The Bride Came D.O.A. (A WayHaught A/U)

by SometimesWaverlyDressesLikeAHooker

Summary

Michelle and Nikki have been penpals for years but have never met. THEN SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS. Not to worry, they meet again later on when they have both started their lives over under assumed identities, as Cole Haught, a lonely homesteader in the wild Montana territory and Waverly Earp, his new mail-order bride.

Notes

Despite having different names in the beginning, this is a WayHaught story from beginning to end. 99% of the angst takes place before the name change and then it becomes the story of them getting to know each other, not knowing they know each other and falling in love. Fluffity fluff fluff in an old west sort of way. Due to the time period, Waverly and Wyatt are contemporaries, but if they are in fact related, she doesn't know about it. Anyway, it doesn't matter because it never comes up in the story. Other Canon characters may appear or be mentioned, but just because the names are the same doesn't mean they are the same age, person etc. as on the show. Also, they may not necessarily act the same as they do in canon. This is definitely Non-Canon A/U aside from Waverly and Nicole's love.
Pa's church sat, by itself, at the very top of the highest hill in the county. A pale giant crouched between earth and sky, its freshly limed clapboards shining like bleached bone in the afternoon sun. When approaching from the north it was all that could be seen for miles, until you reached the summit. Only then could a body see the little township of Hope, nestled in the valley below or the parsonage, where we lived, perched just at the first curve the road took as it rolled downhill. Our house was a virtual twin of its loftier sister, save the steeple. As plain as plain could be, boxy as a carton of crackers and lacking even the simplest of adornments. The shepherd must appear humble to the flock, as my father was so fond of saying.

Appearances.

A man could drink and beat his wife, he could treat his horse better than he did his children and nobody gave a damn, just so long as he play-acted piety and wore a fresh starched shirt on Sunday. For all the townsfolk knew, we lived a life to which they must aspire. The devout man of God and his two tragically beautiful daughters, soldiering on these past six years with no wife or mother. That poor sainted man, he loved his wife so much he never could bring himself to marry again, such was the litany the church ladies recited, behind their white-gloved hands, at church suppers and Sunday socials. As I saw it, Pa just didn't care all that much for the female of the species. Vessels of sin we were, put on this earth by the devil himself, to lure weak men away from God.

That's a direct quote, mind you.

If you asked anyone in Hope, to a man, they would tell you my mother had died from a broken heart, after my brother William went off to fight The War and never returned. It is true, that when we lost Will, the strength seemed to go right out of Ma, same as if someone pulled out a stopper. I might have been only twelve at the time, but even I knew that wasn't what killed her. She didn't wear long sleeves and high collars in the dead of summer because she was a modest christian lady.

I'd heard her cries for help, coming from behind their bedroom door, enough times to know that when the whiskey jug came out, my father got meaner than the devil himself. Sometimes my brother could minimize the damage by getting between them and distracting my father, but mostly no one could save Ma but the good Lord himself. I figure that once it had been a year with no word from Will, Ma resigned herself to the fact that no one would ever be able to protect her from Pa again. She took to her bed then and never got out of it again.

Now, if you want to be poetic and say it was a broken heart that ended her, I guess that's your prerogative, but I think it had a lot more to do with all that blood that gushed out when she cut her wrists open. I often wondered how many of those self-righteous church ladies knew the truth and chose to look the other way.

As for the poor, sainted Will the war hero, turns out he died at camp from dysentery, before he ever saw a day of fighting. Call me crazy, but meeting your maker squatting in some southern field, from a terminal case of the green apple quickies, doesn't sound very heroic to me.
Despite having a soft spot for his mother, my brother was saintly in as much the same way that my father was pious. The truth is Pa barely acknowledged me at all, unless he was sending me out to cut a willow switch. William, however, seemed to devote his every waking moment to thoughts of me, ever devising new ways to make my life a living Hell. I never could ken what the men in our family found so distasteful about me, but that boy pursued his vendetta against me with the zeal of a convert.

Once, when I was no more than four, Will had caught me looking through Pa's desk and made me walk the highest beam in the barn in exchange for not telling on me, little caring whether I broke my neck or not. Another time, he'd thrown my doll onto the ice, knowing I'd run after it and knowing the ice was too thin to support my weight. If it weren't for my sister Wynonna, I surely would have drowned or frozen to death that day.

By the time I was eleven, my brother's decidedly less than christian impulses toward me had begun to take on an altogether different character. I already had the beginnings of a womanly figure and groping had replaced beating as the norm. Wrestling had been replaced by holding me down and rubbing himself against me. There were still plenty of threats though, should I ever deign to even think of telling Pa, but he'd been promising to kill me for so long by then that his deadly warnings had lost a good deal of their power over me. In my heart I knew that one day he might actually succeed in arranging me a fatal accident or some other fate worse than death, but I was damned if I was gonna go down without a fight. Puny though I was, years of surviving him had made me strong and fast, almost more boy than girl. I could climb like a squirrel, beat almost any kid at a footrace and half as many in a fight. Not to mention, being the all time schoolyard Hide-and-Go-Seek champion. No one found me unless I wanted to be found.

I'll surely burn in Hell for it, but the day my brother enlisted to fight the Rebs, I was next to ecstatic and the tears I shed when he didn't come home were more from relief than sorrow.

If Will ever went after Wynonna, she never said a word about it to me. Then again she never was much for sisterly confidences. Now, I don't want to give you the wrong idea. I always knew that come what may, Nonna had my back. She was the one person, aside from Mama, that I ever knew for sure loved me, but we were very different she and I. She was four years older than me for one thing and I couldn't fault her for wanting to spend what little free time she had with her grown-up friends, talking about boys and clothes, without her shameless hoyden, as Pa tended to call me, of a little sister tagging along.

When Mama died, Wynonna's childhood had essentially ended. At only sixteen years old, she suddenly found herself the Lady of the Church. If Pa appeared in public, she was expected to be at his side, in an immaculate white dress and gloves, smiling beatifically. She'd also gotten saddled with me, though she was little more than a child herself. Now, she could just as easily have chosen to take that loss out on me, but to her credit, Wynonna always made sure I was clean and fed, sang me to sleep when I had nightmares and helped with my homework when I couldn't figure my sums. How she managed it all while cooking and cleaning for the menfolk as well, I will never know. She is the strongest, truest woman I have ever known. You better listen good when I tell you, anyone looking to find fault with her had better be prepared to deal with this shameless little hoyden first.
Just about a year ago, a young man name of Randall Nedley, who everyone said had a very promising future, asked Pa for Wynonna's hand. Of course, he told him he could court her and that when a respectable amount of time had passed, they could marry. Back then, none of us could have anticipated that Mr. Nedley's bright future would be arriving rather sooner than we expected.

You see, not long after Randy and Wynonna started attending church picnics and dances together, Mr. Randall Nedley Sr. succumbed to the influenza and the ownership of a very successful and longstanding mercantile was passed on to him. The trouble is that the store is situated a good hundred miles from Hope and for me, a hundred miles down the mountain might just as well be the moon.

Naturally, Randy is expected take over the store immediately and Wynonna doesn't want to be parted from her swain for a year. So, one week from now she will become Mrs. Randall Nedley and will be essentially as lost to me as Mama. When that happens, the care of the parsonage and Pa and all that goes with it, will pass to me. Thank God for my dear, sweet Nikki. Without her letters, I doubt I could wake up every morning and face the bleakness of it all.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by Mail-order Annie by Harry Chapin and Prairie Wedding by Mark Knopfler
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

We learn more about our heroine's relationship with Nikki. The aforementioned bad things begin to happen.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: disownment

Nikki was the best friend I'd ever had. Funny thing was, we'd never met. Back in grammar school, Mrs. Loblaw had assigned us all pen pals from other states, in hopes of improving our handwriting and composition. By some miracle, I was sent my own personal angel in the form of Nikki. I couldn't count how many times her letters had lifted me from the depths of despair over the years. I don't think I could have borne it all without her. We harbored a shared fantasy of how we would meet one day and live next door to each other until the day we died, bosom friends neither God nor man could separate. Still, deep down we both knew that it was as much a fairy tale as any of the bedtime stories our mothers had read to us when we were small.

From the wilderness of northern Maine to the mountains of Pennsylvania was a trip far too long for either of us ever to be able to manage. For nearly ten years we'd been exchanging letters and I still had every one. Squirreled away in a tin box underneath a loose floorboard in the upstairs hallway, along with every cent that had ever passed into my hands. A nest egg for the day when I would finally escape this place and be with Nikki in some idyllic, endless, happy ever after.

I sure could have used her brilliant mind to sort out my present predicament. I was late getting home to make Pa's afternoon tea, the third time I'd been tardy this week and I knew I was in for it. Panting like a hound in August, I jumped down from Martha, tied her to the hitching post and ran for the back door. Carefully slipping off my boots, I emptied my pockets of anything that might make noise, and made a mad dash for the stairs, saying a quick prayer that Pa wouldn't hear me. If he saw I was wearing trousers, I'd be in the kind of trouble that would make being late seem a treat by comparison. “Proper young ladies do not wear trousers”. My father had made his feelings on the subject more than clear. The last time he caught me I'd been made to kneel in the church for 24 hours. My knees sore and bruised for a week from the cold, uneven, unrelenting, hardwood floor.

Halfway up the stairs, I noticed the door to Pa's office was ajar. Goddamn it! I uttered another prayer, that I might pass by without him noticing, tacking on a Hail Mary for the blasphemy. Then I held my breath, crossed my fingers and went into a glide, trying to convince myself that my stockings were skates and the floor was ice. Before I was half way past, my father's baleful tenor pulled me up short.

“Young lady!”

“Well, shit.” I guess I shouldn't have skipped waxing the floors this week.
I quickly set my mind to composing a speech of contrition. As Nikki has been known to say, it's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. Smart girl, that one.

“Yes, Sir?” I replied meekly, standing just across the threshold.

“Sit,” he commanded.

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm my temper. Being spoken to like a spaniel tended to make me a bit peevish.

“Not there,” Pa halted me midstride as I headed for the settee, pointing toward the tortuously uncomfortable ladderback chair next to his desk. I took a seat, steeling myself for the torrent of fire and brimstone he was about to unleash upon me.

Wasting no time, he thundered, “What is the meaning of this, girl?”

“I'm so sorry, Pa” my apology poured out without commas, “I know I've been late three times this week, but I was with the Craig twins and you know how they're prone to hang about. We had to go back, because Charity thought she'd left her gloves at the tea room, only to find when we got there that Patience had had them in her bag the whole time.”

“Do you really think I give a fig about you being late for tea? Three times was it?” he clarified, marking it down in the little book he used to keep track of my sins. “Really, girl…” he shook his head, his tone distracted. “And I do wish you would stop using contractions. They are so common. You, God help us, will be the lady of the church soon. You must make an effort to rise above.”

“Yes, Daddy.” I hung my head, trying to appear properly submissive, “I promise I shall try to make you proud, Daddy.”

“Do not call me Daddy! You are far too old for such sentimental claptrap! That appears to be a bit of a trend with you these days, I'm afraid. Suddenly, you seem too old for a great many things, which you nevertheless insist upon making regular practice. Have you no sense of how a proper girl should behave?” he paused, staring off distractedly before he muttered, “The fault is partly mine, I suppose. I have been far too consumed with my ministry and looking after the souls of my flock to pay much attention to the passage of time or indeed, your proper discipline...”

'I beg to differ.'

“At any rate, things are going to change around here. They most certainly are,” the preacher reached into his rolltop desk and pulled out a pale grey envelope, “Starting with this.”

'Oh dear God, no…'

Panic not only reared its unsightly head, it pulled up a chair and put its feet on the desk.

'Is that Nikki's letter? Please don't let it be that letter!

The reverend pulled the pages free of the envelope, bringing a pressed primrose along for the ride. The blossom of course, took its time fluttering down to land upon the emerald green blotter in a most conspicuous and dramatic fashion.

'Yes...that letter.'

I held my breath as Pa began to speak again, concentrating so fully on not vomiting that I scarcely
heard a word he was saying. Judging by the way he gesticulated with the letter in his hand, like he was conducting an orchestra, I imagined his tone must be quite emphatic. It probably contained more than a few predictions regarding my future eternal residence and just how scaldingly hot the climate was likely to be, as well.

'Don't flail it about like that! You'll tear it!'

“It is only natural for a man of faith to want to give those under his aegis the tutelage they need to make it into the Father's blessed kingdom, to lead them away from the path of sin with a loving heart and a gentle hand. I fear I am beginning to realize, entirely too late, that perhaps in your case I have been too indulgent. I suppose I tried to make up for the things, for the time, I could not give you by sparing the rod…”

'Excuse me?'

“And letting you run free like a wild Indian. First, when your mother left us...”

'Left us? She killed herself, Pa.'

“And then of course...the unpleasantness.”

'It was a war. I assure that for those unlike yourself, who couldn't afford to buy themselves a desk job, it was a great deal more than unpleasant.'

“Your Aunt Augusta permitted a great many things I never would have allowed, had I been here. Letting you visit at that that hospital for one thing. All those men and no chaperone - positively indecent…”

“I was a nurse, Pa…”

My father fixed flinty eyes upon me, silently warning me not to dare and interrupt him again.

“It has become painfully apparent that I have mistaken the fact that you and your sister essentially raised yourselves, for you being more mature,” his intonation became more precise and his voice appreciably louder, “And do not think, for a moment, that I am unaware of the true reason for your tardiness. Have I or have I not spoken to you about the impropriety of teaching those sharecroppers to read?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to try and stem the tears I could feel welling in my eyes. I began to tremble. I was so angry with Pa, but I didn't want him to mistake me fury for weakness.

“Then there is this nonsense,” he brandished the letter like a saber,”I really hoped you would grow out of this and become a respectable young lady while I was gone. Obviously, I have overestimated you. It was one thing for you to have a 'pen pal' when you were a girl and had just lost your dear mother and William, but this…” He shook the letter in my face, it took all of my resolve not to snatch it from him, “This is quite beyond the pale! If I may quote…”

“Pa, please!”

My father affected a girlish simper, which would have been quite amusing had circumstances been different, “I long to hold you in my arms and kiss your sweet face, my dear friend...I have missed your weekly letters more than anything during this horrid war. More than meat, more than new books, dare I say more than my own brother...I must be wicked. Surely we both are...but no matter...One day we will meet, you and I...and from that day hence, it is my fondest wish that we nevermore shall be parted'. To top it off, this abomination is signed 'Your Loving Nikki!’”
No longer able to stop myself, I buried my face in my hands and began to weep in earnest.

All was lost.

“...I will not have it! No girl of mine is going to partake of Boston Marriage as they call it! It is a sin and an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Not only is this girl a perversion of nature but an immigrant as well, if names mean anything.”

“We are all immigrants, Pa,” I was so angry now, I no longer feared retribution, “Unless you are secretly a red indian!”

“Do not tempt me, girl,” he raised his fist as if to backhand me,”“This is unacceptable! You are too old for this sort of schoolgirl silliness and might I add, dangerously close to being past the age when any decent woman ought to be married. So, in your best interest I have come to a decision, since it seems you cannot be relied upon to make sensible ones for yourself. I spoke with Mr. Hardy this morning. The matter is settled.”

“But, Pa...I don't...do not love Champ...Martha the mule is smarter than him...I...”

“You had better not be about to tell me that you love this Nikki creature!”

I couldn't help it. Before I could stop it a gasp escaped my lips and Pa knew my answer without me uttering a word.

“I see...I might have known Julian's twisted nature would manifest in you one day...although his being french Canadian I had rather hoped you would only take to the drink...”

“I don't understand, Pa. Who is this Julian person?”

“Julian, my girl, is your father,” he spat it as much as spoke it.

“But you're my father...”

“No, my girl...I am merely the man who was unfortunate enough to marry that whore of a mother of yours. Julian was a common laborer she bedded that summer she spent at your Aunt Augusta’s. As you well know, divorce is not for men of my standing. I was not about to let that strumpet sully my good reputation, so I pretended that you were mine. I did my best to raise you to be a good christian woman, despite your mother's unsavory influence. Truly, it was an unexpected blessing when she killed herself...but alas, I see it came too late...clearly the damage was already done...look at you...trousers!”

I raised my chin defiantly, willing myself not to cry in front of this cruel creature I thought was my father. At least now I had some idea why he and Will held me in such disdain.

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that you have a choice, which is more than I ever had...You will go to Mr. Hardy in the morning and tell him how pleased you are at your betrothal or you will leave this house, this town and never darken my doorstep again. In either case I will be well shed of you. Now get out of my sight!” With that, he tore the letter in two and tossed it upon the fire.

“Nooooooooooooooo!’

“May I ask a question, Sir?”
“If you must,” he sighed, not even looking at me.

“Did you never love me?”

“How could I love a scarlet stain upon the breast of my whorish wife?”

There was nothing left to lose.

Snatching the primrose from off the desktop I ran from the room.

I never saw my father again.
Nikki was filled with glee. So much so that she very nearly skipped from Crawford's General Store back to the wagon. Had you asked anyone else on the street, they would have told you it was a run of the mill Tuesday, but Nikki knew better. This was one of the very best sorts of days, more glorious than Christmas, the 4th of July and her birthday all rolled up in one. For today, among all the ordinary letters and packages there was an envelope with a Pennsylvania postmark and that could only mean one thing. At long last a reply, from her dear, oh so dear friend and that was enough to make any day into a holiday. As her younger brother drove the sugar wagon, Nikki played her usual mail day game. She would place the precious letter at the very bottom of the pile and try to resist opening it until she had sorted the other missives geographically by postmark, starting from the east. It was a game she had yet to win.

Oh, a letter from Germany, that would be from Aunt Netta and the strange, colorful stamps would definitely be worth saving. Better put that one at the top of the pile, hardly likely to get any further east than that. A package from Boston, that comes next. An envelope from the Montana Territory, how exciting. Seeing the frontier one day was a special dream of Nikki's, just thinking about it made her whole body tingle. Who knows, perhaps some day Uncle Xavier might invite her for a visit, once he got his homestead all sorted. She shuffled the envelope to the bottom of the pile. Just then the wagon hit a frost heave and she nearly dropped all of it.

Riding over frozen, rutted dirt roads was hardly the optimal condition for reading. It wasn't Isaac's fault but she elbowed him in the ribs just the same. Had to keep her little brother in line after all, if he was gonna make some poor girl a half-way decent husband. Boys had too much freedom as it was, if you were gonna teach them to act right, you had to do it while they were still young. Not wanting to chance losing her prize to the wind or the wagon wheels, she placed the mail inside her leather satchel, tucking the special letter inside her heavy woolen coat for safe keeping. The rest of the way home, she attempted to block out the cold by dreaming of better days to come, in warmer climes, with her beloved friend. It wasn't easy to be sure, not with the snow and horse dung flinging up from the wheels, but she made a valiant effort just the same.

It is often said that love is blind and ignorance is bliss and in this case both proved true. For Nikki was so elated at getting a letter from her girl, that she never noticed that the address,
had been inscribed upon the envelope by another's hand. All she could think about was the long awaited reply and an end to her suspense and suffering.

Did the other girl feel the same way or had she gone too far with her profession of love and ruined everything? They had grown so very close over the years and in these past few months, now that they were both of marriageable age, it had become increasingly clear to Nikki that there was no one but her Pennsylvania pen pal, that she would ever consider spending her life with, no matter how many boys her mother tried to send her way.

Hannah Saulnier hollered after the streak of ginger lightning that was her daughter.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Nicole? No running in the kitchen. One of these days you'll stumble into the stove and set your dress alight!"

"Yet another reason you should let me wear pants!" was shouted from the next room.

"Never!"

'I never should have let that girl hang about the boiling house with her brothers and the sugaring crew. She's picked up so many of their rough habits, she might as well be another boy. I suppose I couldn't have helped it if I tried, Lord knows her father never did, God rest his soul. She's so tall and strong, it's all that wood stacking did it. I doubt he would have even noticed she was a girl if she wasn't so beautiful. Thank heaven for that, otherwise she'd never find a husband.'

Before Ma Saulnier even had a chance to get back to her stew, there was a sudden blood-curdling scream from the sitting room. "Nicole! Baby!" she shouted, breaking her own rule about running near the fire. She found her daughter face down on the davenport, sobbing so hard that she couldn't speak.

"Baby, what's wrong? Talk to me..."

Nicole just cried harder, great shuddering sobs that shook her whole body. Mrs. Saulnier pulled the redhead into her arms, "Come on, child...tell Mama," it was no use, the girl was hysterical. Then she spotted the crumpled letter on the rug. Pulling it toward herself with the toe of her shoe, she reached down and picked it up, smoothing the paper before reading it over her daughter's shoulder.

Miss Saulnier,

I am writing to inform you that my daughter Michelle is dead. Murdered by the backwoods trash she insisted on teaching. Further correspondence regarding this matter is neither required nor desired. Any post still in transit will be marked Return to Sender.

Reverend Gibson
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Waverly and Aunt Gus have a drink and a chat

CHAPTER FOUR

The beautiful, young, brunette stood on the stoop, softly weeping, near breathless in her hysteria.

'Dear God, please be home!'

At last the door opened and the girl was greeted by her Aunt Augusta’s wise and understanding eyes.

“Ah, I see the Reverend has finally shown his true colors. Come inside, child. Come inside. You must be chilled to the bone.”

The older woman, put an arm around the disconsolate girl's shoulders and guided her to a comfy chair beside the roaring fire. The kindness only seeming to make her weep harder.

“There, there,” she soothed, “We'll soon have this sorted.” She patted her niece on the back.

“You're better off without the old bastard anyway.”

“Aunt Gus!” given recent revelations, the younger girl found that word seemed a good deal more odious than it once had.

“Relax, Michelle,” her aunt tutted, “I don't know why you insist on going by your middle name, when your given name is so lovely.”

“Waverly? I think not.”

“At any rate let me make you a nice hot cup of tea. All things will seem better with a nice cup of tea in your hand.”

“Aunt Gus?”

“Yes, child?”

“Do you have any whiskey?”

Returning with the glass of amber liquid for her niece and one for herself, the older woman noticed the impressive pile of bags in the entryway, doubtless brought in by the cabby.

“My God, child...did no one ever tell you that when you run away from home you are not supposed to take everything you own?”

“They are my things. Why wouldn't I take them? Pa has no use for them. They aren't even remotely his size.” She chuckled despite herself. “And I didn't run away from home, I was thrown out!”
“No matter, no matter. You can stay here with me as long as you like. Smooth your feathers, as it were. Get yourself sorted before you decide what you'd like to do next. Since we lost your Uncle Curtis, this old house gets awfully lonely all by myself, you'd be most welcome.”

“Don't you want to know what I did?”

“What you did or rather what your father thinks you did, is none of my concern. The secrets of a woman's heart are her own affair.”

“Thank you Aunt Gus.”

“The way I figure it, if you're old enough to drink whiskey, you're old enough to know your own mind or your own heart, whichever it may be that brought you here.”

The girl just sighed and started longingly into the fire.

“So, shall we have another or...” she shook her glass, “Is there something else you'd rather do?”

“What can you tell me about Julian?”

“Ah...Julian Earp...where do I begin?”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Nicole is utterly bereft at the loss of her bosom friend, but sometimes one door closing gives you the vision to see other possibilities in the distance.

Chapter Notes

Another angsty one I'm afraid, but at least it gets a little more hopeful at the end.

I promise, the heavy angst train has nearly come to the end of its track. Not quite yet, there are still a couple more stops, but soon. I'm already working on chapter six.

“Please, Nicole!”

Hannah Saulnier had been rapping at her daughter's bedroom door for so long that her knuckles were red and sore.

“You have to eat, baby! It's been three days,” she pleaded, “I made your favorite...rabbit stew...won't you please come out?”

Upon hearing of her best friend's untimely passing, the younger Saulnier had locked herself in her bed chamber and refused to come out. In that time she had spoken to no one, unless it was to tell them to go away. Nicole had grabbed her mother's bottle of sherry off the sideboard as she passed, but had turned down all other offers of food or drink.

At first there had been nothing but the sound of hysterical sobbing, now and then interspersed with piteous cries of her dead friend's name. She had endured two days as such without cease, unable to be consoled. Then there followed a silence as thick and weighty as February fog. Had it not been for the crash of something fairly heavy being hurled against the door in response to her constant pleading, Mrs. Saulnier might have feared her daughter had done herself a harm.

“Nikki! You open the door this instant! If you continue to refuse food I shall have no choice but to send Isaac for the doctor.”

Silence.

“My poor nerves...take pity on your Maman!”

Nothing.

“I don't want to intrude on your grief, my child...but if you don't come out I shall have your brother remove the hinges. Don't you doubt me, Nicole. You know I'll do it!”

The older woman jumped back in surprise as something that sounded like crockery smashed against the door, quite near to where her head had just been.
“Please, angel,” she pounded on the door with both hands, “I will not have you throw your life away like this! I lost your father at Gettysburg and nearly lost your brother Davy too. I will not lose you as well! Nicole! Do you hear me? This is not what Michelle would have wanted!”

In a flash, the heavy oaken door slammed open. Her daughter stood before her, her hair unwashed and tangled, her eyes pink and puffy and her face red with anger. She was still in the same dress she’d worn that day, but it was soiled and torn in several places where she had rent it in her grief.

“You know nothing of Michelle!” she bellowed, “How dare you presume to have any idea what she would want? You keep her name out of your mouth, you bitch!”

Before she could think to stop herself, Mrs. Saulnier reached up and slapped her much taller daughter across the face.

“Oh Nicole, I am so sorry...forgive me.”

She threw her arms around her daughter, the taller redhead squirming and protesting at first, then seeming to no longer have the strength to bear the weight of her sorrow, her knees gave out and she melted into her mother's arms. There came a storm of great heaving sobs, the girl gasping for breath like a cod in the bottom of a boat, until the young woman folded in on herself and fell to the cold, hardwood floor in a dead faint.

“Isaac!” her mother cried out, “Go and fetch the doctor! Now, boy! Do not tarry!”

Nicole had been in her bed and under the doctor's care for two weeks now, a fever upon her brow and falling in and out of delirium. She kept calling out for Michelle as if she was only in the next room. Perhaps she was begging for the dear girl's departed spirit to come and take her too, so they might finally be together.

“I am sorry, Madame Saulnier, but I am afraid I have done all that I can do,” Doctor Barrell admitted, defeatedly.

“Oh doctor, are you telling me that it is in God's hands now?” Hannah mewled, “That there is nothing to be done to restore my darling Nicole to me?”

“I did not say that Madame. I merely stated that there was nothing more that I could do. The medicine I have administered will bring the fever down, but only your daughter can save herself. She must find a reason to go on living, something to look forward to, some diversion...a trip perhaps. Have you no friend or relative to whom she might pay an extended visit? A change of scenery could be just the thing. Some place where she won't be reminded of the departed every time she turns around.”

“Oh doctor, you truly are brilliant. I think I may have the very thing. The very thing, indeed.”

The next morning, Nicole woke up. Her nightie was soaked in sweat and she was shivering, what she wouldn't give for a bonus blanket right then. The fever had broken during the night and a little color was returning to her sallow cheeks.

“Mother?”
“Oh, my baby! What do you need? What can Maman get you?”

“Another quilt, I'm freezing! And a cup of tea?”

“Anything you want, its yours.”

“Some toast maybe? I'm starving.”

The older woman wept as she walked into the kitchen, feeling like for the first time, in nearly three weeks, she could finally breathe again.

As Hannah Saulnier sat on the edge of her daughter's bed, watching her nibble on a corner of toast, she felt like the luckiest woman in the world. She'd eaten her whole breakfast, eggs, ham, toast and three cups of tea to wash it down. Tomorrow she'd try to tempt the girl with some pancakes and maple syrup, not the sweet amber liquid they sold to other people, but the good stuff, dark as black coffee and tasting faintly of trees. That was a treat none of her children had ever been able to resist.

“Nicole? I've been thinking...”

“Should I be scared?” her daughter teased.

“Oh, you...” she gave the girl a playful shove, “I've had a thought and Doctor Barrell agrees with me. We were thinking that a change of scenery might do you good.”

“Oh Maman, I don't know...”

“Hear me out,” the older woman wiped a tear from her eye, Nicole hadn't called her that since she was a child. “I got a letter from your Uncle Xavier and he asked me to send him a couple kegs of syrup and some hearty Maine seeds. It seems the ones he can get mail-order don't have the fortitude to stand up to the rocky soil and cold nights at the homestead. Our Maine stock ought to be just the ticket I think.”

“And this has what to do with me?”

“So, I was wondering...how would you like to hand deliver them?”

“Oh, Maman! Please! The frontier?!? Yes! A thousand times yes!”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Aunt Gus tells her niece all about Julian and the story of her conception. Also, they drink an Earply amount of whiskey (for two proper women in the 19th century anyway)

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: spousal abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Julian Earp. Hmmm...now there's a name I haven't thought of in years.”

“Who was he? How did he and Mama meet? What did he look like? Was he handsome?”

“Settle down, girl. Take a breath. One question at a time.”

“Aunt Gus!”

“Okay...okay...what do you want to know?”

“I want to know who I am.”

“You are who you've always been. I think you know that, but I'll try and tell you where you come from, okay?”

“Please!”

“Let me think a minute. Why don't you pour us another whiskey?”

Michelle crossed the room to the sideboard and poured them both a generous portion of whiskey. Then returned to the fireside and sat down in the chair opposite her aunt, impatience schooling her features.

“How old are you now?”

“Eighteen...and a half.”

“So, then it was 1852...”

“Uh-huh,” the younger woman made a 'please continue' gesture with her left hand, as she took several small sips of the amber liquid contained in the glass she held in her right, grimacing comically with each swallow.

“Your mother had come to stay with me for the summer. Will and Wynonna came along too, of
course. A pair of wild heathens they were or my name isn't Augusta. I don't recall their specific ages, but they were still young 'uns. I know Wynonna hadn't yet started school. Being a bright girl, you may have surmised that the reason for their visit wasn't entirely recreational. You see, by then your Pa had already started beating Michelle...um, I mean, your mother, the original Michelle...and she was trying to make up her mind whether she had the courage to leave him. For a woman alone with two young children and no husband, it's a hard road no matter how you look at it. I told her she could stay with Curtis and I as long as she wanted. As you know, I couldn't have children of my own and your uncle and I would have loved to have your brother and sister grow up with us. Will was still young enough then that he hadn't yet fallen under your father's spell and really was a very sweet boy at heart. It was Wynonna who was the troublemaker.”

“I don't believe it.”

“I'd offer to swear on a stack of bibles, but knowing your Pa put me off that nonsense for life.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Anyway, your mother always was bullheaded about not taking what she saw as charity, said she didn't want to impose. I tried my best to make her understand that she was my baby sister and by definition was incapable of imposing, but she wouldn't listen. Once that woman dug her heels in there was no moving her come Hell or high water.”

“Sounds a lot like someone else I know.”

“Wynonna? Oh yes, definitely cut from the same cloth.”

Gus stared into the fire and took a long pull off her drink, smiling wistfully and sighing.

“I wish you could have known your mother when she was young.”

The young girl raised one eyebrow, glancing at her aunt's glass.

“Yes, I realize that's impossible, but humor an old woman. Oh, she was a firecracker back in the day! Sassy as the day is long. If that woman's mouth had been a horse, it would have been prime racing stock.”

“Doesn't sound like the Mama I remember, at all.”

“Well, unfortunately my girl, by the time you were old enough to take notice, Ward had already beaten all that out of her.”

Michelle shook her head sadly and let out a long sigh.

“You know, the one bit of praying I still do is that that sonofabitch gets what's coming to him one day.”

“Language, Aunt Gus!” she couldn't help giggling, “Sounds like a habit I might want to give some thought.”

“You know, my sister was considered a great beauty back in those days. Oh yes. Long strawberry blonde hair, a complexion like peaches and fresh cream and hazel eyes like a sunrise on a stormy morning. She was a stunner, alright. She could have had her pick of any of a dozen men. Heck, she could have thrown a rock and hit a better man than Ward Gibson. I will never understand what made her set her cap at your father. Oh, sorry...not your father...your Pa. All I could figure was that maybe being a preachin' man he had a way with words. The secrets of a woman's heart, I tell ya.”
“Aunt Gus...Julian?”

“Patience, little one...God, sometimes if you don't remind me of her. You may not favor her much, except for your eyes. Those same stormy, hazel eyes that make a person feel like you're looking right into their heart.” Michelle grinned, “And that little wise smile of yours, but oh girl, have you got her spirit!”

“Really, Aunt Gus?” the pretty brunette blushed a bit.

“Child, has no one ever told you how wonderful you are?” she tutted, “Remind me to say an extra prayer for your father tonight.”

“I love you, Aunt Gus...can I get you another drink?”

“No thank you, Baby. I'm starting to feel a little dozey as it is. I better make this the short version. Ha! Too late for that,” she chuckled, “Now, where was I?”

“Julian.”

“Oh, yes...how could I forget? Let me see, Curtis was having some land cleared to expand the back pasture that summer. Julian was a logger, you see. Not one of those great, hulking, hairy beasts, but oh was he strong. It didn't show to look at him, but under his clothes he was solid muscle. At least that's what Michelle said.”

“Aunt Gus! Was he handsome? Is that why Mama fell for him?”

“Oh, Waverly...you have a lot to learn about men and women.”

“Do you have to call me that?”

“I think it's pretty, like you.”

“Anyway, men and women is the one area of study that doesn't interest me in the least.”

A subtle look of realization twinkled in the older woman's eyes for just a moment, then disappeared. She shot her niece a knowing smile and sighed.

“Now listen good, child. There is only one reason a woman ever falls for a man...for anyone,” she winked, “Because that person, whoever they may be, happens to be whatever it is she needs, in that particular moment. I suppose Ward flattered her with pretty words and promises that she'd be at the highest level of any parish he presided over. She always did have a weakness when it came to that. Vanity.”

“So, what did Julian have that Mama needed?”

“To answer your earlier question first, Julian wasn't what you'd call handsome, really. Although, he did have a certain virile appeal, I suppose. That was certainly never my type. He wasn't a rich man or a scholar or I suppose even a particularly good man, when it comes right down to it. Seeing as he did woo another man's wife. Not that he pursued her, really. They just got to talking each day, when she'd bring him his lunch and I guess you could say they took a shine to each other. What was I saying? Oh, yes. Now, this is the important part, so listen. All in all, I suppose Julian was what most people would call ordinary. At least that's how he came across.”

“Then what made him so special, that Mama would break her wedding vows for him?”
“I'll tell you. You see, the thing was that Julian was one of those truly rare sorts of men. Truth be
told, you don't meet many these days. Thank God, my Curtis was one. Damn, I miss that man. I'll
tell you what your father really was, Waverly. He was a decent man, a kind man, a gentle man.
After being married to Ward for ten years, your Mama needed that more than anything.”

“Did they think of running off together?”

“I think Julian was much the same for Michelle as spending the summer with Curtis and I. More
than anything, he was a vacation of sorts, from the bleak existence she had with Ward. She knew it
would eventually have to end, but while it lasted it was sublime and it restored her strength and
spirit and gave her what she needed to be able to return to the life she'd committed herself to, the
life she was too scared to leave behind. You know, I'm almost sure I had her convinced to stay here
with us at one point. I could have sworn I did.”

“Obviously, she went back to Pa, so what happened?”

“You happened, Sweetheart. Michelle started to get sick in the mornings and having been through
it twice before, she knew you were on the way. She had no choice then, but to go back to Ward.”

“Why, Aunt Gus?”

“Because no matter how ignorant the general populace might be, most of them can still count to
nine, my love. She had to go back and talk your Pa into pretending you were his. Michelle would
have been ruined, a pariah. Hell, in some places she could have got thrown in jail for it. For once, it
was a good thing that your Pa was such a proud bastard. He wasn't about to risk his reputation.”

“Poor Mama, I never knew,” Michelle wiped a tear from her cheek.

“Losing your Mama so young has been the great tragedy of my life. Lord, how I wish I could have
convinced her to stay. Ah well...if wishes were horses, right?”

“I'm sorry, Aunt Gus.”

“Whatever for, child?”

“If it weren't for me, Mama might still be alive.”

“No Baby, don’t you ever say that. Don't you take that on, don't you even think it for one second.
You were the light of that woman’s life. She always said you were the best gift the good Lord ever
gave her. I think she would have endured a dozen Wards if it meant she could have you. Michelle
loved your brother and sister, but you were her special angel. She loved you something awful and
so do I.”

“Thank you, Aunt Gus. I think I understand Mama a little better now.”

“Good. You know, I see a lot of Julian in you too, child. His kindness, his gentleness, you've got
that in spades.”

“I'm glad. So what happened to him?”

“The same thing that always happens in cases like this, Honey. The summer ended. The job was
finished and he had to move on. There was never any question of her going with him. He couldn't
take on a woman and two small children on a lumberjack's pay, always moving from place to
place. Anyway, I don't think either he or Michelle really wanted that.”
“Did he love her?”

“I have no doubt that there was love between them. Always remember, when things get unbearable, no matter what else may be true about your poor excuse for a family, you were conceived in love, child.”

“I will, Aunt Gus. Thank you for that.”

“You know I'll always be here for you if you need me, right? Don't be too proud to take a helping hand. In that one way, don't be like your Mama. You promise me?”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“You know I hate it when you call me that. Now come and give me a kiss, it's way past my bedtime. I can't keep my eyes open another minute. If you have any more questions, they'll have to wait for morning.”

Michelle got up and threw her arms around the kind, older woman, “Thank you for this, Aunt Gus. Thank you so much.”

“Ooooh, don't squeeze so hard! These old bones aren't as strong as they used to be and there's no need to thank me. It was my pleasure. In a way, it was like having a visit with my Michelle again, after all these years. Now come to bed, Waverly.”

Chapter End Notes

This will be the last of the quick updates for now. The next chapter requires a bit of research before I can write it. Yes, I'm one of those nerds who actually does research for fan fic. I can't help it if I like my historical fiction to be historically accurate.

Anyway, hopefully it won't take too long.

COMING SOON: Our story moves west!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Nicole gets ready for her trip to Montana

Chapter Notes

I feel like this one is a little short, but it's just a transitional chapter, really, so...

“Nicole, do you have your itinerary?” her mother called from the other room.

“Yes, Maman...although you've asked me about it so many times these past few days, I'm not sure I need it any more. I have it memorized just from going over it with you.”

“Tell me again...”

“If you insist. Davy will drive me from here to Bangor in the delivery wagon. From Bangor, I take the Maine Central Railroad to Boston.” Hannah Saulnier moved her lips in synch with her daughter's, she had memorized the itinerary herself, but the recitation helped to calm her nerves. “At the Boston station I board the New York Central to New York City, from there I travel to Council Bluffs, Iowa, starting point of the new and exciting Union Pacific Railroad. Then I ride the train for a really, really, really long time until we reach Corinne where I take the spur line to Montana and All Points North until we reach the terminus at Silver Bow. Uncle Xavier will meet me there, I will give him a big hug from you and your warmest regards, as instructed. Then we will travel together, in his wagon, to the homestead, give or take 52 miles as the crow flies.”

“And the seeds?”

“The seeds are safe and secure in my trunk. The syrup will travel by freight, just like it always does. My clothing, for various kinds of weather, with footwear to match accordingly, is somewhat tidily packed in my trunk and luggage. I will carry an assortment of books, non-perishable foodstuffs and sundries, smelling salts and anything else I may need on the train, including my ticket and gloves, in my satchel. I will not converse with any strange men or suspicious looking characters, nor will I sit anywhere near them when the train is likely to be in the dark, whether from tunnels or nightfall. Nor will I lean over the rail, at the back of the train to see the wheels and fall off the caboose to have my brains bashed out on the tracks...on my honor. Satisfied?”

“You are so mean. Pity my nerves, child. I am so afraid of losing you, I cannot bear to lose another child. Don't tease me so, I only want you to be safe.”

“I am sorry, Maman. I do not mean to be unkind, but I assure you, I can take care of myself in any situation that might arise.”

“How silly of me. You are only a beautiful, young woman, traveling cross country all by herself. Why would I worry? I know you think you are invincible. Everyone does at your age, but you have
not been out in the world. It is not like Aroostook County. It might as well be another planet entirely.”

“That's what I'm hoping, Maman.”

“I know you are excited to see the frontier and I am excited for you, getting to realize your dream, but I'd be willing to bet you'll get there and as soon as the novelty wears off, you will be homesick for Maine and your Maman, no matter how callous you may be now.”

“I wouldn't take that bet if I were you.”

Madame Saulnier leveled a withering stare at her daughter and folded her arms across her ample bosom.

“Maman, I know you worry, but tell me, last 4th of July, when Allaire and Boisvert got into the hard cider, who was it that broke up the fight and tossed them both into the pond?”

“You.”

“That's right...and who chopped and corded all those logs stacked behind the sugar house?”

“You and Isaac.”

“But?”

“But mostly you...”

“That's right. I can handle myself better than most boys, Maman. I am tall and strong. I am not some soft city girl who's never done anything but read and practice needlepoint. I can swing an axe with the best of the lumberjacks.”

“But you won't have an axe,” Madame Saunier sniffled.

Nicole pulled her weeping mother into her arms, “Will it make you feel better if I try to find a respectable looking married couple to sit next to on the train?”

“Maybe...a little.”

“And if I put my longest, sharpest hatpin in my hat?”

“That could help, but...even better...”

“Madame! I have told you, I am not riding all the way to Montana with a brick in my purse!”

“Will you send me a card from every station you stop at?” the older woman pouted.

“Maman, I will need to find food and use the washroom.”

Madame Saulnier gave her daughter her best 'no need to light a candle for me, I'll just sit here in the dark, alone' look.

“I promise I will send you a card from every station where the stop is long enough, okay.”

“I suppose that will do.”

“This trip was your idea, as I recall, Maman.”
“I know, I know. Sometimes, Maman she is not so bright.”

“Don't be silly. I will be back before sugaring season, I promise. Now give me a big hug and a kiss to last until I see you next. You know how Davy will get, if I keep him waiting too much longer.”

“I love you, cher...I will miss you. Don't forget to give my baby brother a kiss from his sister, the old lady.”

“You're are not old, Maman. I'd venture you could still turn a few heads, if you ever took off that apron. You are a readhead, after all”

“Oh, You!” she gave her daughter a good natured shove. “You are aging me by the minute, child. Now go, before I start sobbing in front of the whole crew. I love you, my Nicole.”

“I love you too, Maman. I will miss you. Tell Isaac if he doesn't behave I'll come back and toss him in the pond. Goodbye.”

Nicole could still see her mother, standing in the dooryard, crying and waving, her little brother waving crazily by her side, until the house was out of sight. In truth, she was a bit more nervous than she had let on, but she was also so excited that it made her feel a little sick. This was the start of a new chapter in her life, without Michelle by her side. In her absence, she was determined to have enough adventure for the two of them.

The frontier! Oh, how I wish you could see it with me, my dearest! We always dreamed we would be together when we finally set eyes upon it. Who knows, perhaps one day I will even get to see the mighty Pacific Ocean and swim in its salty waters for us both. Although, no matter how many times we argued about it, I must confess that I have a hard time believing its waters are warmer that the ocean here in New England. I know you were convinced, my darling girl, but I just can't imagine it. Still, for your sake, my love, I hope you prove me wrong. Just this once.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Michelle is getting antsy, cooling her heels in Philadelphia

Chapter Notes

Another short transitional chapter to move the story along. The action really starts in the next one I promise.

“I don't understand, Aunt Gus,” Michelle whined, “I wrote to Nikki the day after I got here. It's been over three months and still there's been no reply.”

“You arrived at the end of August and now it's coming on Christmas. Nikki lives in the woods of Northern Maine, where I'd guess the mail service is patchy in even the best of weather. It's been a rough winter already. Things have been bad enough here in Philadelphia, the city has slowed to a crawl. I'd imagine that far north, they're in snow to their hips. So you'll have to forgive the postal service if the mail isn't running up to your standards of promptness.”

“I miss her!”

“I know, baby. I know. Perhaps if you did something other than sit around reading those dusty old books, in Latin no less, and what is that you're looking at now?” the older woman craned her neck to read the title, “Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper.”

“What else would you have me do?”

“You're in Philadelphia, America's most historic city. Explore! Tour a few churches, visit a museum or two, take in a show, go to the library, for pity's sake. Anything other than sitting around here moping.”

“Are you sick of me already, Gus?”

“Of course not, child. I told you that you could stay here as long as you needed to and I meant it. I just can't bear to see you so miserable.”

“I should start looking for a new situation. I suppose I really shouldn't stay here much longer.”

“Waverly! We're family, you may stay as long as you like.”

“Um...what I meant was perhaps it's not safe for you if I stay much longer.”

“Explain.”

“Well...I never told you how I got to Philadelphia, did I?”
“As a matter of fact...”

“I may have...”

“Spit it out, girl. Are you trying to give me palpitations?”

“I might have...stolen Pa's wagon and favorite horse, then sold them when I arrived in Philadelphia,” Michelle let out a nervous giggle.

Rather than scolding her niece as the girl had expected, the older woman let loose a great, boisterous, belly laugh, “You've got your Mama's spirit, that's for sure.”

“I had to do it. I wasn't sure if you'd take me in and I knew my nest egg wouldn't be enough to last me long on my own,” she giggled a little, “Anyway, the old bastard never treated me anywhere near as well as he did that horse. He deserved it.”

“You'll get no argument from me.”

“I could never forgive myself if you were to be implicated in this, Aunt Gus. I'd better be going soon. I don't know where, but it's not safe for you while I'm here.”

“Don't be silly, child. If the law was coming after you, don't you think they'd have arrived by now. I'd venture a guess that Ward never even reported it. That old sonofabitch wouldn't risk the scandal, trust me.”

“You really think so?”

“I'd bet my house on it.”

Three Months Later-

“Aunt Gus, I'm home,” the pretty young brunette called out, into the cavernous house.

“So, how was your lecture?”

“Pathetic. I know more about Greek Mythology than that fool did. Professor my eye, if he's a professor, I'm Medusa.”

“At least you got out of the house. It's not right for a girl your age to be spending all her time keeping an old woman company.”

“You're not old! And I don't mind keeping you company at all,” Michelle gave her aunt a small kiss on the cheek, “How was your afternoon?”

“About as exciting as watching paint dry, but I do have a surprise for you.”

The girl bounced up and down on the balls of her feet like an excited child, “What is it, Aunt Gus? What is it?”

“I couldn't say. I didn't open it, but the postmark says Maine.”

Michelle clasped her hands over her mouth and shrieked with glee.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A letter from Nicole to her Mother, written on the train.

Clarification: Just so you don't think I'm completely ignorant. I want to make it clear that Nicole starts the letter to mother in Chicago but continues writing it as her journey progresses. Seeing as Chicago is actually east of Iowa, I wanted to make myself clear.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the long time during posts. I was born in New England and lived there forty years. I am a womb to tomb Red Sox fan and I had to follow my boys in the World Series. 2018 World Champs, Baby!

Several of Nicole's descriptions of her travels, in the letter to her Maman, I culled from actual accounts written by passengers traveling the Transcontinental Railroad back in the day. They can be spotted by the use of language rather more florid than Nicole's usual means of expression. They are not verbatim, but the spirit is there.

Also, I have fudged Doc's age by a few years, as in 1870 he would have only been 19 and still living with his parents in Georgia. He did in fact go to St. Louis to apprentice with a dentist a few years later.

My Dear Maman,

They say that a hog can travel cross country in one trip, but if you're human you have to change trains in Chicago. As it turns out, it's true. My train was running behind schedule and by the time we arrived in Chicago, the transfer had already gone. So, since there isn't another train until morning, I am stuck at the station with a whole lot of time to kill. I've already finished two of my books and I want to save the other two for the second half of the trip, so I thought I would write and tell you about my journey so far.

I have absolutely nothing to report about the first leg of my trip. Nothing exciting ever happens on the old Boston and Maine. As it turns out, the New York Central Railroad is just as dull. Although, New York City was a little more interesting. Not that I got to see any of the city outside of the train station, but as far as that goes it was quite a shock for a girl from the Maine woods. I have never seen so many people all in one place! The hustle and bustle of it, all running around like ants on a hill. I honestly don't think I could ever manage to live in a city, Maman. How can they breathe?

Except for the change in scenery, the trip from New York to Iowa was no more stimulating. I would have slept to make the time pass more quickly, but there was a woman with a crying baby in our car. Thank God she departed before we reached Council Bluffs, I think if I'd had to listen to that all the way to Montana, I would have willingly thrown myself under the wheels of the train.
I have been missing you and the boys, as you predicted. I know. Listen to Maman, she knows what she's talking about. At any rate, when we arrived at the terminal in Iowa, I was glad that you were not in fact accompanying me. Due to some dispute between companies, when the train reaches Council Bluffs, the baggage must be unloaded and transferred into wagons by another company. The train continues along the track to Omaha, while we humans must cross the river by ferry. As I understand, it involves some deal made so that the railroad could use the land and the previous proprietors could still make a living. I'd say they make a good deal more than that, for the ferry service is as costly as the pilots are crass. I have never seen a person in a position of service be so rude to their customers. As Memere would say, they were rude, crude and socially unacceptable. Oh Maman, I was so glad you were not there to hear it. Frankly, I did not hear any words I have not heard before around the sugar house, but I have never before heard so many used at once or in such imaginative combination. I must say, the mind boggles.

When we finally reached the other side of the river, we were all so happy to set foot on terra firma once again. From there to the station, we rode upon a two level omnibus. I was on the upper level and therefore subject to wind and splatter. There was plenty of the latter, believe me. Omaha. What a mess! The streets are so deep with mud that the conductor was constantly asking us to shift from one side of the contraption to the other, in order to keep from capsizing, as we navigated the horribly rutted roads. A great sigh of relief was heard from all and sundry when we finally arrived at the Union Pacific terminal.

I had thought that New York City was a teeming anthill, but compared to the Omaha Station, it was the model of decorum. Such tumult and confusion as no one living has ever seen. That's how the guidebooks describe it and I have to say, the writers were masters of understatement. The crowds at the terminal were rife with rumors of wild Indians attacking and wrecking the trains. I must admit that as bold and tough as I may be for a girl, I was more than a little bit afraid. Standing in the long line at the ticket window did nothing to help my nerves. If only to keep myself from falling asleep for the boredom of waiting, I fell into conversation with a lovely young man from Georgia. Now Maman, do not be scandalized or worried for me. John Henry was a perfect gentleman and very helpful as well. He is studying to be a dentist and is quite well spoken. He had traveled to St. Louis previously, to look into an apprenticeship and is now on his way there to begin it. Being more experienced in these things, he set my mind at ease, telling me that the rumors of vicious savages are stirred up by the ticket agents themselves, in order to scare folks into purchasing insurance along with their ticket. Young Mr. Holliday assured me that I should by no means waste my money on such nonsense, and that the train is perfectly safe so long as you take everything you hear with a large grain of salt and don't be enticed into playing poker with men in fancy suits.

John Henry tried to convince me to take his Derringer pistol “just in case” but I did not want to be beholden to a relative stranger and so, assured him that I could defend myself quite well with my hatpin, my wits and even my fists if needs be. Failing that, I am also carrying the very large hunting knife I picked up for Davy in New York. Having reached the booking window, I purchased my ticket. Erring on the side of frugality, for who knows what wonders I might find to purchase along the way, I decided to forgo the Pullman Car and just sleep in my seat. Having secured my boarding pass, I said goodbye to young Mister Holliday and went to check on whether the syrup kegs were still traveling with my luggage. That being taken care of, I bought myself a cheese sandwich and an apple from boy selling them by the tracks and boarded the train. The Union Pacific Railroad Transcontinental Flyer, I am so excited that my adventure is beginning for real. It is admittedly bittersweet, for it would be so much more thrilling if Michelle were by my side. May she rest in peace.

For the first three or four miles we passed along the bluffs upon which Omaha was built. Then
pushed out upon the open prairie. The fertile lands of Nebraska, a vast plain dotted here and there with trees, stretching away upon every side. It is all so odd to my eye. The sky is huge! Growing up among all mountains and a cathedral ceiling of tall pines, it is indeed intimidating to see so much of it all at once. And flat! I don't think I could calculate how far the eye can see with no hills to break the line of vision. This truly is a new world!

The plains grasses are a greyish green and when the wind sweeps through them, I could swear that I was looking upon the Atlantic off the Maine coast, undulating with a heavy groundswell. It made me a little homesick, to be honest. Still, I know it is a temporary situation and will not let myself become maudlin. I will see you, Isaac and Davy soon enough.

Okay, forget what I said about the grandeur of the plains. It's been three days now, with the same scenery ALL THE TIME. It seems like the plains are going to go on forever. This monotony is disorienting, its easy to see how some passengers say they feel like time has stopped. I cannot wait until we reach the Platte River, to finally have something new to gaze upon.

If it weren't for the few friends I have made on board I am sure I would be coming quite close to crazy myself. I met a sweet girl named Eliza, she and her husband are newly married and headed out to join his family in Utah. We have had several very diverting conversations and have played cards until it feels like our fingers might bleed from the shuffling. I will definitely miss her when we have to part, but for now I am grateful for the company. She and her husband Frank have been so sweet and welcoming, asking me to join them for games and meals. They have berths in the Pullman for sleeping and from what Eliza has told me, I am glad I changed my mind about paying for one. All the men and women sleep in one large room, with little room between the berths and only curtains for privacy. Can you imagine? I'm sure you would be scandalized. Frank says I am probably getting better sleep here in my coach seat, for the combination of snoring, crying children and body odor would be enough to keep Rip Van Winkle awake. Frank is quite the card.

Finally a break in the monotony! Last night around supper time, there was a glow off in the distance. Prairie fires! The spectacle of a prairie fire is one of infinite grandeur. For miles on every side the air is heavy with volumes of stifling smoke and the ground is reddened with hissing and rushing fire. It is hard to believe such destruction can be so beautiful. It certainly added excitement to the evening dinner service.

I have eaten with Eliza and Frank at the dining stations once or twice, but with meals going for $1 each and only 30 minutes per stop, I have mostly been surviving on fruit and the cheese sandwiches they sell at the depot. After this trip is over, I think it will be a great many years before I eat a cheese sandwich again. Everyone says that the food ranges in quality from wretched to middling, so I am not missing much. Also, the stations are glorified tents with long tables and the food already set out when they arrive. Lord knows how long it has been sitting out and if cleanliness is indeed next to godliness, one might as well be eating in Satan's outhouse. The phrase 'if you've seen one you've seen them all' is never more appropriate than when discussing the food stations along the Transcontinental. People say that the only way to tell the difference between breakfast, dinner and supper is to look at your watch before eating. There is next to no variety in the menu. They all serve the same tea, buffalo steak, antelope chops, sweet potatoes, boiled Indian corn, hoe cakes and syrup. Not good maple syrup either, but some nondescript sugary concoction which has no flavor apart from sweet. I imagine it is made from sugar beets or some such. I actually heard people exclaiming over the novelty of being served fried mush this morning, because it was at least something different. Yuck.

I heard a story which I know you will find amusing. Apparently, on the last trip out, some of the passengers were thrilled to find a most delicious chicken stew for breakfast at one stop. What a lovely surprise! It was only after thoroughly enjoying the repast and complimenting the cook, that
they were told it had been made with Prairie Dog. Those with more delicate constitutions and sensibilities, found themselves taking a second look at their breakfast as they hung over the rail of the caboose.

How to explain to you what a Prairie Dog is...they are about the size of a rabbit, but without the long ears. They look nothing like dogs, I imagine they are in the rodent family, but they are adorable, with bright, curious eyes and tiny fluffy tails. They live in little villages of holes close enough to the tracks that you can see their little faces. They seem a quite joyous and playful bunch as they are given to leaping in the air, doing somersaults and diving in the air, like harbor seals diving into the waves, to disappear back down their holes, their tails and little hind feet wiggling in the air. To my disappointment, we have not yet seen any buffalo. We have seen many antelope, elk and even the odd wolf or bear, although they look nothing like our Maine black bears. There was even a pack of coyotes running along side the train yesterday, looking like they might challenge the engineer to a race. As is typical, a few of the men have fired guns out the window at the animals, brutes that they are, despite it being against the rules and the conductor giving them a good tongue-lashing. Thankfully, none of them were good enough shots to hit anything.

We had a horrible storm yesterday afternoon. The sky was suddenly dark as a moonless midnight. Lightning flashed in every direction and electric balls of fire rolled over the plains. I couldn't blame some of the more religious types for thinking that the very artillery of heaven was aimed at the valley and we were destined for certain destruction. Happily, the storm and their fears soon dissipated to reveal the most brilliant rainbow I have ever seen, it was truly breathtaking.

One feature of the scenery I have found quite striking is the remnants of the pioneers who traveled this land years ago in covered wagons. Now and then in the monotonous landscape of the plains will appear a broken wheel, an abandoned piece of furniture, the skeleton of a horse or oxen and most affecting, a lone grave marker.

I have seen no Indians, save for those broken men and women who haunt the railroad depots. Dressed in white man's clothes, but with their hair still plaited, their eyes empty and lost. They sell simple wares, bead and leather jewelry and other souvenirs likely to appeal to the tourist. Still, the worst are those reduced to outright begging for food and money. I can only imagine these are those too proud to go to the white man's reservations. It is unspeakably sad to see and I have given more than one of them a few coins. I hope that as we get further west, things will be different, but I have little hope of it.

That is all I can write for now, Maman. They have just told us that the connecting train is finally about to arrive. I must finish up if I am to have time to mail this. Give a hug and a kiss to Isaac for me, even though he will wipe it off and give my love to Davy. I miss you, Maman. Thank you so much for this trip. I am beginning to feel more like my old self already. Take care of yourself.

Your loving daughter, Nicole
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The second half of Nicole's trip and some really bad shit at the end.

this chapter is more like a rated M

Chapter Notes

MULTIPLE TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER ONLY: ATTEMPTED RAPE - SEXUAL ASSAULT - PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN - VIOLENT DEATH

Also contains: strong language, minor character death and period appropriate drug use

IF YOU FEEL YOU MAY BE TRIGGERED, STOP READING AT THE MENTION OF THE SHORTCUT AFTER NICOLE AND BOB LEAVE THE STATION.

IF YOU ARE REALLY WORRIED ABOUT BEING REMINDED OF POSSIBLE ASSOCIATIONS STOP AFTER NICOLE COMMENTS ON THE STARS

Like Emily Andras, I pledge to my readers that there will never be an actual rape story line in my work and our girls will not die "for real". This attempted rape and the events that follow are necessary to certain plot points of the story as it progresses, I promise there will be nothing else like this. Please forgive me.

I left you with a horrid cliffhanger, but the next bit is already finished in my head and will be posted within the next couple of days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My dear Maman,

I hope this letter finds you all well. I have been feeling a bit nauseated myself, but I think it probably has more to do with the food than the rocking of the train. I highly doubt the motion could be the cause, when I have good enough sea legs to venture out on the Gulf of Maine on Davy's fishing boat. There is no denying, however, that I am good and sick of this train.

We passed the Nebraska/Wyoming border this morning and and hour or two before luncheon, reached Sherman Summit, just outside Cheyenne. It has the highest elevation of any stop on the transcontinental line. According to the guidebook it is the most elevated station in the world, but I have learned that the guidebook contains about as much truth, as Mildred Grandmaison's Church Supper Chicken and Dumplings contains chicken.

Sherman Summit water tower is the official half way point between Omaha and San Francisco.
Since we were running a bit ahead of schedule, the engineer took an extra long stop, so that we might all enjoy a good stretch of the legs, as well as the view from Dale Creek Bridge. I must admit, it was quite breathtaking. Following that, the train plunged down the mountainside toward Laramie. Many of the ladies in my car were frightened as we picked up speed on the descent, but being a Maine mountain girl, born and raised, it was old hat to me. I quite enjoyed it, in truth. It was most exhilarating. It was next to nothing, though, when compared to what came next. As we approached Fort Fred Steele, a garrison built along the rail line to protect travelers from “savage indians” of whom I have seen precisely none. Truly it is not hard to imagine that these forts were conceived of by the same men who wrote the guidebook. It is quite appalling the way our government is treating these people. Stealing their land, making treaties they have no intention of keeping and confining them to specific parcels of land, like so much foraging cattle. Our Quebecquois neighbors to the north have certainly done a better job of coexisting with the natives. That, there is no denying. Oh, but I have gone off on one of my tangents again!

As we neared Fort Steele, we caught our first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains. Oh, Maman! Such beauty! So pure and white and distant. The sight of them fills you with a cold chill. They are so very different from the mounts of Maine. A lifetime lived alongside the Rocky Brook Mountains, ill prepared me for the luminescence of these Rockies. The sunshine reflects off from their snow covered summits, as though they had been carved from diamond. The mere foothills make Mount Katahdin look like a pebble. I never could have imagined this. Never. I do not think even my Michelle, with her vast, encyclopedic imagination, could have conjured up the majesty of these peaks.

I fear your motivation for sending me on this trip, though well meaning, was a bit wrongheaded. I am thankful to be taking it, don't get me wrong, but every new and exciting vista makes me think “If only Michelle could see this!” rather than distracting me from her memory, as you had hoped. Please, do not be disappointed in me, Maman. I am trying so hard to look ahead, but grief keeps its own timetable, I'm afraid. One which we mere mortals cannot hope to influence. It's just that after all these years of having Michelle as my best, bosom friend, knowing she is no longer in the world makes me feel like one of those poor fellows who returned from the war missing an arm or a leg. I fear there is nothing that can be done to ever make me feel whole again. Suddenly, I find myself craving a good, long nap. Only three stations to go before the turn away to Montana. I hardly believe it can be true.

Here I am again, Maman, although much later than I had originally intended. As you no doubt recall, I had told you I was feeling ill. The nausea returned when I woke from my nap, along with a most violent headache. I was quite lightheaded and could not seem to take a deep enough breath, my lungs feeling rather like they were filled with molasses. My limbs seemed heavy as lead and it took all my effort just to move. Just as though all the energy had somehow been drained out of my body. I feared that the strain of the long trip had brought on a relapse of my previous condition. Thank God I was wrong about that. As luck would have it, there was a doctor traveling in the next car and he assures me that it is merely Altitude Sickness. Apparently, it befalls a great many tourists when traveling through these lofty mountains. Yes, it can be quite severe if not treated properly and sufficiently early after its onset, but have no fear, Madame. I have taken every precaution and followed Dr. Corey's orders as though they were handed down by the good Lord himself. To tell you the truth, I was feeling far too miserable to do otherwise.

Dr. Corey recommends that I drink as much water as possible, but it is vital that I sip and not gulp. I must endeavor to stay as cool as possible and not exert myself. It has been quite embarrassing to be on display, before my fellow passengers, without my jacket or tie, clad only in my skirt and blouson with the buttons undone as far as decency allows. The doctor administered a cup of tea containing Extract of Cannabis, which tasted like Issac's old socks, but did wonders for my nausea and headache. Most fortuitously, my friend Eliza had picked up some hashish candy at the last stop
and I find that chewing one makes me feel a good deal better for several hours.

Aside from feeling like the devil, the main drawback to this illness is that I have missed a good portion of the scenery we have passed through. I was out of commission through the remains of Wyoming, all of Utah and was even too deeply asleep to bid goodbye to my new friends Eliza and Frank. I will miss them. I cannot tell you how frustrated I am by this turn of events. Still, the mountains will endure without my observance and I will get the chance to see them once more on my way back home to you.

As it stands, there is only one more stop before I must change trains and journey north to Montana. I can hardly believe my journey is nearly over. Alas, I must sign off now, Maman. Dr. Corey is giving me that look again. I miss you more than I can say, Madame. I even miss Isaac, believe it or not. How surprised I am that I could miss my bratty little brother! I know, he is not really so bad, but you know how it is with brothers.

I do not know when I will have the opportunity to mail this letter, there is hardly a Postal Office on every corner, but I shall put it in my satchel for safe keeping until one presents itself. I promise I will send a card when I reach Silver Bow, so you know that I have arrived safely. I love you, Maman.

Your loving daughter,
Nicole

P.S. - I don't know why I included that last bit about when and where I would post this letter. It is not as though you could tell upon receiving it, when it had been finished or mailed. Perhaps I should cut down on the hashish chews.

The train for Montana and All Points North was as sparsely populated as the last had been crowded. Aside from Nicole, there were only eight other people aboard the car. A lone man, around her brother Davy's age, an elderly couple and a family of five, consisting of an infant, a set of of twins not much older, a frazzled looking young wife and a middle aged man in a cleric's collar, with his nose buried in a Bible, completely oblivious to his wife's predicament. Nicole could not help thinking of Michelle then and her trials with the church. Were all ministers cut from the same cloth?

The tall redhead loosed a heavy sigh, communicating with her beloved in her mind. 'Oh, Michelle, we are almost there! How I wish you could be beside me here and now. It is not the same without you. Alas, if in no other way, you will always be with me here in my heart, my angel.'

When the train arrived at its terminus, Nicole, her luggage and a few saddle horses were the only things unloaded from the train. The sun had already begun to set and the only soul present on the platform was a large orange hued cat, cleaning itself atop a pile of crates.

“How queer.” she said to herself, “Perhaps Uncle Xavier is waiting inside.”

Venturing inside the small structure, Nicole found no one present except for the ticket agent.

'Ah well, who knows what sort of mishap Uncle may have had traveling through this wild country. Horses throw shoes, wagon wheels split. Nothing for it but to sit and wait.'

“I am sure he will arrive eventually,” she assured no one but herself.
This was hardly how she had envisioned her arrival on the frontier, but such was the way of the world. As the saying goes, man plans, God laughs. She had planned to have this experience with Michelle, after all and now here she was alone and her dearest friend was lost to her forever. Owing to that, it was a good deal more difficult to work up the enthusiasm which had always accompanied this particular fantasy.

Looking about, she spotted a sign that caught her attention immediately. LADIES CONVENIENCE. Ah, yes! In all her born days, she could never have imagined that a time would come that she would be so agog at the idea of a privy. A privy that didn't move!

Nicole had been waiting patiently, reading her book, her legs stretched out on the hard wooden bench, for little over half an hour. She had just allowed her eyes to close for a moment when the clerk loudly cleared his throat.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Can I help you with sumthin, Miss?”

“I'm just waiting for my Uncle. He was supposed to meet my train.”

“If you don't mind my askin' what's yer uncle's name? If I know him, I might have an idea where he's likely to be. You see, the station closes in a half hour and I have to lock up right on time. Also, there's no sleeping allowed here.”

“Oh, I am sorry. I didn't know. I only just arrived a bit ago.”

“That's okay, Miss. No sorry needed. It happens all the time. Now what was yer uncle's name, again?”

“It's Haught. Xavier Haught.”

“Xavier Haught, you say?”

'That's right.”

“Oh, Miss..I don't know how to tell ya...I am so sorry to be the bearer o' bad news...yer uncle died three days ago.”

“Excuse me?” Nicole began to feel faint and clutched onto the back of the bench for support.

“Yer uncle was a friend of mine, Miss. Used to come by here all the time. The other day, he came in to pick up his mail. He was standing right outside that side door there, talking to Jake, when a fight broke out in front the saloon across the street. Stray bullet struck him right through the heart. I was the darndest thing I ever did see.”

“Oh no! Uncle Xavier!” she began to weep in earnest, gasping for breath, “Oh, Maman! Her baby brother! This will kill her!”

“I don't want to be rude, but it's comin' up on closin' time.”

“Oh no...what will I do? I was supposed to be staying with Uncle Xavier!” panic started to rise.
“Do you know anyone else in town?”

“No, I don't...not a soul. Oh God, what do I do? Is there a hotel nearby?”

“As a matter of fact there is, but I doubt a nice young girl like you would want to stay there.”

Nicole looked at him like he had three heads. Couldn't he see how desperate she was?

“You see, Miss...the only hotel hereabouts is also the local brothel.”

“Oh no...that wouldn't do. Maman would have my head.”

“I figured as much.”

“What about the homestead?”

“Well, Miss...that's a good fifty miles southwest o' here. Not really an option for tonight. Being as you're the next of kin, I could sign it over to you, as I also happen to be the Land Agent hereabouts. That is if...”

“Oh good!” finally something was going her way, “Let's do that.”

“As I was saying...that is if you was a man. Only menfolk can claim homesteads, inherit or have one transferred. Have you got a husband joining you by any chance?”

“Nope. No husband.”

“Poor thing. All alone out here with no one to watch over ya.”

“Where is Uncle Xavier now?”

“He's over to Hollins, the undertaker's. You can go by there in the morning and claim his effects. I don't want to be rude, but I really gotta close up, Miss.”

“What do I do? Wait...you said you were friends...were you very close? Would you know if maybe he had a lady friend here in town I could stay the night with, perhaps?”

“As a matter of fact, I do know of a nice older lady runs a boarding house. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. I'm sure being a friend of mine she'd let you stay the night.”

“Oh yes, please. That would be wonderful.”

“Just let me lock up here and I'll take you over there.”

“Oh, thank you so much. You are a life saver. I don't know what I would have done if you'd said no.”

“No trouble at all. You got any luggage other than that there suitcase and yer satchel?”

“I have a couple of trunks and two kegs of maple syrup out on the platform, my family's in the business.”

“Ooooh, yum! No need to worry about that, they'll be safe here until the morning. If you'll just wait out on the sidewalk, I'll lock all this up and join ya in a minute.”
As she waited for the gentleman to close up the station, Nicole stood on the sidewalk staring up at the stars.

“The sky looks so different here. The constellations look all out of sorts, somehow.”

“Where you from, girl?”

“You can call me Nicole. I'm from Aroostook County, Maine.”

“Name's Bob. Turn left at the corner up ahead.”

“I am so exhausted...is it much further? I'm not used to these shoes. Back home I work in the woods a lot and mostly wear boots.”

“I was just gonna suggest we take a short cut up ahead.”

“That sounds wonderful, Bob.”

“It's that alley up there, other side of the livery stable. Here, let me carry your things for you. It can be a bit dicey in the dark if you're not familiar. You'll want yer hand free to feel along the wall.”

As they stepped into the pitch black alley, Nicole handed her cases to her benefactor. Taking a couple of steps to her right, the redhead felt for the aforementioned wall in the darkness. She could faintly see the dimly lit windows of a house in the distance and prayed it was their destination. She couldn't wait to get out of her damned corset and tight dress and slip into something more to her taste, which at the moment ran along the lines of a nice, warm bed.

After a few more steps, Nicole heard a crash. There was no way she could have known it was the sound of her companion tossing her luggage aside. Before she could inquire about the noise, all her breath was knocked out of her as Bob slammed her into the wall, pressing the full weight of his body against her.

“Stop that!” she screamed, “Bob! Stop! What is wrong with you?”

“Oh come on, girly...everybody knows a woman in the west can't be but one of two things, a wife or a whore and you already done told me you ain't got no husband. He grabbed hold of her breasts and manhandled them roughly.

“Ow! Nooo! Get off me!” she tried to push him away, to no avail, “Help! Help!”

“Ain't no one out here at this hour to hear you, go ahead and scream all you like, girly. To tell you the truth I like a screamer.”

“You pig!” Nicole spit in his face, struggling for all she was worth, but not making much headway. “Let! Me! Go! You bastard! What would Uncle Xavier say?”

“Couldn't say. I only met him the once. Now come on, whore...I got money, you can't say no to me...you know you want it. You ain't never had it so good. I knew you needed it bad the second you walked through my door. I know'd what you girls do to get through those long Maine winters. Fuck yer cousins...or was it yer daddys?”

Nicole reached forward and grabbed the vile man by the crotch, squeezing the contents of her hand as cruelly as she possibly could. It was a trick she'd learned wrestling her brothers.

Bob cried out in pain, then backhanded her across the face, splitting her lip. “You little, bitch! Yer
gonna pay for that!"

Grabbing both her wrists, he pinned them above her head with one hand and roughly ripped open her bodice with the other.

“Mmmm, would you look at those pretty, white, farm fresh titties. Do they taste like maple sugar?”

As he leaned toward her, Nicole craned her neck back then headbutted him in the nose full force. A pretty girl didn't grow up around a crew of woodsmen without learning how to defend herself. The frightened redhead managed to run a few steps before tripping over something she couldn't see in the blackness. Before she could right herself, she felt a searing pain at the back of her head, as the brute grabbed her by the hair and pulled her down to the ground, laying his crushing weight on top of her.

“I was gonna take it easy on you, since yer so pretty and all, we coulda both enjoyed ourselves, now I'm gonna hurt you bad! You'll be nuthin' but scraps by the time I'm done.” He reared back his arm and backhanded her once more, slamming hard into her cheekbone, blood spraying. Before she had time to get the world back in focus, Nicole felt the disgusting sensation of his grubby hands against her legs, pushing her skirt up higher.

'Think, Nicole. Think. What would Michelle do if this was Will?'

As the revolting creature sat back on his haunches to free himself from his trousers, she took advantage of his distractedness to feel about the filthy ground around her. Luck was thankfully on her side in that moment, as her fingers came in contact with a solid, rectangular object.

A brick.

Waiting until Bob was occupied with trying to wrestle off her bloomers, the horrified young woman called upon every one of her wood chopping muscles and slammed the brick, as hard as she could, into the side of his head. In truth, the sound of his skull cracking was hard to mistake, but for safety's sake and frankly out of sheer disgust, she gave him another good whack. Rolling his now limp body off of her, finally able to inhale fully again, Nicole took one deep breath, then slipped into unconsciousness in the filthy alley.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry about the delay in posting. I know I promised I'd post this morning but it's been one of those days. I had about three quarters of the chapter edited and in the computer when the program crashed and I lost all of it. Thank God the previous chapters are saved on here. I always write my first draft in long hand, which turned out to be a good habit this time. Being a long chapter, it took me quite a while to get the whole rewrite/edit typed back into the computer. Then my battery was nearly dead and I couldn't recharge because we were having severe thunder storms. Here I am two hours later finally able to post. here comes the thunder again. I hope you all think it was worth the trouble.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The morning after. Nicole processes the events of the horrible night before, makes her escape and assumes a new identity.

WARNING: Descriptions of her trauma and some very dark thoughts she has the next morning may be quite triggering to survivors. The larger part of this chapter takes place inside Nicole's mind and is not materially necessary to following the plot going forward. If you don't want to risk triggering, just read the last paragraph and you will understand what's going on in the next post.

I promise you, THIS IS THE ABSOLUTE LAST CHAPTER OF THIS TRAUMATIC ANGSTY NATURE IN WHAT PROMISES TO BE QUITE A LONG STORY (except for Waverly opening the mail, but that's over in a sentence or two) Thanks for sticking with it.

Some time later, Nicole awakened upon the cold, unforgiving ground. Disoriented at first and for a moment, unable to remember quite how she had gotten there. The world around her somewhat skewed, as one eye was swollen shut and her head was throbbing like mad. Her lips and teeth ached. In fact, there wasn't an inch of her body that didn't hurt. Attempting to get up, the young redhead was swamped with a powerful wave of nausea. She rolled on her side, shrinking into a fetal pose as she clutched at her roiling stomach, then deposited its contents on the filthy ground.

When she had collected herself enough to again attempt to open her eye, she saw that the blue hour was upon her and shapes were beginning to make themselves apparent in the previously darkened alley. First off, her good eye alit upon her satchel, hanging open with half its contents strewn in the dirt.

"Hmmmm, I suppose I must have lost my grip when I fell."

Then, she saw it.

The brick.

Her head swam and she looked down at her own hands, to find them covered in gore. All at once, the entirety of the night before came flooding back. Nicole got to her knees and dry heaved until she was sure she would turn inside out, her throat burning like she'd been drinking kerosene. Steadying herself against the building, the frightened girl got to her feet, turning slowly to survey her surroundings. A brief scream escaped her lips, as her eye took in the dead body before her. Unable, in her current state, to even acknowledge the fact that she'd killed a man, be it in self-defense or otherwise, the young redhead's mind protected itself by slipping into practical mode.

There wasn't much time until dawn, maybe half an hour if her senses told the truth. Nicole held her breath and listened as hard as she could. No sound reached her ear save her own labored breathing. No birds singing, no horse's hooves striking the ground, no evidence of activity anywhere near. Perhaps it was earlier than she thought. In an effort to stave of the inevitable onset of panic, she focused on the facts. It was obvious that no one had witnessed the crime or its aftermath or she
could not have remained here undiscovered for so long. At least, she had that in her favor.

Quickly, or at least as quickly as possible while having to stop and steady herself every couple steps, as the world had a tendency to spin if she moved too fast, she gathered up the strewn contents of her satchel. She stuffed the items back into the bag, trying her best to ignore the fact that many of them were spattered with blood or worse. The suitcase had sprung open, but thankfully was mostly undisturbed. Snapping it shut, she gathered up her cases and crept to the end of the alley. Taking the lay of the land, from her position of cover, Nicole scanned the street in search of anyone who might witness her escape. There wasn't a soul in sight, thank the Lord. Although, after last night, she was having serious doubts whether such an entity existed. Still, she said a quick Hail Mary, just the same. She'd been raised Catholic and old habits were hard to break. Then marshaling all her strength and relying greatly upon adrenaline, the frightened girl made a mad dash for the small patch of woods she could see off in the distance. Crouched low, looking only forward, doing her best to run in a straight line and trying desperately not to think too much about the fact that she had to traverse two alleys to get there.

The woods being still quite dark and comprised of mainly large old growth trees, with a good deal of underbrush, the girl was fairly certain that she could not be spotted from the street. Gasping for breath after her extended sprint, Nicole wrapped herself up in this illusion of safety and slumped to the ground. Wrapping her arms around her knees and pulling them in close to her chest, like a long lost lover, she started to cry. She wept until the sun began shining through the canopy of leaves. She wept, buckets of tears, until there was not a single one left. Had the shriek of a hawk, hunting for his breakfast, not shaken her from her stupor, she might have lain there until she died of it. Still, self-pity was not an emotion that had been allowed to be entertained in the Saulnier house. They were strong, hard-working, mountain stock and they did not let the storms of fate buffet them for long. You turned your sails into the wind, focused on the horizon and kept on going. If you stood still too long, the current would drag you under, best to avoid the doldrums entirely if you could.

Shaking her head to clear it...oops, bad idea...Nicole tried to come up with a solid reason to justify her continued existence. First of all, she was not about to let a sick bastard like Bob, snuff out the spark of her young life. If she did that, then he had indeed left nothing of her in the world but scraps. No matter what, she could not let that be true. She would not cede him the victory. Pushing aside morbid musings on the existence of true evil in the hearts of man and the knowledge that the marks he had left upon her flesh would likely fade in a few days, but the mark he'd left on her soul would undoubtedly endure as long as she did, she turned her thoughts to Michelle. Her beloved friend hadn't made it to the frontier and Nicole had sworn she would experience the adventure for both of them. If she allowed herself to sink into this despair, she would dry up and blow away like the fluff on a dandelion. She would be breaking a promise to the truest, sweetest soul she had ever known. She owed her so much more than that. It was quite simply not an option.

Fixing the idea of Michelle firmly in mind, she forced herself into action, focusing on what could be done to resolve this unmitigated disaster. Nicole looked down at her blood covered hands, at her dress, spattered with gore and dried vomit, torn and filthy from...

No.

Don't think about that.

Never think about that.
You need to get cleaned up.

You need to make a plan.

She reached into her satchel and pulling out a kerchief, soaking it liberally in the dew that clung heavily to a patch of moss beside her. Pressing the cool, damp cloth to her swollen eye, Nicole hissed in pain, gritting her teeth. A new bloom of pain shot through her lower jaw. Best not do that again. Still, it had to be done, so she held her breath and continued cleaning the dried blood from her face before moving on to her hands. She wrung out the sanguine cloth, wetted it in dew once again and began scrubbing at her palms. In time her skin was white again. She could even see the smattering of sun freckles across the backs of her forearms. Still, even when not a trace of blood could be seen on her flesh, Nicole felt like her hands would never be truly clean again.

Like even if she took a million baths, she would never feel clean again. Knowing that in that moment, what she needed to feel most of all was nothing, she reached into her satchel in search of the hashish candy that dear Eliza had gifted her. Hoping against hope that she had not eaten them all. Alas, the gods were feeling kind. Comparatively. There were three left. Gingerly parting her lips, but setting them back to bleeding even so, she carefully slipped the cube of musky sweetness into her mouth and began to suck upon it. Her teeth were definitely too sore for chewing. Soon enough, a certain sense of numbness came upon her and in a sort of trance, she went about stripping off her dress. She kept her eyes tightly closed, not wanting to glimpse the evidence of the night before upon it. Tossing the spoiled garment aside, she dropped to her knees, shivering in just her corset and petticoat. Pulling her valise to her, she opened it up and began to search for something clean to wear. The first few items on top were spotted with mud and other things she preferred not look at too closely. She tossed the ruined garments on top of the dress. It was there, half way down in the case that she spotted her salvation. Sturdy boots. A red plaid shirt. Heavy corduroy trousers with suspenders attached. Her wood chopping clothes.

Oddly enough, had her other clothes not been ruined in her encounter with Bob, the name made her stomach turn, she never would have spared them a second thought. They were just a good, warm set of clothes, practical for working in the cold and nothing more. Still, in that moment, it somehow dawned on her that they were her way forward. She knew now, exactly what she must do to survive.

Taking the small embroidery scissors from her satchel, Nicole set about the arduous task of cutting off her long, silky, auburn hair. The hunting knife she'd bought for Davy would have accomplished the task much quicker, but her head hurt too much for that. The scissors were small and inefficient but they were also far gentler. It consumed more time than she could truly spare, but when she was finished, her hair was in much the same style that her brother Isaac wore.

Next she removed her petticoat and began tearing it into wide strips. Removing her corset and blushing a little at being topless out in the open, Nicole used the cloth to bind her breasts, crying out in pain as the bandages cut into the tender, bruised flesh. Divesting herself of the remainder of her feminine apparel, the redhead tossed her bloomers, defiled by that maniac's hands, onto the pile of clothes she needed to dispose of somehow. She then stepped into the long flannel underwear, that she wore under her clothes when she needed to work outdoors in winter, before pulling the matching top over her newly shorn head. Lastly, she donned the plaid shirt and soft corduroy
trousers, leaving the braces hanging at her hips and sitting to pull on a good pair of wool socks and her heavy lace-up boots.

Not being the sort of girl who cared much about her appearance, Nicole hadn't packed a mirror.

In truth, she was glad of it, for she did not think she could stand to see the evidence of the previous night upon her face.

Getting to her feet, she paced around a bit, trying to get the feel of moving in a more masculine fashion. It didn't take her long to realize that there had never really been much feminine about her walk to begin with, if she was being honest. The extra layer of cloth, provided by the longjohns, served the dual purpose of adding bulk to her frame and helping to disguise the few womanly curves she naturally possessed. She'd never had much in the way of hips to begin with and years of chopping wood had given her stronger arms and broader shoulders than many boys she knew. When it came right down to brass tacks, there was no denying that she had a body much more suited to men's clothes than the restrictive, fussy fashions made for women.

It was funny, she'd worn this outfit hundreds of times, but somehow the highly symbolic act of cutting her hair and binding her breasts made it feel completely different. Nicole released a small giggle, when she realized how very little it took to disguise the fact that she was a woman at all. Odd, how very not strange the idea of living the rest of her life in these masculine garments seemed. How safe she felt in them. How very much they seemed like coming home.

That morning, in a quite ordinary woodland clearing...that horrid morning after the worst night of her life...okay, second worst...Oh, Michelle...what would you think of me if you could see me now? That cold, fateful morning, Nikki Saulnier perished quietly on the forest floor, unable to cope with the things that had been done to her and the thing she had done in return. In the flame of her shame, an innocent, young, redheaded country girl was burned to a cinder and Cole Haught rose, like a mythical phoenix from her ashes.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Nicole takes her new identity for a test run.

Nicole stuffed the few items which were still of use to her, underclothes, socks, a couple books and not much else, into her satchel. The rest of it, her explicitly female attire and all of the things which had been irreparably stained with blood and muck, the letter to her mother among them, she put in the suitcase along with a few heavy rocks. When the opportunity presented itself she would dump it in the first deep body of water she came across.

She could barely stand to think about the fact that she would never see her dear Maman, Isaac or Davy again, but that was how it must be if she wanted to survive. Nicole had killed a man, and with no way to prove that it was self-defense, Nicole must disappear entirely. Not a single unnecessary risk could be taken, including contacting her family. Even if she could send a letter, what would she say? I love you all and by the way I'm now living as a man, which is actually perfect because I prefer the company of women? At best, her Catholic mother would shun her, at worst her head would explode. In all seriousness, what she was doing was just as illegal as murder, though not as severe. One slip could find her on the end of a hangman's rope or at the hands of an outraged mob. Many a fate worse than death could be hers if she was found out, including the madhouse. This armor of masculinity that made her feel so safe and free was at the same time a life sentence of isolation, for she must never share her truth with another living soul.

The ersatz young man shed one last tear for the family she must lose, then went about an accounting of her assets and making a plan. Now more than ever, Nicole was thankful she had opted not to pay for the Pullman Sleeper. If she had, as well as eating hot meals along the way, she would have had nowhere near the amount of money she would need to see her way out of this mess. Fortunately, all of her assets were in coin, so that the blood could be washed off. Had the money been paper, she would be lost. Rolling the coins around in the still damp moss, she wiped them down, before placing them inside a clean white hankie. The lovely coin purse, which her mother had hand embroidered for her, she tossed into the suitcase as well. Snapping the lid shut upon the last vestiges of her old life.

The suitcase itself, she buried under fallen leaves and branches for the time being, praying no curious animal dragged it out again. Stained with blood as it was, she could scarcely carry it around with her and like it or not she had some errands to run in town before she could make her escape.

Her first order of business was finding a good hat to help hide her face, more men's attire to replace the clothing she'd had to dispose of and some means of self-protection, a little more lethal than the hunting knife in her bag or her thick Maine Yankee skull. On her way to the mercantile, which she'd spotted the night before, Nicole happened to catch her reflection in the barber shop window. The lovely coin purse, which her mother had hand embroidered for her, she tossed into the suitcase as well. Snapping the lid shut upon the last vestiges of her old life. The suitcase itself, she buried under fallen leaves and branches for the time being, praying no curious animal dragged it out again. Stained with blood as it was, she could scarcely carry it around with her and like it or not she had some errands to run in town before she could make her escape.
down the front of her long johns. Adjusting their placement, she laughed aloud, thinking of all the times she'd seen men doing the same.

“I'm getting more authentic by the minute,” she chuckled.

Stepping out of the privy and into the sunlight, she headed toward the mercantile. After a few strides, she found that she had to modify her gait, in order to keep the leather substitute from chafing against her thighs. Once again she laughed to herself.

“So that's why they walk that way.”

Arriving outside Gardner's Mercantile, Nicole checked her reflection in the mirror by the door.

“Hmmmm, not bad if I say so myself,” feeling oddly giddy, she nodded to the wooden Indian, “What do you think? Quiet type, huh?”

Taking one deep breath and holding it, she stepped across the threshold.

“Good morning, young man. Welcome to Gardner's! If there's anything I can help you find, you just let me know,” the elderly gentleman behind the counter, called out jovially.

“So...that went well,” she mumbled to herself, letting out the air she'd been holding in her lungs.

Keeping her head down and wishing she could make herself invisible, Nicole walked the aisles, picking up a couple more pairs of pants, three work shirts, a nightshirt, some socks and a box of hashish candy for the pain. There didn't seem to be any point to buying food just yet. Uncle Xavier had only been gone a few days, God rest his soul, so there were bound to be a few things at the homestead that were still good. Barring that she was an old hand at catching fish and not so bad with a hunting rifle.

Placing her finds on the counter, she waited patiently for the proprietor to notice her. There was no sense in calling attention to herself by speaking when it wasn't absolutely essential, even if her voice was pitched naturally lower than most girls.

“Find everything you were looking for, young fella?”

“Mostly. Tell me, what do hear about these Levi Strauss trousers? I've never seen them before.”

“You'll wear out before they do. Tough as a Union Pacific antelope chop.”

“I'll take 'em then.”

“Is there anything else I can do for ya?”

“You sell guns here?”

“Well, I suppose that depends on what you want it for, now doesn't it?”

“Mostly hunting,” she shuddered, “And snakes.”

“I hear ya, boy. Never could abide snakes myself. Let me see what I've got for ya.”

“It doesn't need to be pretty, so long as it shoots straight.”
“Your purse is a little light, huh?”

“I don't even have a purse,” she took the bundle of coins out of her pocket and laid it on the counter, “Just a hankie.”

The old man laughed, “I like you...don't take yourself too serious. That's a good quality in a man. My pappy always said, a man doesn't have to be smart to be successful, he doesn't have to be honest, but he does have to be likable. You'll go far.”

Nicole grinned at him, then winced when her lip split open again. She picked up the hankie and dabbed at the blood, reminding herself that no matter how embarrassed she might feel, she had better not blush.

“That's a helluva shiner you got there. How'd you come by that? If you don't mind my asking?”

“Defending the honor of a young lady,” which was technically the truth.

“Well, well...Good for you, son. Don't meet many young gentlemen like you these days.”

“You have no idea, mister,’ Nicole thought to herself.

“Tell you what, since your such a fine, upstanding young man,” he winked, “I'll sell you this old Spencer Repeater for half price. She pulled my biscuits out of the fire many a time fighting Johnny Reb. Might not be newfangled, but you'll hit what you aim at, that is if you know how to aim.” he winked, “I'll even throw in a box of cartridges.”

This fellow winked so often, she was beginning to wonder if he had a nervous condition.

“Sounds like a deal to me,” she stuck out her hand to shake on it, remembering to make it nice and firm, thanking heaven for her wood chopping callouses.

“Whoa! That's some grip you got there, young man. Is that gonna be all for ya?”

The tall redhead pointed to a display behind the counter, “Could I have a look at that white hat? The one with the big brim?”

“The Stetson? You've got a good eye, boy. That there is a quality hat,” he handed it over, “Try that on for size.”

It felt so odd to be wearing a hat with so little hair underneath, but it was a near perfect fit.

“I'll be damned if you and that hat don't look like you were made for each other. Here, take a gander,” he placed a standing mirror on the counter. “Plus, it'll help you hide the shiner,” he teased.

Of course, Nicole had dealt with merchants trying to make a sale before and knew better than to take their compliments at face value. Still, looking in the mirror, she saw that the old gentleman was telling the truth. She cut quite a dashing figure in the white Stetson, even if she did say so herself.

“When you put it that way, I don't know how I can not buy it.”

“I'm sure your young lady will love it,” the old man winked once more.

This time Nicole couldn't stop the blush from rising. She ducked her head and coughed uncomfortably. “So...how much do I owe you?”
“Is that gonna be cash or do you want to start an account?”

“Cash please. Just passing through on my way out west.”

“Let's see now...two pairs of Levi Strauss at $13.50 a dozen, three shirts, socks, nightshirt, the candy, that's a dollar fifty, $30.00 for the rifle and $5.00 for the Stetson...that's $45.40.”

“That seems fair,” she nodded, laying out four $10 gold pieces and a handful of smaller coins.

“You got a horse outside to carry all this, I hope.”

“It's on my list.”

“That's fine, if I'm not mistaken, I got a big ole poke under here somewheres,” he squatted behind the counter and came up with a large canvas bag. Placing everything inside, except for the gun, he tied it off with a hank of rope and handed it to her.

“It's been a pleasure doing business with such a polite young man, what was your name again?”

“Cole.”

“Cole. A good strong name for a solid young man,” he winked one last time, “Good luck to you, boy. You be careful now.”

“Same to you, sir.”

Nicole touched two fingers to the brim of her new hat, then strode out into the afternoon sun, standing a little taller.

Pulling the brim of the Stetson a little lower over her eyes, Nicole ambled toward her next destination in no particular hurry. She'd learned an important lesson from her trip to the mercantile. If she didn't act like there was anything at all about her out of the ordinary, then most people would take her at face value. It was the nature of the beast. People saw what they wanted to see and nobody out there wanted to see a twenty-four year old woman parading around in men's clothes. If Nicole just kept telling herself that she was a shy, young man, probably out on his own for the first time, headed out west to seek his fortune. With any luck, most people would assume that was exactly what she was.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Nicole finishes her errands in town. She also proves to be a bit of a badass.

Chapter Notes

Dolls is referred to as "colored" by the railroad clerk. I do not mean to offend anyone, just trying to be period appropriate.

Sorry about the delay between chapters. We've had a temperature drop and the arthritis in my fingers has been kicking up.

I really appreciate all the comments and kudos I've been getting. I have been amazed at the big elevation in hits since I posted the last couple of chapters. Knowing someone is enjoying my work makes writing it that much more satisfying.

Nicole stopped a woman with two young children, outside the apothecary.

“Pardon me, Ma'am, but could you tell me where I might find Hollins, the undertaker's?”

“Oh, you poor boy. I am so sorry for your loss. You will find Mr. Hollins' establishment on the west side of town, one block back that way.”

“Thank you. Much obliged, Ma'am.”

Turning the corner and passing the saloon, a familiar name caught Nicole's ear. Oddly enough, considering their place of origin, both voices were female. What was it they called them? Soiled doves, no doubt.

“Ya hear about Bob?”

“Land Agent Bob?”

“Yup.”

“Served him right.”

“I always knew that filthy sonofabitch would meet his maker with his pecker out.”

“I only hope it was a woman done it.”

“I'm sure there's plenty in this town wish it'd been them. Hell, there's plenty in this building.”

“Whosoever she was, they oughta give her a medal.”

Nicole smirked a little, then internally chided herself for doing so.
Upon approaching the undertaker's, it looked like a respectable establishment. There was a black awning hung above a window, with R. Hollins, Undertaker stenciled on the glass, in fancy black letters with gold accents. Upon entering the storefront, however, one's opinion tended to change rather quickly. Hung on every available bit of wall space were photos of dead outlaws, stood up in their coffins, some riddled with bullet holes or with rope burn on their necks. Nicole knew that the corpses belonged to outlaws, because posted beside several were handbills with headings like "DEADLY BILL BANKHEAD – Infamous Outlaw" and a list of viewing prices below. The young redhead, felt dirty just being in the same room with them.

Having been alerted by the bell above the door, the proprietor soon entered through a black curtain on the back wall. As one might expect, he was dressed in black from head to foot, with the exception of a dingy white shirt. In keeping with that detail, the rest of him seemed to be covered in a thin layer of grime as well. His hair, his skin, even his clothes, all looked as thought they'd been sprayed down with a liberal coating of grease. Nicole found herself happy for the pungent, stomach churning smell of formaldehyde, for she was certain the man's natural body odor would be exponentially more offensive.

"Can I help you with something, young man?"

"I was told that my uncle was here."

"Let me guess. Xavier Haught?"

"Why, yes...how did you know?"

"Same fire red hair, same cheekbones, same broad shoulders. I'd a known you was a relative a block away. Come for his things?"

"Can I see him? I'd like to pay my respects."

"I'm afraid we buried him yesterday, son. You see, it hasn't snowed yet so we don't exactly have a way to keep 'em fresh, you should pardon the expression."

"I'd like to claim his belongings then..Also could you tell me where he's buried?"

"I'm afraid it's unmarked at the moment, so it'd be kinda hard to explain. Let me just find that box. Now where did I put it?" He dug under a pile of loose, disordered papers, "Oh, here it is!" His elation that he had actually been able to locate it was a bit disconcerting, to say the least. The grubby little man set the box on his desk and sat down, indicating a chair for Nicole across from it.

"Now let's see, what have we got here?"

Hollins picked up a list, apparently checking it against the contents of the box. The first item he drew out was a fairly ornate pocket watch. Raising it closer to his face to get a better look, he surprised her by opening his mouth and biting down on it.

"Yup, one pocket watch, 24 karat gold. That's a honey. You'll be wanting to wear that, I suspect. It's sure to impress the ladies."

Next he lifted out a small, book, bound in green leather.

"One pocket copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets," he pronounced it Shack-iss-peer's So-nets, obviously not a fan.

"One plain white linen hankie, still folded. One small leather coin purse containing five hundred dollars U.S. Woowee! Musta been in town on a toot. And last but not least, one pair of spectacles, 
left lens broken. Was the bullet done that, I suspect.”

If the bereaved young woman had glared at him any harder, he might well have burst into flame. "I was told he was shot through the heart."

“Also says here, there's a horse, complete with saddle and tack. He didn't fit in the box, so we put him over the livery stable.”

Nicole sat stonefaced, not reacting to his feeble attempt at humor.

“Jeeze, you're a tough audience. I find a little humor helps lighten the mood a mite.”

“Yes, very little.”

“Of course, you'll be responsible for payin' the feed and board bill on the horse.”

“That won't be a problem.”

“There's also the matter of my bill.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Well, let's see...there's twenty dollars for the embalming...”

Nicole interrupted, “If he was embalmed, then why did you say he wouldn't keep fresh?”

“Oops! Caught. You can't blame a man for trying.”

“I believe I could probably blame you for anything I choose and be right ninety percent of the time.”

Hollins coughed nervously, “You owe me ten for the burial and if you want to show your love for the dear gentleman, a nice stone marker will run you forty.”

“Will it now?” Nicole laid her left foot on her right knee and cradled the rifle in her lap.

“God's honest truth, I swear. You know, I'd be willin' to take that old horse as trade and you'd be free and clear. I'd even pay your bill at the livery.”

“Mister, I know I look young, but do I look stupid too? You and I both know a fifty dollar horse couldn't even make it into the glue factory under its own power. As a matter of fact, my uncle has written me many times about what a fine horse Bobo is, even if he does go a little squirrely when there's a filly around. You and I both know, that the rate for a good saddle horse in these parts is upward of two hundred dollars, not to mention the saddle and tack. Just what are you trying to pull here?”

“Oh, come on, son. A man's gotta make a living somehow.”

“I might suggest you try to find some other way than swindling the bereaved.”

“I'm sorry, okay?” he whined, nervously eyeing the Spencer in her lap.

“Now give me that box and the inventory list and the paper that needs signing. Let's make this all nice and legal, so you can't claim I robbed you. Then I will give you your fifty dollars and I better not come back here and find a cheap wooden marker on Uncle Xavier's grave either!”

Hollins slid a printed form across the desk, after moving aside some of the clutter to clear a path.
“Sign there on the line at the bottom.”

Nicole made a simple, large X on the line, not having had the time to practice a more masculine style of handwriting.
Hollins took the form and handed over the box in exchange.

“There you go. You know, you seem like a young gentleman of spirit. I got a criminal out back, had his head bashed in with a brick. I’ll let you have a gander at him for two bits.”

That did it. She had reached her limit and sped right past it. Thinking nothing of the safety of not drawing attention to herself, the girl gave the disgusting troll of a man a piece of her highly indignant mind.

“What kind of a pathetic excuse for a man are you? You have been given the honor of being the last person to care for these people on this earth. These bodies you so casually offer up as entertainment, once had families, loved ones who are paying you to treat them with respect and instead you try to profit off their misfortune. That man out back isn't the only criminal here.”
Nicole gazed down the barrel of the Spencer at him, “Here's your fifty,” she tossed the coins angrily on the mess of a desk, “And if I ever find out that you had my uncle on display, I will come back here and put you in the ground myself! We clear?”

“A man's gotta make a living! Folks ain't dyin' round here like they did back in the gold rush days.”

“I said are we clear?”

“We're clear! There ain't no need to go pointin' your pea shooter at me!”

Nicole turned on her heel and went on her way, slamming the door so hard on the way out that a long spidery crack formed from the upper left corner to the center of the glass inside it. Still, she didn't think the ghoulish Mr. Hollins would be giving her any trouble about that particular bill.

Her next stop was the livery stable, an errand she was not at all enthusiastic about running, given what had happened in the alley beside it. Thankfully, the stable was owned by a decent, honest man and she was able to settle up accounts and collect Bobo in no time flat. Placing her uncle's belongings in the saddle bag and hanging her poke off the horn, she slid the Spencer into the conveniently provided holster and mounted up and was on her way.

Arriving at the railroad station, the tall, increasingly world weary, redhead tied Bobo to the hitching post and walked up to the window marked Post Office and Land Agency.

“What can I do for you, young man?” asked the bespectacled, balding man behind the counter.

“Is the land agent in?”

“That'd be me...well, temporary Land Agent...official one went and got hiself kilt.”

“I'm sorry.”

“No need to be sorry, boy. Sonofabitch most likely deserved it.”

'Seems like I'd be a hero in this town, if I could admit to what I did,' Nicole mused to herself.
“Anyway, what can I do ya for?”

“My uncle passed away recently and I'm here to claim his homestead.”

“Xavier Haught, right?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“I saw you with Bobo out front. I'd know that horse anywhere. White blond brush atop his head and a single white patch on the side of his chin. Plus you got that same flame red hair and those same broad shoulders. You sure he wasn't yer Pa?”

“He was my mother's baby brother. So, yes, I am fairly certain.”

“I dinnit mean nuthin' by it, son. Just runnin' my mouth. I'm sorry about yer uncle. He seemed like a decent man, couple times I met him.”

“He was...decent, quiet, patient, forgiving. I'm nothing like him,” Nicole replied with a slight edge in her voice.

“Let me just find that deed for ya. You got any identification?”

“I just picked up his things from Hollins, the undertaker. Is that proof enough?”

“I'm sorry, young fella.”

“Thank you for your condolences.”

“No, I mean yes...I mean, I was saying I was sorry you had to meet Hollins.”

“Now that's an apology I'll accept.”

“Just sign here and again here at the bottom.”

Once again Nicole made her mark with an X. Don't want to leave a paper trail when you're trying to disappear. She only hoped the people in this town saw enough passers through that she wouldn't be remembered.

“All set. That'll be two dollars transfer fee.”

She dug in her pocket and pulled out the coins, “There you go, sir.”

“Such a polite young fella. Don't meet many boys like you these days.”

'You have no idea, mister.'

“Thank you. Is there a map or someone who knows the territory who can show me where it is? I also need someone to haul my supplies.”

“Just out back yer gonna see a young man in a buckboard, hitched up to a yoke of red and white oxen. Name's Dolls. Nicest colored fella ya ever want to meet. He can fix ya right up. Lives out that way hisself.”

“Thank you, sir. You've been very helpful.”

Stepping out onto the platform, Nicole snugged the Stetson down on her head and peered down the
tracks in search of Dolls, squinting at the sun in her eyes. It didn't take long to spot him, as there was no one else on the platform even close to matching his description. Fortuitously enough, he wasn't very far from where her trunks and kegs had been left.

“Excuse me, sir.” she called out, “Sir!” a little louder, “Sir?” she cleared her throat loudly, “Pardon me, Sir!” perhaps he was deaf. “Mister Dolls?” she practically hollered.

“You talking to me?”

“Yes, sir...indeed I was.”

“It's just Dolls, young fella. Ain't no mister about it. And you don't gotta yell like that, I ain't deaf.”

“The man inside said you could help me find my homestead and haul my trunks for me.”

“That's right. Whereabouts is this homestead of yours?”

“I don't really know, it was my uncle's. The land agent said it was out by your place.”

“My place, huh? No such thing as my place. I'm a sharecropper. It's very definitely his place, not mine. Saving up to buy it though. My wife and kids deserve to live on some land they can call their own.”

“Good for you. I admire a man who take's good care of his wife and children.”

“I'll be able to help you out first thing in the morning, but I don't go out that way this late. It's a good fifty miles as the crow flies. It ain't safe driving it in the dark, not with the coyotes and cougars.”

“All right then. I'll meet you here first thing in the morning. Those are my trunks and kegs right there. Would you happen to know of a place I can get a hot meal, a bath and a bed for the night?”

“Flossie's place has the softest beds in town, I hear.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Nicole ties up lose ends and finds a meal and a room for the night

Chapter Notes

This was originally planned to be a funny chapter, but my muse was in a different mood today. Hope you like it.

Before Nicole could indulge herself with a hot meal and a hot bath, she had one loose end to tie up. Taking a long, rambling route through town, so that no one might deduce her destination, she and Bobo made their way to the woods on the edge of the prairie. Arriving at the site of her rebirth, she rode carefully out of sight, before redistributing the purchases she'd made at Gardner's between her saddle bags, munching a hashish candy to calm her nerves. Tethering Bobo to a low hanging branch, she got to her knees and dug out the bloodstained suitcase. Relieved that it showed no signs of having been tampered with, she lashed it to the horn, using the hank of rope from the canvas bag, then climbed into the saddle. Riding at a snail's pace, she headed toward the sunlight that was filtering through the canopy of leaves, cautiously approaching open ground. The last thing she needed was someone from town catching sight of her and getting suspicious, so rather than using the road, she rode west across the fields. Having read enough about the geography of the area, she knew that if she just continued going forward, there was a river somewhere up ahead that would be impossible to miss.

After a half hour's leisurely ride, she didn't think it was a good idea to push Bobo with a relative stranger on his back, the redhead arrived at the riverbank. Across the rushing water, Nicole spotted a young doe drinking in the shallows. It was such a breathtaking sight that she did her level best not to move a single muscle, not wanting to spook the beautiful creature. Smiling wistfully, she stood stock still, thinking of a time not so long ago when she had been nearly that naive. Laughing, a little bitterly, to think that more innocent time had ended so recently as three days ago. As impossible as it might seem, there was no denying the fact that she felt a good deal older now than she had then.

A hawk, who'd been circling above, screamed as he dove for his lunch and the frightened doe ran off into the scrub. Seeing no other good reason to linger, Nicole took hold of the suitcase with two hands, spun in a circle to gain momentum and flung it with all of her might into the river. Before she had time to even blink again, the last physical evidence of her old life, sank like the stones with which it was so heavily weighted. It didn't seem real in the moment, but just like that the only traces of Nicole Saulnier that continued to exist were in her own heart and the hearts of her loved ones. Heading back into town, she felt lighter than she had in a very long time. Not since before she had received the horrible news of her Michelle, had she felt so free. With her throat full of road dust, Nicole decided to treat herself to a drink and pulled Bobo to a stop outside the saloon. As she tied him to the hitching post, she had a good view over the swinging doors. The place was essentially empty, save for two older, well dressed gentlemen playing cards. Thanking her lucky stars, she staked out a place at the long, mahogany bar and sat down.
Nicole fixed him with her best glare, “I assure you I am older than I look. Do you have hard cider by any chance?”

“This look like apple pickin’ country to you, boy? Just come in on the train from back east, did ya?”

“What if I did?”

“This here is a saloon, son. We serve whiskey, beer and cheap whiskey that'll rot a hole right through the leather if ya spill it on yer boot. Unless you want I should go find a friendly cow and get you a nice big glass of milk.”

“I'll have a beer, thank you.”

“Please and thank you...where you learn that, boy? Finishing school?” He poured the beer, blew the foam off the top and slammed it down in front of her, spilling about a quarter of it over the side.

“Do you serve food here, mister?”

“Best steaks this side of Laramie.”

Nicole probed at her split lip and sore teeth with the tip of her finger, letting out a little hiss of pain in spite of herself.

“Don't know that I'm quite ready for that much chewing yet. Do you, by chance have any soup?”

“By chance we do,” the barkeep simpered, curtsying. “We got rabbit stew.”

“My favorite. I'll have a bowl of that.”

“Oh goody! You sure you don't want me to go find that cow and make you a bottle, now?”

Sitting up a little taller in her seat, Nicole picked up her beer, looked the bartender in the eye and drank down the remaining three quarters of it in one long pull.

“No, thank you, but I will have another beer.”

“Money first.”

She slapped a five dollar gold piece down on the bar.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't realize I had a railroad baron in my saloon.”

“What's your problem, mister?”

An immodestly dressed blonde came sashaying over, “Leave him alone, Otis! What'd that kid ever do to you?”

She had more paint on her face than all the women, Nicole had ever known had worn in their combined lifetimes.

“Fine, Polly...you take care of him then! Kid wants a stew and a beer.”
The barkeep stalked over to the poker table and began sucking on an unlit cigar that closely resembled a dried up turd. Based on his demeanor, that might have been exactly what it was.

“Don't mind Otis, kid. He's got his dander up 'cause it's only Thursday and he's already lost his wages for the week at the card table.” she gave Nicole a little pat on the shoulder, “Let me just go get your stew and I'll be back in a minute.”

“Thank you, Ma'am.”

“Don't call me Ma'am! I'm younger than I look!”

Soon enough, the young woman returned with a steaming bowl of stew and a large hunk of hearty bread.

“There you go, baby. I made the bread myself. You need anything else other than that beer?”

“No thank you, Ma'am...I mean...”

“You can call me Polly, cutie...and who might you be when you're at home?”

“Cole.”

“You're a regular chatterbox ain't ya, Cole? See, isn't it nicer now that we're all friendly?”

Nicole nodded in agreement.

“You tuck in now, before that goes cold. I'll be right back with that drink.”

Nicole poked at the stew suspiciously with the back of her spoon. When nothing obviously revolting presented itself, she took a bite.

“Hmmm, not as good as Maman's, but not half bad,” she said quietly to herself, “But at least it's hot and not a cheese sandwich.”

“There you go, Cole. One beer.” she set it down gently, “Mind if I sit?”

“By all means, be my guest.”

“Such a gentleman.”

The redhead reached up to tip her hat, then remembered she'd taken it off when she sat down. Maman was always reminding Davy that gentlemen did not wear hats indoors. Oh, Maman...

“How's that stew? You try my bread yet?”

“It's good,” a bit ran down her chin and she wiped it with the back of her hand, “I haven't tried the bread yet, I was just about to.” Nicole broke off a chunk of the crusty bread and pinching off a good portion of the still warm, white insides popped it into her mouth. Without intending to, she moaned aloud and her eyes rolled back in her head.

“See,” Polly giggled, “Told you it was good.”

“Pardon my asking, but what are you doing working in a saloon when you can bake like that?”

The blonde looked down somewhat ashamedly and Nicole saw, for the first time that the girl really wasn't much older than herself.
“I'm sorry, Polly...I didn't mean to be rude...I just...it's just...it's really good. I mean really really good.”

“Why thank you, Cole. I guess I've had better compliments paid me, but not recently and none sweeter.”

“Y-You're welcome, Ma'am” she always did find it hard keeping her composure when she was talking to a pretty girl. It was a good thing she and Michelle had been pen pals, because she never would have been able to be so charming in person.

“What'd I tell you about calling me that?”

“I'm s-sorry.”

“No need to go getting all flustered there, Cole. It's only little old me. Now, is there anything else I can get for ya? A piece of blackberry pie, maybe?”

“Oh no, thank you. I couldn't eat another bite.”

“Let me just get rid of these dishes then and you and me can have a little chat. A girl gets lonely on slow nights like this.”

Nicole sat nursing her beer and studying her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Yup. Pretty convincing, even with the bruises fading. Already there was a bit of green mixing in with the purple.

Pretty Polly returned and stood beside her, twisting a lock of flame red hair between her fingers.

“Is there anything else at all I can do for you, Cole?”

“I don't suppose you'd happen to know where I could get a bath and a room for the night?”

“Right here. Drink, food and rooms, along with any other thing you might be wanting, all in one convenient location.”

“Someone told me a place called Flossie's had the softest beds in town.”

“And the prettiest girls too. All right upstairs.”

“You mean this is?”

“Uh-huh.”

Polly draped a bar towel over her arm and bowed at the waist, “Would you like me to show you to your room, Sir?”

Nicole could see right down the front of her very low cut dress. 'Gosh look at those!'

“Um...uh...I better go check on my horse.” she blushed, heading for the exit.

“You do whatever you need to, cutie.”

In a few minutes, Nicole had fed and watered Bobo and seen to his other needs. She came back in with her saddle bags draped over her shoulder, the saddle on one arm and the Spencer in the other, to find Polly wearing her Stetson.
“You sure you got everything you need there, boy?” she teased.

“She is just about everything I have in the world, I wouldn't want to lose it.”

“Yeah, I might kinda understand that. Shall I show you to your room?”

“Lead the way. I'll just follow the hat.”

After traversing two flights of stairs and most of a long hallway, Nicole dropped her saddle under the one window in the room, draping the saddlebags across it and leaning her rifle against the wall by the bed. Then she dropped herself, right down on her back on top of the covers, with all the grace of a sack of potatoes.

“Are you sure there isn't anything else I can get you, Cole?” Polly asked coyly. God, this kid was either dense or he rode side saddle.

“I'd love a bath.”

“I'm afraid we don't have a tub here. Only one in town is at the barber shop and they're closed at this hour. There's a bowl and pitcher on the wash stand, though and I could bring up some hot water.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“See, I knew I could get you to say yes to something, I'm not losing my touch after all. Why don't you make yourself more comfortable and I'll be back in a flash.”

Polly left the room and Nicole set about unlacing her work boots. Her fingers were feeling as stiff as the rest of her body and it was slow going.

“I may just have to get myself some of those fancy pull up boots all the men out here wear.”

Just as she was setting her boots beside the bed, there was a knock at the door.

“It's just me,” Polly called from the other side.

“Come on in.”

The petite blonde entered carrying a steaming kettle and decanted the water into the pitcher.

“I went downstairs, pumped the water, heated it up and carried it up all those stairs and you still got everything on but your boots? I guess you must be one of those fellas likes to take his time. I always did like that in a man.”

“Okay,” Nicole replied, confused by how personal the girl was being.

“You sure you don't want some company, Cole?”

“Thank you for the offer, but I've been bathing myself since I was six.”

“I wasn't talking about...I mean, if that's what you like, I'm always open to negotiations, but I'd have to charge you the higher price for a special.”

“You mean...”

“I mean...”
“So this is a...”

“Uh-huh,” Polly smiled.

“Then you're a...”

“And a damned good one too.”

Nicole blushed to her roots.

“I didn't know...I had no...”

“You really are young aren't you?”

“I'll have you know I'll be twenty-five in December.”

“Oh, you are a grown up man after all, aren't you? You're only a couple years younger than me.”

“Really?”

“Really. Doesn't that make it nice?”

“Um...I suppose.”

“You sure you don't want some company, Cole?” she reached to unbutton Nicole's shirt and the redhead pushed her hands away, “Relax, honey. I ain't gonna hurt ya. It's just, you're such a polite young fella I know you'd treat me real nice. Hell, I'd bet you even got that shiner defending a young lady, didn't you?”

“Sure did, Ma'am.”

“Are you for real?”

Nicole panicked and jumped to her feet.

“Down, boy,” Polly pressed on her shoulders, “I was just teasing, relax! Shit.”

Nicole hung her head. It had been a long, hard day, week, month, it seemed like forever now. She was too bone tired to deal with being made fun of by a girl. Especially with her bosoms just staring at her like that.

“Look, Cole...you seem like a real nice kid, good looking too. And if I could provide you with some company tonight, then maybe I won't have to go with some nasty old man with bad breath and worse body odor, like that undertaker.”

Nicole thought about how close in age she and Polly were. About how, if it hadn't been for the men's clothes in her luggage, providing her with the opportunity to become Cole, who knows, in time she might have ended up in the same situation as Polly.

“I promise I'll be real gentle with you.”

“Okay, Polly. You can stay...”

“Oh Cole, you're the best!” She kissed her on the cheek.

“But you're not watching me wash up!”
“Yes, sir!” she saluted, “Why don't you get yourself washed up and I'll go downstairs and let them know that I won't be available for the rest of the night.”

“Okay.”

“And Cole?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. You seem like a real decent guy. Don't meet many men like you these days,” she closed the door behind her.

“Sister, you have no idea.” she mumbled once she was sure the girl was out of earshot.

Polly opened the door just as Nicole was changing into her nightshirt. She'd already removed her undershirt and binder, but not her longjohns and the girl caught a flash of highly defined muscles flexing across her back and broad shoulders, as well as a firm rear end.

“Woohoo. I guess you are a grown man after all. How'd you come by muscles like that?”

“Chopping wood.”

“Chopping wood,” Polly parroted, mimicking the low voice Nicole had been putting on, “You one of them Canucks or something?”

“Yeah...or something.”

Nicole had laid down on top of the coverlet, facing the wall, her back to the young soiled dove.

“Isn't there anything else you'd like, Cole? You're paying for the full night, you might as well get your money's worth.”

“Did you say you did...um...special things...for special prices?”

“I knew it! Nobody's that innocent! What is it then? You want me to spank you and tell you that you've been a bad boy?”

“God, no!” Nicole was appalled.

“Tickle your asshole with a feather?”

“What? Ew...no more!”

“Tell me you're not one of those big manly men who really just wants his bottom powdered.”

“Stop! Forget it. Just never mind, okay!” Nicole hid her face under the pillow.

The blonde started to rub her back gently, cooing in her ear, “Come on, Cole...don't be like that. I know you've never done this before, I didn't mean to scare you. I can make you feel real nice, I promise. Just tell me what you need, don't you worry. Polly's heard 'em all.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart. Now come on, tell me what you want,” she ran her hand through the red ringlets, that sprang up whenever Nicole's hair got wet, “You sure got soft hair for a boy.”
“I wash it in rain water. Maman always said it was the best way.”

“Rain water, you say. I'll have to try that. Now are you gonna tell Polly what she can do for you?”

“Can we sleep together?”

“Well, yeah...that is the general idea. What'd you think we were gonna do, play Whist?”

“God, no! I had enough of that on the train to last me a lifetime.”

“You too, huh?”

“You came out on the train, too?”

“Yup, about a year ago. I answered one of those ads, you know, in the Illustrated Newspaper? Was s'posed to marry the guy and everything, but when I got here he was dead. I didn't have any money to get back, my family couldn't pay for my ticket and I didn't know anyone in town or anywhere else out west for that matter. Otis took me in then, out of the kindness of his heart, I thought. I started out working in the kitchen, but then, well you know the story. Turns out his intentions weren't quite so charitable as I thought.”

“I'm sorry, Polly.”

“Not your fault. Anyway, it beats being out on the street.”

Nicole nodded, trying to reserve judgment. There but for the grace of...

“You're a sweet boy, Cole. You figure out what you want yet?”

The younger woman laid there silently for a few minutes, just enjoying the feeling of Polly's hand up and down her back, that along with the beer had relaxed her considerably.

Then suddenly, she blurted out, “This..”

“Huh?”

“This, Polly. This is what I want. It's feels like such a long time since I left home and I feel so all alone in the world, so isolated. Can't we just...”

“What, Cole? Anything you want, it's okay, I promise.”

“Can we just...can we talk? Can we just talk a while? Then can you sleep here with me and let me hold you?” Nicole ran the tips of her fingers along Polly's jawline, finding her skin was covered in a baby soft down. It was nice.

“Sure, Cole. We can do that. Are you sure that's all you want?”

“Well, there is one other thing but I don't know if it's okay to ask.”

“It's fine, Cole. Go ahead.”

“I sure wouldn't mind your bread recipe.”

Polly let loose her true laugh then. It was a full musical sound that made Nicole feel warm deep down in her bones and when she did it, Nicole was sure she caught a glimpse of the real damaged girl under all that face paint.
“Sure, Cole, we can do that. We can do all of that,” She tugged at her fancy chemise, “Do you want me to take this off?”

“Only if you'd be more comfortable without it.”

“I believe I'll keep it on then, it gets real cold in these rooms some nights. Let's get under the covers.”

Lifting the corner of the quilt, the petite blonde got in beside the tall redhead, who was already lying on her side underneath. She scooted backward until her firm bottom was pressed tight against her customer's groin. Nicole silently thanked whatever gods covered that sort of thing, that she hadn't had time to remove the gloves from her pants. They chafed a bit, but there were certain things about herself she wasn't about to reveal to Polly, no matter how sweet she seemed. Reaching back, the older girl took hold of Nicole's hand and brought her arm across her waist, pulling it in close and tightening her grip on the calloused hand.

Nicole sighed, contentedly, into Polly's yellow hair. Once. Twice. Then the two of them started sharing stories. They stayed that way for hours, just talking and taking comfort in being together with no demands. The blonde told Nicole all about the tiny town where she'd grown up in the mountains of Appalachia. She told her how her father and brother had died in the mines and about her Mr. Francis, who she really had wanted to marry.

Nicole told Polly about Maine, about being sick on the train, but mostly she told her about Michelle. Since the blonde thought she was a man, she didn't have to hold back a single detail. It was so freeing. She told her how Michelle had been the love of her life, she told her how wonderful she'd been, how hard her life had been and yet Michelle had still managed to be the most wonderful, positive, kind, loving person she'd ever known. She told her of how cruel and recent her death had been and that she was certain she would never love another woman as long as she drew breath.

All in all, it turned out to be one of the best nights of Nicole's life. It was like spending a few hours bonding with the sister she'd never had. Before she fell asleep, Nicole pressed a small kiss to the girl's temple. It felt so good just to hold a warm, soft body in her arms and share some part of her truth, even if she couldn't share it all.

“G'night Polly. Thank you for this.”

“Night, Cole. I was right about you before, you know. You're a real gentleman,” then she started snoring.

Nicole closed her eyes, a small smile on her face. When she awoke in the morning, she was more rested than she'd felt in a while. Polly was gone, but the bread recipe was pinned to her saddle.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Cole and Dolls head for the homestead

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the long wait for an update, between the holiday and cold weather, my arthritis has been acting up

AND NOW THE ANNOUNCEMENT YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR: NEXT CHAPTER THE RETURN OF WAVERLY!

When Nicole arrived at the station, Dolls had already loaded her things into the buckboard and was sitting in the driver's seat waiting patiently. She brought Bobo alongside and touching two fingers to the brim of her Stetson, greeted him.

“Morning, Dolls.”

“Someone's a late riser,” he teased.

“It's 6:30, Dolls. The sun is barely up.”

“Well, I've been out of bed since four. Still, I suppose staying at Flossie's, you had what you might call an eventful night.”

“Oh, I don't know about that. We spent most of the night in bed.”

“Uh-huh,” the driver teased, his sweet smile belying his intimidating size, “Why don't you tie your horse off and ride up here with me. We got a long way to go today and there's no sense in tiring him out if you don't have to, am I right? Anyway, keeping pace with Doc and Charlie would no doubt make him crazy. Oxen may be strong, but damn if they ain't slow as molasses going uphill in the winter time.”

“Sounds like a capital idea to me” the redhead secured her mount to the back of the wagon and climbed aboard, “To tell you the truth, my backside could use a rest, it's been a while since I did this much riding.”

Dolls glanced at the firearm balanced across her knees, “We transporting something I don't know about?”

Nicole regarded him with a look of pure puzzlement.

“The gun, boy. We ain't carrying payroll here. You got no call to be riding shotgun, unless we come upon a bandit with a sweet tooth.”
“It's not a shotgun. It's a Spencer Repeating Rifle and you can never be too careful, that's what my Pa always said.”

“Uh-huh...and where is he now?”

“We lost him at Gettysburg. He was with Colonel Chamberlain.”

“Pardon me, Boss. I didn't mean no disrespect.”

“Oh, don't call me that, please. Think of me as a friend who just happens to be paying you to help him out. That okay with you?”

Dolls laughed out loud, “Whatever you say, my friend,” he shook his head, “I suspect you may be one of a kind, son.”

“You have no idea.”

“It'd help me get you where you wanna go if you told me where we're headed exactly.”

“My uncle's homestead, he passed recently and I'm taking it over. The land agent gave me this map when I signed for it.” she placed it in the driver's enormous hand, “Uncle Xavier always said it was just past the first bend in the Blackfoot River.”

“I know just the place you mean. Don't you worry, Dolls will get you there before nightfall, no problem.”

The mismatched pair rode for close to an hour without saying a word. There were only so many common topics a former slave and a tomboy from the back woods of Maine could possibly find to talk about. Still, the silence was becoming awkward and the redhead just couldn't stand it any more.

“Oh, what I wouldn't give for a good cup of hot coffee right now,” she yawned and stretched.

“Tire you out did she?”

Nicole blushed redder than a ripe tomato.

“Woohoo! I guess so. Who was she?”

Not a single word passed her lips, but her eyes were full of 'you can't be serious'.

“I'll bet it was Lenore?”

“Who?”

“Daisy?”

“Never heard of her.”

“Oh, you'd remember her. Great big...heart on her.”

A shrug was the only answer she granted him.

“I know...Polly!”

Another blush.
“Uh-huh. I knew it! So, how was it?”

Appalled by this highly personal line of questioning, Nicole refused to dignify it with an answer. Why did men have to be such pigs?

“Not the kind that tells, huh?”

The young redhead turned her back to him.

“Aw come on, you gotta give a man something to think about when he's driving alone in the wild. One little detail?”

“I got her bread recipe,” she smiled enigmatically.

“My God, boy! What are you packin? My wife has been trying to get that recipe for months. I don't believe it.”

Nicole just shrugged and grinned at him, her dimples on full display.

“Might as well throw away the damned cage, cuz you look like you ate that canary, son.”

“I don't see what all the fuss is about. All I did was sleep with her.”

“I guess maybe you're not as green as you look, after all.”

“I couldn't be, now could I?”

“Being as we're such good friends, I know you're gonna share that recipe with me.”

“Polly swore me to secrecy.”

“Oh, come on, Boss. You ever been married? This could put my wife in a good mood for weeks. I might even get a trip to the saloon out of it.”

“Maybe your wife should try sleeping with Polly. It worked for me.”

“Excuse me?” Dolls glared at her with hellfire in his eyes.

“Oh...oh, I'm sorry...I said something offensive didn't I? My foot has been living in my mouth since I got here. Things are so different from back home. I promise you, I didn't mean to insult your wife. Forgive me.”

“Boy, if I didn't need the money you're gonna pay me so bad, I would throw you off this wagon right now and I wouldn't stop it first. You hadn't oughta be saying things like that about a man's wife.”

“Please, Dolls...please forgive me. Where I come from women sleep in the same bed all the time. Sometimes whole families share a bed, especially in winter, for the body heat.”

Suddenly, it dawned on Dolls that he and Cole were talking about two different things and he shook his head in disbelief, chuckling a little.

“Well, I suppose since you're not from around here and all, I could skip killing you, just this once.”

Nicole let out the breath she'd been holding so long that her lungs were burning, “I'd be most beholden to you.”
“Just don't do it again. I may not be a white man, but that don't mean my wife don't deserve respect just like any other man's wife. Delia is a fine Christian woman.”

“Of course. Of course...my mother always taught us boys to treat women with respect, all women. If it weren't for mothers, none of us would be here, right? We owe them that much.”

“You got that right.”

“I'm sorry if I gave offense. It's just that, well...you're the first person of the um...not white persuasion I've ever seen. Again, I mean no offense.”

“For real? Where you come from, boy? The North Pole?”

“Close. Aroostook County, Maine. There's not much there except for trees, snow and moose. Although, they do say that black bears outnumber people two to one, so that's something.”

“Woo! That's something alright. Explains a lot.”

“So, your wife's name is Delia?”

“Yup.”

“And you have children?”

“Two boys and a baby girl. Sweet William, Narcissus and Peony. Delia's partial to flowers”

“How long have you and Delia been together?”

“Forever. I mean, I've known her all my life. We were born on the same plantation. You got a woman somewhere, Mr. Cole?”

“No more,” the redhead stared off into the middle distance, forlornly.

“Broke your heart, did she? Is that why you came out here?”

“Well, my heart is broken beyond repairing, that much is certain. It's through no fault of hers though. Michelle was the love of my life and the sweetest, kindest girl who ever drew breath. She was murdered two months ago.”

“Oh. You have my condolences, Boss. That's rough. We don't have to talk about her if you don't want.”

“Thanks, Dolls.”

“You got anyone coming to join you?”

“No soul.”

“That's not good. You really oughta think on it.”

“I think not. Thanks just the same.”

“For real, Boss. It's no good for a man being alone out here. It may not be the middle of nowhere, but it's more than halfway there. I've heard of more than one man gone crazy from it.”

Nicole shook her head sadly and changed the subject.
“So, how much further have we got to go?”

“Just 'bout twelve miles or so, the way I figure.”

Nicole dug in her satchel, “You want an apple?”

“You don't have to share your food with me, Boss. You eat it.”

“Why wouldn't I?” she held the fruit out to him, “Isn't that what friends do?”

“Well, thank you kindly, my friend.”

The two ate in companionable silence, mostly. Chatting about this and that, now and again, until the homestead came into view.

“There she is, Boss.”

About a quarter mile from the river, stood a small sod house, a corral with an attached lean-to, a privy and the beginnings of a log cabin. The walls stood at about three quarter height and a large pile of logs lay alongside.

“Looks like your uncle didn't have time to finish his fine new home.”

“I guess not. He did make a good start though. There's plenty of good Ponderosa Pine around here and I'm an old hand with an axe. If I had a little help, I'm sure I could get it done before old man winter comes calling.”

“I suppose you might. If you worked day and night.”

“Tell me, Dolls. Do you work for the railroad or are you on your own?”

“Dolls works for Dolls. Period.”

“I don't suppose you could see your way clear to working for me for a while? Since it promises to be backbreaking work and time is of the essence, I'd pay you twice what a lumberman normally gets.”

“My back may regret it later and Delia may get a mad on when she hears how much I'll be away from home, but when she sees how much you're paying me, she'll get over it soon enough. Plus the way I figure, I can't rightly say no to you.”

“Oh really, and why is that? Pity?”

“I'll tell you, Boss. You're the first man in my life, ever treated me with respect. I gotta tell ya, when you called me Sir, I just about shit myself. When you talk to me, you look me right in the eye, just like you thought we was equals.”

“It never occurred to me we were anything else, Dolls. So long as you know your way around an axe and treat me straight, I'll do the same for you.” she stretched out a hand to him, “Deal?”

The large man grasped it in his own and gave it a good shake, “Deal.”

“Excellent. I only have one condition.”

“And what might that be, Boss?”
“No more of this Boss business. From now on you call me Cole.”

“Whatever you say, Bo...um, Cole.”

“Good man. What do you say I see what Uncle Xavier has in the larder and fix us up some grub. If we get a good foot under us we oughta be able to down a tree or two before we lose the light.”

“Thank you kindly, Cole...but if I'm not home for supper, Delia'll think I got another woman. I love that woman more than anything but the Lord, but damn if she don't got a temper. Now, I like you Mister Cole, but not enough to sleep on the porch for it.”

“First thing in the morning then?”

“First thing...And Cole?”

“Yeah, Dolls?”

“You really should give some thought to finding yourself a woman. Like I said, a man'll go crazy alone out here, especially in winter. I can't be out here babysitting you all the time you know.”

“Yeah, yeah...Can't be worse than February in Maine. You get home to Delia and the little ones. I'll see you in the morning.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

I don't usually do this, but I loved Gus' speech from Bury Me With My Guns On so much that I lifted sections of it, whole cloth, from the show. There's also a brief paraphrase of a line from Gone With the Wind, for you old movie buffs. See if you can spot it.

Next chapter - The Correspondence Begins!

It had been so long since Michelle had heard from her dearest friend, that she just stood in the hallway staring at the envelope that she held in her shaking hands. Despite the months she'd waited for a reply from Nikki, she couldn't quite work up the courage to open it, somehow. The way things had been going lately, she couldn't help but entertain a feeling of foreboding.

“You gonna open that thing or just stand there staring at it?” Aunt Gus teased, “I'd think that after all the months of whining I've had to listen to, you'd be ripping it open like a maniac.”

“Anticipation can be a ferocious beast, Auntie dear” Michelle singsonged, “And I wasn't whining!”

“Here, try a little liquid courage,” the older woman handed her a tumbler of whiskey.

Michelle drained the contents of the glass in one go, “Thanks.”

Taking a deep breath to steel her nerves, she tore the end off the envelope. Reaching her fingers inside to slide out the contents, she discovered a smaller envelope and a single sheet of paper. The envelope, much to her chagrin, had been addressed by her own hand. It was the letter she'd sent to Nikki upon her arrival in Philadelphia. The paper was a note from a stranger.

Miss Gibson,

My name is Henri Brochu. I regret to inform you that the Saulniers are no longer residing at this address. I purchased the home, sugarhouse and surrounding property from Madame Saulnier a little under two months ago. I am sorry to say that I can offer you only minimal information regarding the family's current whereabouts.

As I understand it, the girl went traveling and never arrived at her destination. What became of her no one knows but it is presumed she was a victim of foul play. Having exhausted all of her savings in the search for her daughter, Madame Saulnier and the younger boy have gone to live in Quebec, where she has a sister. Again, I am sorry I could not be the bearer of happier news. May God bless
The whiskey glass slipped from Michelle's grasp, shattering on the hardwood floor. The young brunette soon following, as she fell into a faint upon the broken shards. Her aunt, hearing the crash from the adjoining room, ran to her side.

“Waverly! Waverly? Are you okay?” she lightly slapped at her cheek, in an effort to bring her around, “Waverly!” she shook the girl, muttering, “why do I never have smelling salts when I need them?”

The petite brunette slowly opened her eyes, “Nikki...” she moaned dejectedly.

“What's happened dear? What's the matter?”

Her niece said nothing, simply handed her the note then set about sobbing, as her aunt read it in shock.

“Oh, honey,” she took the weeping girl in her arms, “I am so sorry.” Augusta held her niece closer and rubbed her back, not knowing what else to do, “So very very sorry.”

FOUR MONTHS LATER

“Waverly? Where are you, girl?” the older woman called out as she hung her coat and hat on the hall tree.

“I'm in the drawing room, Auntie.”

“Of course,” she muttered, “Where else would she be?”

She found her niece in the exact same place she'd left her hours ago, curled up in an easy chair with a book in her lap.

“My God, child, have you moved at all in the last four hours?”

“I am not a child, Auntie. I'll be twenty soon.”

“Really? I would have taken you for far older, sixty or seventy maybe. Look at you, sitting there with your book and your cup of tea, I'm surprised you're not wearing a shawl.”

“It's not cold enough.”

“Waverly!”

“Aunt Gus! How many times are we going to have this discussion?”

“I'll do it every day, every hour on the hour, if that's what it takes to snap you out of this.”

“Don't...”
“Tell me, Waverly...how long has it been since you left the house?”

The world-weary young brunette let out a huff and opened her book again, turning away from her aunt.

“How long?”

“I don’t know, okay? But I’d bet my nest egg that you're going to tell me.”

“It’s been nearly four months! It's just not right. A young girl ought to be out living her life, not mouldering away in a dimly lit room, ruining her eyesight, looking at some dusty ancient book like an old maid. Next thing, you'll take up crochet!”

“I’m grieving, Gus!”

“I know, baby,” the older woman's voice softened and she reached out to stroke her niece's hair, “But you can't just stop living. You are a lovely, brilliant girl. You were meant for more than sitting around in a drafty old house, keeping an old lady company. I've been trying to give you time, but I cannot stand by and watch you do this to yourself. You are breaking my heart, child.”

“Good. Then maybe we'll have something in common and you'll try to understand what I'm going through!”

“Ward may have been a piss poor excuse for a parent, but I know he taught you better than to speak to your elders that way!”

“I'm sorry, Aunt Gus. I know. You've been wonderful sheltering me here in my time of need. You've been kind and unquestioning, while I have been a petulant brat. I know you deserve better, but you just don't understand. I can't help myself. I've lost everything. Everything! My home, my family, the oldest, most wonderful friend I have ever had, they're all gone. I don't know what else to do with myself except read and remember. How can I look forward, when everything I ever wanted is in the past? When every thing I had planned for my future, has fallen to just so much dust?” she fairly screamed the final questions, “You might as well tell a ghost to go out and have some fun.”

“Oh, child,” Gus sighed, sadly, “Will you at least come out on the veranda with me and get some sun and fresh air? It's a lovely Spring day.”

“I don't know, Auntie. I'm only half way through this chapter.”

The older woman stood in front of her niece's chair, a determined expression on her face, her hand outstretched. She did not intend to take no for an answer.

“Look, Waverly,” she had an added inducement, “I picked up the latest Frank Leslie's for you while I was out.”

“Oh, all right.”

Once seated on the sun porch, Waverly turned her attention to the latest illustrated news.

“Are you thirsty, Auntie?” she asked far too casually, “I am. I could sure go for a whiskey about now, how about you?”

“That's another thing...it seems like we've been going through an awful lot of bourbon lately.”
“Have we? I hadn't noticed.”

“I know you drink, Waverly. What's more, I know exactly how much you drink.”

“I haven't noticed you've switched to tea-totaling.”

“That's different, I'm an old woman, I've already lived my life. You, on the other hand are trying to hasten yourself to an early grave.”

“So...”

“So...it's cruel of you to make me watch you do it. I lost my baby sister when she was not much older than you are now, because she was too damned bullheaded to take my help. I won't watch you kill yourself too.”

“Are you saying you want me to leave?”

“Heavens no, child. What I'm trying to say is...when you decide you're ready to unstick those wings of yours,” she handed her a bankbook, “Well...here.”

“What's this?”

“It's freedom, honey. You've been doing what others wanted you to do for so long, now it's time to do what you want.”

“Which is what?”

“Live your life. Remember, some of the best things in life are the surprises it throws at us, about what we want, who we want,” she winked, “You've always been an honest kid, don't stop now, hmmm?”

Michelle opened the bankbook and checked the balance, “Gus! It's too much!”

“We both know you're gonna inherit all this when I kick the bucket, I figured why not give you what I can now, while I can still watch you enjoy it. Consider it a gift to both of us.”

“I don't know what to say...”

“You don't have to say anything, just think about what I've said. Wise advice from a not so wise old lady.”

“I'll try. I love you, Aunt Gus.”

“Me too, kid. Me too. Now I'm gonna go make us a pot of tea. What say you get started thinking about that new plan of yours. I'll be back in just a minute.”

Once the older woman had gone, Michelle ran her fingers through her thick, messy hair, shaking her head at what had just occurred. She knew in her heart that Gus was right, but she didn't have it in her to think about it right now. Looking for a bit of light distraction, she picked up the latest Frank Leslie's Illustrated News and turned to the Heart and Hand column, in hopes of finding some amusement. There certainly seemed to be a lot more ads these days. She imagined it had something to do with the transcontinental railroad. Lots of lonely cowboys looking for a bride.

“Nikki and I were going to see the frontier together,” she sighed, “No. Mustn't think about that now.”
She'd just returned her focus to the printed page when a fairly long ad, about halfway down the column, caught her eye. The title alone was enough to pique her interest.

LEAVE YOUR PAST IN THE PAST

Have you ever dreamt of seeing the frontier? Do you secretly long for adventure, but only read about it in books?

Lonely homesteader seeking bride.

Your past is of no interest to me, as far as I'm concerned we were both born the day before we meet.

I do not expect to find love, I am only seeking a like minded companion to be a helpmate with the homestead and animals when I am out working and to provide agreeable company during the long lonely hours when I am not. I thought that I could manage on my own, but as it turns out trees don't talk all that much.

I am young, but I am strong and hard working and a man of my word.

Perhaps, if you are willing to take a chance, we could start over together.

“Hmmmm, maybe Gus had a point when she said it was time I started living my life again.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A short chapter to tide you over for the weekend. Waverly responds to the advertisement.

Chapter Notes

I have fudged the date that typewriters became available to the general public, as I needed a device to prevent our ladies from recognizing one another's handwriting.

Initially, Michelle set the advertisement aside, as just so much frivolity, but as the hours and days passed, she found herself returning to it again and again. There was some quality of it that intrigued her. She was uncertain what it was exactly, but she almost felt drawn to it. It was idiocy to think it, but it was nearly as though the young man knew her somehow. Like the ad had been written directly to her.

In a way, even Michelle was surprised, when scarcely a week later, she found herself sitting down with pen and paper, hidden alone in her room, to draft a response. There was no sense in subjecting herself to Aunt Augusta's inevitable teasing before she even knew if it was a viable option.

Dear Sir,

I know this will sound crazy, but when I read your advertisement, parts of it felt like you had written it directly to me.

While this sort of arrangement is not something I have ever considered before, I have been told by more than one person that I am approaching the age by which any decent woman ought to be married. It has always been my opinion that the age at which a woman chooses to marry should be her own personal decision. Still, I feel it only fair to inform you that I shall be turning twenty a week from Tuesday. I hope you do not think me an old maid.

As for your advert, I cannot think of a time when I did not dream of seeing the frontier. Since I first heard of it as a child, the idea of it has burned, like a flame, in my mind. In fact, the very thought that seeing it might indeed be possible, causes me to break out in gooseflesh. I hope it is not indelicate of me to say so. I do not wish to offend.

It is funny that you mentioned living vicariously through the written word. Due to recent circumstance, I have had access to a vast personal library. You must forgive me if I do not go into detail as to how this came to be. It is of a personal nature and has no real bearing on this story. At any rate, I have been spending hours at a time with my nose buried in dusty tomes, entirely absorbed in the histories of ancient civilizations long since past. Perhaps I am peculiar, but when I read it is almost as if I can see moving pictures in my mind. O’ how I have longed for an adventure.
of my own!

As a result of unfortunate events, which I prefer not to discuss, I have come to a place where I must start my life anew, as all that I have treasured and aspired to is now irrevocably consigned to the past. Given the choice between going forward and not going on at all, I must choose forward, as it is not in my nature to give up.

I am most relieved that you have stated that you do not expect to find love. For I myself, have already found and subsequently lost the love of my life and I know that I shall never have room in my heart for another.

I am a plain cook, but a good one and I can make a damned fine cup of coffee, if I do say so myself. I do also have some experience tending to livestock, both horses and milk cows.

What animals do you have?

Have you planted a vegetable garden or is it yet too cold where you are?

By the by, where might that be, exactly?

Out of curiosity, how do you make your living?

I do not mean to pry, but I am endeavoring to create a mental picture of you, as well as I can.

I have never had a picture made, but I can tell you that I am petite of stature, have hazel eyes and a long, thick head of wavy light brown hair, which I am quite proud of (even if it is a sin). I have been told that I am quite pretty, although I am not the type to put much store by compliments.

I have never shrunk from a good day's work and am quite strong, probably more so than a proper lady really ought to be. I know some men might be put off by this, but I should think it might come in quite handy on a homestead.

I must be honest and tell you that I am prone to speaking my mind and although I am not proud of it, I can have a bit of a temper when provoked.

If I have not put you off entirely, please respond and tell me more about yourself.

I will not ask you if you enjoy reading. Your felicity of expression tells me all that I need to know on that score. In addition to history, I enjoy reading Hawthorne, Byron, John Donne and recently I have discovered a new American humorist, named Mark Twain, of whom I expect great things. Have you read “The Innocents Abroad”? It is marvelous. Truly though, I must confess, that my heart will always belong to Master Shakespeare. Who are your favorites?

Please forgive my not writing in longhand, as my aunt has recently acquired one of those newfangled typewriting machines and I could not resist trying it out.

Michelle rolled the paper out of the machine and was set to affix her usual signature at the bottom, when she paused. If she was going to embark upon a new life, shouldn't she also have a new appellation?

Smiling, she dipped her pen in the inkwell and signed her true name, in great scrolling letters, for she had decided that this new version of herself would be bolder than her current incarnation.
Yours cordially, Waverly Earp.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Cole answers Waverly's letter.

Chapter Notes

While we are in the correspondence stage of the story, we will have shorter chapters consisting of single letters.

Miss Earp,

No. You do not sound crazy. What you do come across as is enthusiastic, which is a very good thing. As it has been my observance that those who are able to make a go of it, on this untamed frontier, are those who truly want to be here. If this is not something you are truly passionate about, I beg you to set the idea aside this instant. I have seen those who travel east from here and the only word I can think of that accurately describes them is broken. You seem like a sweet and idealistic young lady and I would be loathe to see that fate befall you, particularly if it were to be my fault in even its smallest increment.

Before I go any further in responding to your letter, there is one notion I feel obliged to disabuse you of immediately.

The idea that a woman of twenty is an old maid or past marriageable age in any way, is patently ridiculous. I have never understood these men who wish to marry fourteen or fifteen year old girls. For what can they possibly have in common. I myself could never conceive of joining my life to someone with whom I could not carry on a stimulating conversation. I know my views on women are far from commonly held, perhaps they stem from having lost my father as a teenager and being raised by my mother. I know there are many would think me crazy for it, but I'd much prefer a more mature woman who has had time to get some decent education. None of those empty headed china dolls for me, no Sir. I am sorry to those who don't agree, but I could not abide a wife who merely sits silently and embroiders and speaks only when spoken to directly. One might just as well buy a dog.

By the way, do you care for dogs?

I have been thinking about getting one. They are capital for sounding the alarm should dangerous animals or humans wander onto the homestead. I do have a cat. Frankly, she is an inordinately large, ginger cat, fat, furry and foul tempered, who goes by the name of Jane. Although she is highly unlikely to pay any attention when called by it. I hope you are not the type who holds cats in disdain, for the simple reason that they are an undeniable necessity here. That is unless you prefer your domicile to be overrun by an army of mice.

Oh my, I really did run off on a tangent there, didn't I? Forgive me, but I have a tendency to ramble when I am nervous. My good friend Dolls says perhaps I shouldn't tell you that. However, I think
we’d both agree that any illusion you may have had of me being smooth is ancient history by now.

At any rate, I feel that this sort of thing can only work if we are honest with one another. Although, after reading your response to my advertisement, I do not think honesty is something I need to be worried about where you are concerned. Please do not be offended if I tease a little, I only do it with those I like.

I have received two other responses to my advertisement, but in truth, yours was the only one that piqued my interest. The way you express yourself gives the impression that you are what my father used to refer to as a filly with spirit. That is something which, I must confess, I have always had a fondness for, despite the phrase being better suited to a paddock than a parlor, in my opinion.

As long as I am making confessions, I suppose I should tell you that this is not actually my handwriting.

By way of explanation, I will answer a few of your questions. I am, at present, a lumberjack by trade. It was not my main occupation when I was back east, but here in Montana I have fallen into it. I inherited this homestead from a relative with a dislike of the look of unbroken prairie. As a result, large sections of the parcel are covered by forest. I have had enough experience wielding an axe, that it seemed only natural for me to follow into the business.

Dolls and I have felled many a tree together, in completing the house, that my uncle started before his passing. Between that and the various outbuildings we have erected as a team, we have developed quite a knack for it. With all of the homesteading going on in this area and most of the parcels being open prairie, there is a ready market for logs already prepared for assembly into cabins. At any rate, I have once again gotten far too complicated with my explanation. The reason Dolls is currently acting as scribe, is that the other day we were felling a large ponderosa pine and she took a turn on me and broke three of my fingers. Please don't think me careless, I assure you the reality is quite the opposite. Trees are fickle things and will turn on even the most expert of woodsmen.

Oh my, I've just glanced at your letter for reference and it occurs to me that I have not properly introduced myself. How very rude of me. Please forgive me.

My name is Cole Haught (pronounced HOT).

In keeping with the example of description set by you and knowing you are trying to construct a mental portrait of me...

I am twenty-five years old, as of last month. I have dark brown eyes, red hair and owing to that, a very fair complexion. I have been told, more often than I'd like, that I have a “baby face” because the color and texture of my hair renders my beard so light and soft that it is difficult to see unless you are very close indeed. It is by no means a rare instance that I have to convince people of my true age.

Dolls is teasing me now. He is insisting that I inform you that I am “pretty enough to be a girl” but that is not the sort of compliment a man likes to hear. I cannot help the fact that I inherited my mother's long, dark eyelashes. I am rather slim of frame, aside from broad shoulders, but what there is of me is mostly muscle from swinging the axe. I am stronger than I look, make no mistake about it. I am no boy-man, even if I am pretty.

Far from thinking you peculiar, I was pleased that parts of my advertisement spoke to you. I believe it indicates that we may have traits or interests in common, that may make it possible for us to truly build a genuine friendship.
Having grown up in a rather remote area, I have indeed spent a great deal of my life losing myself in books. I am sad to say that some of my luggage was lost on the trip out here and I have only two of my books currently in my possession. Thankfully, my uncle left behind a pocket copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets, which I have read cover to cover ten times since I have been here. Thank heaven he had such good taste. The nearest mercantile is more than fifty miles from here and I have been far too busy to justify a trip to town just for books. Dolls tells me that a traveling peddler comes through here a couple times a year after snow melt, so I look forward to perusing his selection.

Which brings me to another of your questions. I have not planted any seeds so far, as the snow has melted but the ground is not yet fully thawed. Aside from Jane, who is nearly large enough to be considered livestock, I have one horse, named Bobo, a milk cow, named Tessie and several chickens, who not being very stimulating company, I have not bothered to name. I do have space for more animals, as Dolls and I have built a full sized barn, but I thought it best to wait for my wife, whomever she may be, rather than choosing them myself. As, when I do marry, this will be our homestead rather than my own and I feel it only right that she have a part in decisions which will affect her quality of life.

If we do indeed make a match, you need not worry about having to “rough it” as they say. In addition to the barn, Dolls and I have finished and added on to the house my uncle started work on, before he passed. It is now fully chinked, with a sturdy roof, good ventilation, a large fireplace and stove and a separate room, should my new companion not feel comfortable with me sleeping in the same room as she. The last thing I would ever want to do is make a lady feel ill at ease or intimidated.

This is not one of those “sod-buster” affairs. There is a house, barn, corral, chicken coop, smokehouse, ice house, root cellar and of course, the necessary. I have a springhouse already constructed and when the ground thaws, I intend to divert part of the river to cool it. The Blackfoot River, that is, which sits about a quarter mile from the homestead.

Allow me to have one last look at your letter. It would be awfully embarrassing to have run on so and not have answered all of your questions, now wouldn't it?

I have no problem with plain cooking, in point of fact, I prefer it. Coming from a cold climate, my mother kept to fare which warmed a body and stuck to the ribs a good long time. She also insisted that all of us boys learn to cook. So, I could share in those duties now and then and would not mind doing so, at all.

As I have already said, I am the last man who would have a problem with a woman speaking her mind. As for the temper, I suppose you know what they say about us redheads. Well, I must admit, it is not entirely untrue, but I have devoted many an hour over the years to learning to control mine. Put it down to preferring it to being sent out to cut a switch. I am no ruffian and have never raised my hand to a lady and never would, you may take me at my word on that count. Where I come from a man's word is his bond and honor is everything. I never cared much for all the rules and strictures that came of it, but the basic precept is something by which I've lived my life. I have no religion, but I do believe strongly in the golden rule.

I am not yet acquainted with your Mister Twain, but based on your recommendation, I look forward to reading him. Despite having taken Mister Greeley's advice and gone west, he is not to my taste. I prefer the diversion of fiction to the rigors of politics. As most boys do, I suppose, I prefer the adventure tales of Melville and the like, but I also enjoy the quieter works of your Mister Hawthorne and his ilk. Though many do not think poetry a manly interest, I have a special affinity for the raw beauty of Walt Whitman. My treasured copy of Leaves of Grass was one of the books
lost in transit. I am not ashamed to admit that “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd” brings tears to my eyes every time I read it. I hope you do not think me soft because of it.

I believe I have rambled on more than long enough. You undoubtedly think me a madman by now. If you do not, please respond. I would like the opportunity to get to learn more about you, if you are willing to share it. I hope I have provided you with enough raw material to form a good mental portrait. Although, I suppose, the painting can only be as good as the sitter.

Sincerely,
Cole Haught

P.S. - I suspect by now you have at least gathered that I am not the strong, silent type.
Waverly responds. Being as she is Waverly, no matter the time period, she is open, honest and sassy.

Mister Haught,

You say that you prefer an honest, spirited woman, who speaks her mind. If that claim is indeed genuine, then I imagine you will love this. Let us see, shall we?

Pardon me for being so plain spoken, but you my dear sir, are full of beans.

You play at being the shy, stumbling neophyte with women, when you and I both know that you are perfectly charming. One can't help wondering how many young ladies back home, were drawn in by a blush and a bumble. I am not a gambling woman, but if I was I'd be willing to bet that you have the dimpled smile to follow it up with, as well. What do you say, Mister Dolls?

You see, Mister Haught, I can tease too!

In your letter, you stated your belief that the only way this could work, would be if we are completely honest with each other. If you are amenable to the idea, I would like to propose that we go one step further and dispense with the trappings of social etiquette and other formalities, which to my way of thinking are just so much silliness. Why not spare ourselves the wasted time and nonsense and be our true, honest selves with one another?

Do not misunderstand me, I am not suggesting that we forego the “born the day before we met” business, I quite like that bit. Neither of us are innocents, I think we both know that, so let us not pretend that we are. If you promise to stop acting like you have no way with women, then I will leave off being coy or prudish just for the sake of convention. It seems readily apparent that we are fated to be friends, so what say we go ahead and address one another as if we already are. Do we have a deal?

I could not forgive myself if I did not straight away set your poor mind at ease. If I had not been entirely certain about this endeavor, I would not have replied to your advertisement. I too, lost a parent at a young age and have been perfectly capable of looking after myself for some time now. So please, my friend, do not age yourself prematurely with worries of my ruination.

I must admit I was a bit taken aback by your letter. You see, I was not raised upon a diet of fairy tales. So, you must excuse me if I have never conceived of such a fantastical creature, as a man who prefers women of substance to empty-headed coquettes. Still, I shall do my best to suspend my disbelief and take you at your word. At any rate, you need not fear, my friend, for I am hopeless at embroidery.

You ask if I like dogs. You might as well ask a lion if it likes meat, although perhaps that is not the best analogy, since I do not eat them. What I meant to say is that I adore dogs. I have yet to meet
one whose company I would not choose over a human's, any day of the week. The same goes for cats, horses, cows and pretty much any other animal with the exception of snakes. A word about snakes. YUCK! The truth of it is, that while I would prefer not to have an army of mice have free run of my home, if they did, I would most probably give them all names. I've had a way with animals as long as I can recall. In fact, I'd be willing to wager that I could even win over your Jane.

I think that perhaps the sense of familiarity I felt, upon reading your advertisement, was the recognition of a kindred spirit. For the more of your story you disclose to me, the more similarities to my own seem to be revealed. You lost your father at a young age and I my mother. We both dream of adventure and find solace in books. Also, for reasons that need not be revealed, neither of us are looking for love. Now you tell me that you make your living as a lumberjack, the very same trade plied by my father. There is no denying the fact, that the coincidences do seem to be piling up.

So, it's the Montana Territory, is it? From what I hear, that is quite the popular spot with homesteaders these days. As I understand it, one must live upon the property for five years before claiming ownership. If you don't mind my asking, how long was your uncle in residence before you inherited?

While I am pleased to read, that should we come to an arrangement, I will not have to rough it, as you say. Had that not been the case, I would not have blanched at the alternative. I am a mountain girl, friend Haught, not some pampered drawing room flower.

I do, however, find your lack of books most disturbing. Though, since it is through no fault of your own, I am prepared to forgive it. In turn, if I should in fact, relocate to the Montana Territory, you will have to forgive me if I bring along a couple of steamer trunks full of reading material.

It is clear that you are not pleased to be in possession of a “baby face”. That is one point on which I must disagree. It seems to me, that if we were in fact to marry, it will help us to appear closer in age to one another. I would not want you to be accused of robbing the cradle, after all. Personally, I have never been able to abide a man with a beard. One might just as well kiss a bear. Not that I was thinking about kissing you, I merely spoke of men in general. As for you being pretty enough to be a girl, I have no problem with it, just so long as you are not prettier than me.

I am pleased that your attitude toward woman is one of such respect and equanimity. I would be more than happy to let you do the cooking any time you wish. What's more, if it will make you feel better, I will gladly let you do the washing up afterward, as well.

Your taste in literature is most encouraging, I must say. I do not think I could tolerate a man who insisted upon reading Dickens or Milton aloud night after night. I would most certainly be asleep in my chair after only a few pages. I do appreciate your Mister Whitman, even if he does tend toward long windedness, rather like the aforementioned Mister Dickens. I know that there are those who feel his works are obscene and certainly not suitable for women to read. In my estimation, it is that very raw realness, that makes it so jarringly beautiful.

And no, I do not think that the fact that poetry evokes such strong emotion in you, means that you are soft. I would take a soft man, with an appreciation of good literature, over a hard man of no feeling, on any day with a Y in it. Which is not to say that I believe, that the ability to recognize beauty where you find it, means that you are soft. On the contrary, I think it takes a very strong man, secure in his masculinity, to admit that he cries now and again.

As far as your rambling is concerned, I must confess that I find it rather adorable. So, please do not
feel self-conscious on my account. Ramble on, my friend! I doubt the strong, silent type would be a very entertaining companion through a long Montana winter.

Your friend,
Waverly Earp

PS – Which of the sonnets is your favorite?

PPS - Until I see your handwriting, you don't see mine.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

a besotted Cole responds to Waverly's response

Chapter Notes

Shakespeare's Sonnet #30 is to be found in the ending notes. I felt the addition to the actual text rather than just a mention would throw off the rhythm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friend Earp,

Mister Dolls says he can assure you, that I have no such gift with the ladies. He postulates that the same peculiarity in women which causes them to dote on scrawny, stray kittens, lends me the illusion of charm. And since you asked, yes I may have a dimple or two.

By all means, let us dispense with social convention. I shall save so much time in not perusing my prose for accidental slights, that I shall get twice as much work done in a day. Impossible as it is to shake hands upon it, an enthusiastic response will have to do. Yes! The deal is struck!

Pardon me if I am being silly. Your last letter was so amusing that I feel quite light of heart. You work just like a tonic on me, Miss Earp, and not the sort the peddlars sell comprised of puddle water and potato peelings. I have been so lonely and desolate since I came west, but since becoming acquainted with you, it is like a ray of summer sunshine has come into my life.

Believe me, my friend, the last thing I would ever do is underestimate your capabilities. I have been called many things in my lifetime, but a fool is not one of them. I have no doubt, that had you lived in antiquity and Hannibal had underestimated you, neither he nor his elephants would ever have seen the Alps.

That being said, I am still not certain you would win that wager concerning my Jane. She is an ornery thing to be sure. Although, if there is anyone who could bend her to their charms, I have no doubt it would be you. Frankly, I would not be at all surprised if you turned out to be that unstoppable force, to which the philosophers and men of science, so often refer.

I might have known, about you and the animals. You have such an open heart. I can see it now, every living thing within twenty miles will be your pet and we will be subsisting entirely upon vegetables, fruit and grains. I'd better keep that in mind at planting time and make the garden accordingly large. Theoretically, that is, I would never dare to presume that our marriage is a foregone conclusion.

I agree that it is indeed uncanny how our stories seem to parallel one another. While I am not a
believer in kismet and the like, I think you have hit upon something with this kindred spirit thing. I have felt an odd sort of connection with you since your very first letter. I shall be most embarrassed if you do not feel the same, but to me this correspondence has seemed more like getting reacquainted with an old friend than discovering a new one.

Oh yes, my friend, the Montana Territory is quite the height of fashion these days. All the best people are moving here now, don't you know? Knowing how much you devote your life to the latest trends, I have no doubt that you will begin packing any day now.

Please, friend Earp, promise you will tell me if I am being too much.

In asking how long my uncle lived on the land, I surmise you are trying to determine the potential length of your sentence. Uncle was here just over a year before he passed, so I must reside on the homestead for three years and eight months before the balance is due and I can claim the deed. However, Miss Waverly, should we indeed marry, I am afraid your sentence will be life, as I am too wise a fellow to let go such a rare gem as you.

No, I most definitely would not think you were prepared, to find my company dull, if you arrived with five steamer trunks full of books, let alone two. If you did in the end, I could take refuge in the pages of the classics and mend my wounded heart, that you found me so boring.

Our Mister Dolls has just informed me, that my prose is beginning to sound like a bad drawing room comedy and he will be happy when my fingers are healed. I maintain that he is just jealous that you are writing to me and not to him.

I am pleased to hear of your preference for clean shaven men, as I did not know where I might procure a false beard in this wilderness. Of course, my dear lady, I would never presume that you had thought about kissing me. Is it not common knowledge that women, being the innocents that they are, never think of such things?

I have no way of knowing which of us is more fair of face, but I highly doubt it can be me. All I know is that if brains were beauty, you would put Helen herself to shame. If the kindness of your heart shone out through your skin, Aphrodite would doubtless go into retirement, to soothe her wounded ego.

Yes, Miss Earp, even I know that last part was a bit much. Still, I am in search of a wife, not a sister. So, whether love is the object or not, I assume there must be some kind of wooing. You must forgive me, if I don't have much experience at this sort of thing or any at all, to be honest. I only hope you do not find my suit too objectionable.

I am pleased that you do not feel my ability to see beauty where I find it means that I am weak. For surely, knowing you would render me practically powerless. You are such a kind and comforting soul, I cannot imagine that your outsides do not match your insides.

As relieved as I am that you find my rambling an asset, I do not think that I could control it if I tried. With a wit such as yours, I feel I shall always be running to catch up, so the rambling is a given. I don't see how any man could be luckier than to have you as a companion throughout the long, cold winter. I feel certain you could keep him entertained without books or any other diversion, even should a new ice age commence.

Lastly, you wish to know which of Shakespeare's sonnets is my favorite. Don't you think that's an awfully personal question? A mother could no sooner choose a favorite child.

All that I can tell you is that number 30 has been on my mind a good deal of late. I look forward to
your next letter.

Your friend,

Cole Haught

Chapter End Notes

Sonnet 30

When to sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes, new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Waverly's response to Cole's letter.

This is a short one due to the nature of the letter. I hope you don't hate me too much.

Chapter Notes

I had a hell of a time writing this one, had to wrestle it like a bear. I was afraid you would all hate it and hate me. I didn't want Waverly to seem like a bitch. I hope I did it justice. Just know that this was necessary. If they fell in love before meeting, the story would top out at 30 chapters. I don't think any of us want that.

Friend Haught,

After reading your most recent letter, I feel first and foremost, that I must ask you one question. Please consider your answer very carefully before responding, as I feel that whichever direction our relationship takes from here forward, will be materially changed by it.

Allow me to preface this by saying that I feel like things have been progressing very nicely between us. I find you to be a kind, decent and intelligent fellow, one whom I would very much like to have as a dear and trusted friend. Please keep that in mind as you read what comes next.

I pray you do not think me a shrew and desire to terminate our correspondence, but if that is the case, I will understand and bear you no ill will because of it. That being said...

How serious are you about this “wooing” as you call it?

I fear that there has been a misunderstanding between us, my friend. When I answered your advertisement, it was with the understanding that you were not looking for love. I have explained my own situation to you and I had thought that we were in agreement on the matter.

You see, it has not been so very long since I lost my beloved, less than a year. I am still in mourning. I imagine it will be a very long time before the day comes when I am able to give my heart to another, if that day ever comes. I am not confident that it will. I have also told you that I put very little store by compliments or flattery.

I took your advertisement and correspondence at face value and expected that you would do the same with mine. Therefore I am quite nonplussed by this “wooing” business.

I do not mean to offend you, my friend. It is not my intention to make you feel undesirable or unworthy of love. In fact, hurting your feelings is something that I am most loathe to do.
In the short time that we have been in contact, I have come to see you as a real friend, one whom I value and much desire to get to know better. It would not be hyperbole to say I feel you have the potential to become a very dear and beloved friend, perhaps one of the most significant of my life. To be completely honest, despite the brevity of our acquaintance, I have already begun to devote some serious thought to the possibility of going through with the move and the marriage, should you deign to ask me.

However, if it is romance that you seek, then I am afraid I shall have to say a reluctant goodbye to you, my friend. So that you may devote your attentions to finding a woman capable of giving you what you desire. You deserve nothing less. I would not want to stand between you and a chance at happiness.

I beg you to forgive me if I have hurt you in saying this, for that is the last thing I would ever want to do.

However, if you have only plied this suit due to some mistaken notion that it is what society demands when in pursuit of a wife, then please tell me, Friend Haught. Do you still desire, as you said, a helpmate, good conversation and companionship, a fellow traveler to share in life's adventures, free of romantic entanglements?

If that is the case, please let us put this behind us and continue our budding friendship, with an eye to discussing marriage at some point in the future. For I already hold you in high esteem and I cannot imagine, that our connection will do anything but strengthen and deepen, as we get to know each other better still. Should we decide to unite and face life's trials and joys together as a pair, I do not doubt that a time will come when we do indeed care a great deal for one another.

From where I stand now, it seems unlikely that those feelings will ever reach beyond the platonic. However, if by some miracle that should occur, I cannot think of any name I would be prouder and luckier to call mine than Mrs. Cole Haught. A wife in every sense of the word, the whole of myself gladly given to you.

Again, I hope my candor has not offended your sensibilities and that our friendship and our correspondence shall indeed continue. If not, then I am indeed sorry, Friend Cole. I shall miss you and remember you fondly always. Good luck in finding the happiness you so richly deserve.

Your friend,
Waverly Earp
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Cole's response and we are back on the train to happy town.

I just couldn't bring myself to leave you waiting too long after yesterday's chapter, so quickie update for all you Cole groupies.

Miss Waverly,

Please forgive me, for I have been a fool.

You may blame Dolls in large part for this misunderstanding, as it was his bad advice that led me down this path. I however, am the fool who asked for and took that advice, so I am by no means free of culpability. I suppose that telling you the whole story from the beginning is the only way to explain my last letter.

In all honesty, I must confess that I have been driving my good friend to the brink of insanity, talking about you day and night.

Miss Earp is the most amazing woman I have ever had the good fortune to encounter.

Miss Earp is so charming and intelligent.

I feel like I have known Miss Earp my entire life. The connection I feel to her is so strong, this cannot be real can it?

Miss Waverly has been such a blessing. She is exactly what I hoped for but never dared dream I would find when I placed the advertisement.

Miss Earp makes me feel like I am on the brink of something wonderful.

If I cannot convince Miss Waverly to be my wife, I shall never recover from the disappointment.

A man with a mission, I asked Dolls how he had managed to win his wife. I have no experience at all with this sort of thing and was feeling quite at sea. That is when Dolls told me that I should spend my time thinking of all the amazing and beautiful things in the world and constantly compare them to your luminescent self. If you were always judged as finer, more perfect, more lovely by far and I did not relent, you would eventually reward me with your hand. He also suggested flowers, but I could not see how that might be feasible. I was dubious of the plan at the time, but Dolls assured me that this was the precise method by which he had won his Delia.

Well, my friend, you know how that turned out. In my defense, turning to one with experience and
proven success at the matter at hand does make perfect logical sense. Then again when has logic ever entered into human interaction?

It was only after I had mailed that misbegotten missive, that I had a chance to speak to Delia herself. She then informed me that her husband's version of events had been entirely spurious, but she liked to leave him with his illusions. Then she explained to me that Dolls had been so pathetic and inept in his pursuit of her that she had taken pity on him and said yes, just to put him out of his misery.

And so, Miss Waverly, I learned a very important and very nearly highly costly life lesson. If you want advice on women, do not ask a married man or any man for that matter. Ask a married woman.

It is my understanding that a man who truly comprehends the female heart, is a very rare thing indeed.

Again, I must proffer my apology, for the fault does not lie entirely with my misguided friend. Still, I should have had enough faith, in the connection we share, to know that if I was just patient enough, all would come right in the end.

I cannot tell you what a balm to my lonely soul your letter was, but then they always are. The parts that don't give me apoplexy, at any rate. I cannot express to you how distressing it was to read your tentative farewell, for the very last thing I would ever want to say to you is goodbye, my friend.

You were so right in your prediction, for your letter has materially changed my outlook on life. For the first time since I came to the Montana Territory, I have felt the stirring of hope in me again. That is an emotion which has been a remote stranger to me since I lost my own beloved. Yes, my dear, that is unfortunately another chapter of our lives which runs parallel.

To respond to the astonishing revelations in your letter...

I too have been devoting much time to thoughts of you and our possible future as a team. Yes, a team, for I feel that like my partner's oxen, we would aid one another in our journey and our strengths and weaknesses would complement one another, so that as a pair, we would be stronger and better equipped to take on the world, than as two individuals.

I would very much like you to be my wife, there is not a single doubt in my mind regarding that. However, I will not ask you until you give me some indication that you are ready. You have my word as a gentleman.

You ask me if I still desire a helpmate, good conversation and companionship, a fellow traveler to share in life's adventures, free of romantic entanglements? Absolutely, my friend, but only if that person is you. As I cannot imagine, that after becoming acquainted with you, any other woman would or could measure up.

So, yes, please let us put this behind us and continue on as if it had never happened. As for the rest of it, I will refrain from comment, lest we court another situation like the one we have just resolved. Suffice it to say that we are in complete agreement.

There is one sentiment which I feel I must express, however. If that miracle which you mentioned should ever occur, I would be without question, the luckiest fool on this earth, to be in possession of both your hand and your heart.
Your devoted friend, Cole

P.S. I dearly hope that I never again have to read or hear another goodbye from you, my dear friend, regardless of how elegantly worded or magnanimous it may be.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Waverly's response to Cole

This is a very short chapter, but Waverly didn't need a lot of words to say what she needed to say.

Cole,

It sounds to me like Dolls is the one you ought to be apologizing to, subjecting the poor man to constant talk of me. Please extend my sincere personal apology to him.

Really, my friend, you could have saved us all a lot of time and grief, if you had just asked me to begin with. I could have told you that most men have utterly no clue about what women want. All females know this by the time they have begun to mature, if only through observation and in rare cases, personal experience.

OK, I will leave off teasing you now, about the recent misunderstanding, anyway. I shall always tease you, so you might just as well resign yourself to it. It is far too much fun to ever give up entirely. I shall simply move on to other topics.

I deeply regret that reading my words of farewell caused you pain, but please know that it could not have been any more pain than I felt upon writing them. Forgive me?

It pleases me so much to know that I have kindled some small spark of hope to reignite within your breast, for you have done the same for me, my friend. You have allowed me to believe that perhaps in time, we might be able to help one another heal. That one day this aching void I feel in my chest, whenever I think of the past, may again be filled with joy. I must admit, I am no longer gobsmacked by these parallels in our personal histories. They have come to be so commonplace as to be considered a matter of course.

If you have read your Plato, then you are no doubt familiar with the concept of soulmates. It is not something I have ever put much store by, but in analyzing our connection, sometimes it seems there can be no other explanation. Most believe that soulmates must be a romantic pair, but to my way of thinking, there is no specification in the text that excludes the possibility of platonic bonded pairs. I'd love to hear your opinion on the matter.

That being said, really Cole, while I am glad that you have done away with the idle flattery, was it really necessary to compare me to an ox? A woman does like to feel attractive, after all, even when in a platonic situation, and there is nothing pretty about an ox! So please, in future should you feel compelled to compare and contrast my qualities with that of livestock, at least try to make it a cute animal.

Seriously, I cannot help but agree with the rest of your analogy. I must confess, I am relieved that you feel such a bond with me that you would not desire the company of another. For I really have my heart quite set on the idea at this point and frankly, the specter of those other letters you received have been haunting me of late. I too, would want no woman but myself to be those things
to you, my friend. Without even noticing that it was happening, I have become quite attached to you.

You are no fool, my dear friend. Although, I feel like perhaps I ought to have been a bit more specific, if you are under the impression, that the only parts of me you would have access to, are my heart and my hand. Ha! I could not resist! I imagine right now your face is as red as your hair!

Your devoted friend,
Waverly

P.S. - You may ask me any time you like, Friend Cole. I think, at this point, my answer is pretty much a foregone conclusion.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Miss Waverly Earp,

Will you please do me the great honor of being my wife?

Your devoted friend,
Cole Haught
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

... 

Cole,

Of course, silly boy. Just send me the time, the place and the ticket.

Yours,
The Future Mrs. Haught
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Waverly tells Aunt Gus her news

Waverly mailed her answer and that same night, she had the dream for the first time.

She and Cole were standing before a country preacher. Her vantage point being from behind, she could only see her future husband from the back. He was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and firey red hair. Clad in the stereotypical attire of a cowboy, boots, chaps, a starched linen shirt and a wide-brimmed white hat. When the preacher informed him that he could kiss his bride, Waverly felt the touch of Cole's lips to hers for the first time and it was transcendent. Her whole body flushed with warmth and she felt the sensation of flying. When her newly minted husband pulled back, she opened her eyes to gaze into soulful chocolate brown ones twinkling back at her, the world around them coming into focus. The young bride was shocked to find that her other half was not what she had been expecting at all. Standing before her, lips still moist from their kiss, was a gorgeous redhead. Dolls had said that Cole was pretty enough to be a girl, but one glance downward at the beautiful body before her, made it undeniable that this was no man. Waverly suddenly felt even warmer than she had before and could feel the beat of her heart strong and fast in her chest and throat, along with one other place.

“Oh dear God, what have I done?” She groaned upon waking, pulling the pillow over her face and rushing headlong into a small panic.

Waverly didn't need to visit a mystic to find out what the dream meant. There was no denying that she had started having certain feelings of fondness toward Cole. The connection between them was already so much stronger than anything she would have thought possible. If she was being honest with herself, the young brunette had to admit that the seeds of affection had begun to sprout within her and they hadn't even met yet. Perhaps it wasn't impossible to fall for someone strictly through the written word. That was how it happened with Nikki after all, but she had fallen in love with her gradually over the years.

Oh, Nikki. Waverly felt a sharp pang of guilt whenever the thought of her dear beloved wandered across her mind. Here she was about to embark upon a new life with someone else, when her only plans had ever been to grow old with her bosom friend.

Bosom friend. That was the sticking place. Waverly had known, from a very early age, that the male of the species held no interest for her. At least not in that way, but she could not remember a time when she had not had a crush on some older girl or teacher. What was she doing marrying a man?

It shouldn't matter, she told herself. They were only going to be friends, right? Still, in her heart she knew that she could not rule out the possibility that they might be more than that one day and that was what had her so confused. Waverly had never in her life wanted to kiss a man, never mind anything having to do with “performing her wifely duties” as her sister had referred to it.

That had to be at the root of the dream. Her brain just didn't know what to do with the information that her heart was sending along. Perhaps, when she met Cole in person, everything would be set to
rights. Surely, once the maleness of him was standing right there in front of her, any far away notion of romance would fall by the wayside.

Some part of her had come to enjoy the dream, after she'd had it a few times anyway and had even begun to look forward to it. She couldn't help wondering, did the stunning ginger really exist? Maybe she was Cole's sister and he could introduce them. Then again, it was undoubtedly considered gauche to ask one's new husband if he had any attractive sisters that she might meet.

Waverly found her aunt sitting on the veranda, a whiskey in her hand and her chair turned toward the beginning of a rosy sunset. She poured herself a glass and pulled up a chair.

“Aunt Gus?”

“Yes, dear?”

“We need to talk.”

“Well, that sounds ominous.”

“I suppose it does,” the younger woman chuckled, “Do you remember that night we had the chat about me wasting my life? As I recall you told me it was time that I unstuck my wings and moved on or something to that effect.”

“So, you really were listening that night.”

“Yes, I was and I've tried to take your advice.”

“I have noticed that you've seemed a bit less gloomy of late. Also, I haven't had to order bourbon in over a month.”

“I was wondering if you'd noticed.”

“I'm proud of you, my girl. You were made for so much more than this.”

“I'm beginning to think what they say about wisdom and age must be true.”

“I don't know if that was a compliment or an insult,” she teased, “Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

“I'm leaving, Auntie.”

“I told you that wasn't necessary. You are welcome to stay as long as you want.”

“I'm getting married.”

The older woman's mouth hung open, her lips moving, but no sound was coming out.

“Gus?”

“Who? I mean, how? You've barely left the house for six months. Explain.”

“I suppose I'd better start at the beginning.”

Once the long story had been told, Gus just shook her head in astonishment. “Montana?”
“Is that all you have to say? Aren't you happy for me, Gus?”

“I really don't know what to say, to tell you the truth, Waverly. If this is truly what you want, then I will try my best to be happy for you, very cautiously happy.”

“I have a really good feeling about this. Cole is a decent, honorable man. I'd be willing to bet my life on it.”

“That's what I'm afraid of, my dear. What if this Mr. Haught isn't what he seems? One hears horror stories all the time.”

“You can't believe everything you hear at the Ladies Aid, Auntie. I do not think I am wrong about this, but if it will make you feel better I will purchase a return ticket before I leave.”

“That might help a little, I just wish you knew more about the man.”

“The fresh start is a big part of what drew me to this. This is a chance to begin anew as a new person. As far as he's concerned I'm Waverly Earp.”

“Really? Michelle would like that.”

“Would you like to read the letters? I want you to be able to be happy for me, Gus.”

“You'd let me do that?”

“I have nothing to hide.”

“Thank you, I think that would make me feel a bit more at ease. I don't want you to think I don't want you to be happy. This just doesn't seem, well...this isn't something I ever expected from you.”

“I don't think anyone grows up expecting to be a mail-order bride.”

“You just never struck me as the marrying kind. Not that you aren't a lovely girl, Waverly. I just never thought this was something you wanted. You never mentioned it.”

“It's not like that, Gus. We're going to be friends, companions. We've both been very clear about the fact that we're not doing this for love, except perhaps a shared love of adventure.”

“Now that sounds more like my little tomboy.”

“I promise you, Aunt Gus. I will take every precaution. I feel it in my heart, Cole is what he says he is and if he isn't, I've already purchased a pistol.”

“That's my girl.”

“I just wish that...”

“What, baby?”

“I wish I could share this with Wynonna. I miss her so much.”

“Then write her a letter. I'll give it to her the next time I see her.”

“I can't do that. Then everyone will know you've been harboring the prodigal daughter.”

“Honey, she already knows...She's known from the beginning.”
’Aunt Gus!’

“I just let her know that you were safe and she shouldn't worry.”

“What if she told Pa?”

“Wynonna wouldn't do that.”

“How do you know?”

“They had a bit of a falling out. They don't really speak any more.”

“Because of me?”

The older woman nodded, “Your father contacted her to see if you'd run to her for sanctuary. After she heard all the venom he was spewing over you, she read him the riot act about how he'd treated you. According to Ward, he has no daughters now.”

“Oh, Wynonna...”

“She doesn't hold it against you, darling. She's very happy with her Mr. Nedley. “

“Perhaps I will write that letter. Maybe it will help me clear my head.”

“Those feet feeling a little chilly, dear?”

“No, Gus. I'm not having second thoughts. I'm sure I want to marry Cole. It's just...I keep having this dream.”

“Care to talk about it?”

Waverly's cheeks suffused with pink, “No, I don't think so. Thank you, I think I’ll go get started on that letter.”

Gus chuckled to herself, “Just friends, indeed.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Cole freaks out then takes a trip to town and drops in on an old friend.

Chapter Notes

There may not be any more updates until after New Year, the wife is off for 10 days and I never get any writing done when she is home. Plus we are going off for 3 days vacation right after Christmas. Then again, who knows, you might get lucky.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS EVERYBODY! THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

Cole waited until Dolls was gone to open the letter. Unfolding the paper and reading the single line response, he shouted with glee.

“She said yes!” She danced around the room, leaping in the air.

“She said yes!”

“She said YES!”

“Oh my God, she said yes.” Panic hit her like a runaway stagecoach.

Despite all evidence that it was the most likely response, it was a possibility that Nicole had not allowed herself to entertain, not in any concrete sort of way, anyway. She hadn't permitted hope to venture so far into her thoughts, that her musings included logistics and implications and the stark reality of it.

“Oh, shit.” At least she was talking more like a man, even if it was only to herself at the moment.

“What if she sees me for who I really am and she's so disappointed that she exposes me to the whole town? They'll kill me. Waverly wouldn't do that, would she? She's too kind and understanding, but a woman who's been deceived, played for a fool, there's not many things more dangerous. Perhaps I should tell her I've changed my mind. That I'm not the man I said I was. I can't marry her. I'm not good enough for her. That's all true, but a woman scorned? You know what they say about that.”

“No. It has to be Waverly. Now that I know her, no one else will ever be enough. I suppose I could try to find someone less perceptive, a less intelligent girl. No. I couldn't stand to live with someone stupid, it would be just as maddening as living alone and a damned sight more annoying.”

“Remember, Cole, people see what they want to see. Oh great, now I'm talking to myself in the third person! I'm going crazy already. I suppose there's only one thing for it. We must remain just friends, separate beds, separate rooms and make sure she only sees you when you're fully clothed. Oh, come on, Haught! You know that won't work. You're already half in love with the girl!”
“I have to go through with this. I couldn't hurt her that way. Not to mention what it would do to me. You just have to man up and pray that she doesn't notice. I have put on a lot of muscle in the last few months. Perhaps it's time to head into town and give the disguise another test run. If I could kiss Miss Waverly just once, I wouldn't care if they lynched me. Hmmmmmm, maybe I should buy a pistol while I'm at it.”

Several months had passed since she had been in the town proper. Dolls had been picking up the mail and supplies and Cole had been living like a hermit. Her auburn hair was down to her shoulders now, and while some cowboys wore their hair in such a fashion, Waverly was from back east and would be unfamiliar with the style. She didn't want to risk her finding it feminine.

So, as soon as she hit the town limits, Cole pointed Bobo straight for the barber shop. She'd be sad to see it go, it had taken so long to grow back since she'd cut it all off that day in the forest, but if she was going to convince Waverly, she needed to feel as much like a man as she could.

This would be step two, since earlier that day, fed up with the chafing and slipping at inopportune times, she had sewn her gloves into a soft flannel pouch in a more natural looking shape. It had felt strange at first, after going around with a pair of gloves in her pants for several months, but at least now she wouldn't be constantly worried that they might slip down her pant leg. Then again, she had noticed that most men seemed a little obsessed with what was between their legs, so...anyway, it was more comfortable and she could button it into her underclothes.

“What can I do for ya, boy?” the barber called from the other side of the room, “I know you ain't here for a shave.”

Cole fixed him with a glare, “Need a haircut.”

“I'll say.”

“I haven't been able to come into town in a while, been too busy swingin' an axe.”

“So that's how you come by those shoulders of yours.”

“Nice and short, please. Getting married. I don't want my new bride to think she's givin' her hand to a woman.”

“Don't think there's much chance of that. Not unless the women look a lot different back where you come from.”

“You don't think this,” Cole rubbed a hand across a hairless chin, “Makes me look young and soft?”

“Naaaaa, yer just what they call fair complected, is all. You got a real strong jawline and the last time I saw that much muscle was on a yoke of oxen. Anyway, ain't this girl seen you before?”

“No sir. She's coming from back east. We've been writing each other for a while now.”

“One of them mail-order gals, huh?”

“What of it?”

“Cool down, boy. There ain't no shame in it. Becoming quite common really, the men outnumber the women so bad in these parts. You don't get a lot of women come to the Montana Territory on their own. These days, it's pretty much get a mail-order bride or switch to ridin' side-saddle, either that or spend a lot of time at Flossie's.”
Flossie's. That gave Cole an idea. One more errand to add to the list.

“There you go, boy” He turned the chair toward the mirror, “That'll be two bits. Mind you, when she asks you how you got so handsome, you tell her old Mr. Crisp helped you out.”

“Will do, sir. There you go, two bits and another two for the wise counsel.”

Nicole stood there a moment, admiring her reflection, running her palm along the closely shorn hair at her temple. She hadn't had access to a mirror since the last time she was in town. The man she saw staring back at her bore little resemblance to the last time she'd seen him. The cuts and bruises might be gone, but she looked a lot more masculine than she had just a few months ago. With her close cropped hair, skin burnished the color of a walnut shell and the new muscles she'd gained through daily logging, she barely recognized herself. The eyes were the same, a little more haunted, a little less bright, but the rest of her looked like a stranger. Had she seen herself on the street, she would have registered the person as unquestionably male, without so much as a second glance.

‘What a handsome young man,’ she thought as she placed the Stetson back on her head. It sat a little lower than it had before, but she could always stuff a little paper in the lining until her hair grew in some.

“Hey there, Cole!” Old Man Gardner greeted her as she walked into the mercantile, “Didn't expect to see you again. I thought you said you were just passing through. Decide to stay after all?”

“Well, Sir...the thing is, I'm getting married and I need a new set of clothes and a few other things. I was so pleased with the purchases I made last time and I knew you'd do right by me, so I made a special trip, even though it is quite a ways from the homestead.”

“Got a haircut too, by the smell of it. I'd know that pomade Crisp uses a mile away. Congratulations on your nuptials.”

“Thank you,” she took a big whiff of air, trying to catch the scent of the hair treatment, “Is it that bad?”

“Surely you remember that I like to tease.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Cole blushed a little.

“So, wedding clothes was it?”

“Yes...and a pistol and holster if you've got one.”

“Expecting trouble out your way?”

“Not expecting, just want to keep the little lady safe. The Spencer is a honey, but not very convenient to tote around.”

“Gotcha. Anything else?”

“Maybe something for my bride? I haven't the faintest idea what to get her.”

“I'm sure I can help you out with all of that and what I can't the wife can, just follow me.”

“Yes, sir.”
“So, what you been up to boy? You look like you're carrying enough muscle for two men.”

“Logging mostly, since I got my place all finished up, my partner and I have been getting logs all cut and dovetailed and selling them to people who want to build cabins without quite so much work.”

“Prepared log cabin kits? That's a great idea. You selling much?”

“Not as much as I'd like. There's a whole lot of homesteading going on hereabouts, but it's hard to make contact with interested parties, Givens, from the trading post west of here has been sending folk our way, but it doesn't amount to much.”

“Boy, what do you say you and I discuss some business?”

By the time she walked out of the mercantile, Cole had a new pair of pull on boots, some Sunday-go-to-meeting pants, as Gardner called them, a crisp linen shirt, a couple gifts for Waverly, a pistol hanging at her hip and a freshly inked contract with Gardner, to sell cabin kits, in her pocket. She couldn't help having a little bounce in her step to go along with it all.

Cole hadn't wanted to risk too much contact with the town folk. All it would take was one extraordinarily perceptive person and she could end up at the end of a hangman's rope. It turned out Dolls and Gardner were already old friends, from his time hauling freight, so they set up a deal where he would be the middle man. He would travel into town once a twice a month, to pick up orders from the mercantile, depending on how good business was, then they would deliver the logs to the customers. For his part, the merchant got twenty cents on every dollar they earned, Dolls got the same and Cole got a steady income to support his new bride. Things were looking up, yes indeed.

There was just one last stop to make before she could go home and write Waverly a letter to send along with the train ticket. In no great hurry, Cole rode Bobo at a slow walk until he pulled up alongside Flossie's.

She'd hardly walked through the door when Polly came running over.

“Oh my God, Cole? Is that you?”

“Hi Polly,” she tipped her hat.

“Look at you. All filled out and manly.” she teased good naturedly, causing Cole to blush, “Still cute as hell, though.”

“Polly!”

“What can I get ya?”

“A beer would be great.”

The older girl, brought her a mug full of liquid, that looked a little too much like horse piss, and pulled up a chair.

“You come back for a little company, Cole?” she asked hopefully. Polly had a tiny crush on the young ginger.

“I was hoping we could talk privately.”
“Another sleepover?”

“No. It's just, I'm getting married and I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Wedding night got you worried? If you want a lesson it's gonna cost you.”

“I grew up around livestock, Polly. I know the score. It's just, I was wondering...”

“Yes?”

“Well...”

“Don't be shy, Cole. We're friends, aren't we? Ask me anything.”

“Polly...do I snore?”

The saloon girl burst out laughing. The redhead looked hurt.

“Don't be so sensitive, a big guy like you. You just surprised me, is all.”

“Well?”

“Yeah, you do.”

A worried look came over Cole's face.

“Aw, don't worry, baby. It's more like a puppy with a full belly, than a grizzly with a head cold.”

“Thank you, Miss Polly, I'd better be going. Gotta get home and write to my Waverly.”

“You treat her right, Cole. Promise me.”

“Yes, Ma'am. I wouldn't think of treating her any other way.”

“Good luck, Cole.”

Polly sighed heavily as she watched him ride away. “Lucky girl.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Waverly writes to Wynonna

Wynonna,

Oh, how I have missed you, dear sister!

If only Auntie had informed me sooner, that you knew I was here, we might have been corresponding all this time. I have no idea how much Gus has told you. She would only admit to me that she'd let you know I was here and safe.

For that matter, I don't know what scandalous or slanderous litany of my sins, Pa has decried upon you. Since Auntie assures me that you are on my side, I am working on the assumption that you didn't believe a word he said. Either that or you believed some of it, but judged it to be my own personal business and of no concern to you. Regardless of the case, I thank you for coming to my defense. Knowing Pa, I'm sure you knew that doing so was a waste of your breath, but that you did so just the same, touches me more than I can say. Still, I am sorry that I was the cause of him shunning you. I am aware that the choice to do so was entirely yours, but I know that you did not have the same sort of relationship that he and I did and I regret that I was the one to cause you the loss of the only parent you had left.

All that I have to say about what you should and shouldn't believe, is trust your heart. You probably know me better than anyone on this earth, you practically raised me after all. I don't think we need to discuss the particulars of why, just know that Pa threw me out. I did not run away by choice, for I really had no choice. Pa had arranged my marriage to Champ Hardy and I would just as soon have married Jake the plow horse as that brutish dolt.

I must confess that I did, in fact, take Pa's favorite horse and best wagon. I simply could not resist the poetic justice of it, since he'd showed more care and affection to them both than he ever had to me. I sold the lot for living money when I arrived in Philadelphia, as I did not know whether or not Gus would keep me and if she did, I wanted to provide for my own upkeep. Simply because a person is independently wealthy, they should not be expected to bear the burden of their relative's expenses.

So yes, I am technically a horse thief. I hope you will not feel it necessary to turn me in to the authorities. Please keep in mind, that Gus has known about this since shortly after my arrival and would doubtless be charged with harboring a fugitive.

My original plan had been to meet up with dear Nikki, but after several months with no response to my letters, I received a reply from the current proprietor of the property. It seems that my old friend had gone traveling and never arrived at her destination. She is officially considered missing, most likely a victim of foul play and is presumed dead, The rest of the family has returned to Quebec to live with Madame Saulnier's sister, after exhausting their savings searching for her. They left no forwarding address, so I have not been able to attain any further information.
Goodness, it seems so real written out in black and white like that. Nikki is presumed dead. It still doesn't seem possible.

I hate to admit it, but for a while there, I gave in to despair. I didn't hardly eat, barely slept and spent the bulk of my time curled up in an overstuffed chair, in a dimly lit drawing room, drinking whiskey and reading about people who'd been dead for thousands of years. You know Aunt Gus though, she wasn't about to let me wallow like that for long. She gave me a good kick up the hindquarters, figuratively speaking and got me back on the path to the world of the living. I know I shall never get over losing Nikki, but I must get on with the business of living my life. It's what she would have wanted.

Not long from now, I plan to take a large step toward that new future. Are you sitting down, sister dear?

I am getting married.

His name is Cole Haught. No jokes, please. I know you'll make them anyway, but I thought I'd ask just the same.

Mr. Haught is a homesteader in the Montana Territory and we have been corresponding for some time now. You will no doubt think me crazy. No girl grows up dreaming of being a mail-order bride, after all. As you no doubt recall, I did however, grow up dreaming of seeing the frontier and this is my chance.

Do not be afraid for me, big sister. I have every confidence that Cole is a kind, decent, honorable man. His letters have proven him to be intelligent, as well as amiable and he values a woman of substance over, as he puts it, empty headed china dolls who do nothing but sit silently and embroider. We share many interests, literature and history among them and the same thirst for adventure lived outside of books. Also, we hold the same views on a number of important matters, including the equality of the sexes. You know what a rare attribute that is in a man.

He describes himself as tall, lean and broad-shouldered, due to swinging an axe all day every day. He has a “baby face” as he puts it and so looks younger than his twenty-five years. Cole is clean shaven, thank God and his friend, who's been taking dictation from him, since he has three broken fingers, says Mr. Haught is “pretty enough to be a girl”. His eyes are dark brown and his hair is, well...it's red, I'm afraid. As of yet, that's the closest thing to a fault I've been able to find in him.

I've allowed Aunt Gus to read his letters and she agrees with my assessment of him. Based upon the extremely remote possibility that both Gus and I are wrong, I have procured a bit of Mr. Colt's latest work, against the advent of a quick getaway. So have no fear, sister dear.

I won't be living in any sodbuster's hut, with mud floors, either. Cole and his friend, Mr. Dolls, have built a real wooden house, barn, corral and every other outbuilding you can name. He is even diverting a portion of the river, so that I won't have to walk a half mile to the springhouse to fetch the milk and butter. Their next project is an indoor pump, so that I don't have to freeze myself, going out into the snow for water, come winter. Is your husband that sweet?

I'm just teasing you. Gus tells me that you and Mr. Nedley are deliriously happy and I could not have been more pleased to hear it.

I do not wish to give you the wrong impression, so I must tell you the whole truth. My marriage to Mr. Haught will strictly be one of convenience. He needs someone to help with the homestead and the animals while he is off in the woods and to keep him company on the isolated frontier during the long winter and share in this great adventure. Cole inherited the claim from his uncle fairly
recently and it will be a bit under four years before the land is ours, free and clear.

Do not pity me my loveless marriage, sister. For it was his assurance that he was not looking for love and the promise of a fresh start, that drew me to his advertisement. We have already developed a friendly affection toward one another and I am certain that we are destined to become great chums, but aside from meals, conversation and the adventure of homesteading, we won't be sharing anything else. Cole and Mr. Dolls have even built me my own bedroom for privacy and modesty's sake. So you see, my Mr. Haught is a very sweet and respectable sort of fellow, old fashioned and polite too, with an adorable streak of shyness. It's always Miss Waverly, never just Waverly and it took a few letters to get him to call me even that.

Yes, it's true. Unbelievable as it may seem I am going by my given name. I thought the fresh start called for a change. So, I am now Waverly Earp. I wanted to disassociate myself from Pa entirely, so I am using my real father's surname or at least I will be until I become Mrs. Haught.

Tell me honestly, Wynonna, did you know all along that Pa wasn't my real father? It certainly came as a shock to me, given the circumstances under which it was revealed to me, but it certainly makes Pa and Will's coldness toward me a little easier to understand. What it doesn't make it, is right. Anyway, I don't hold it against you if you did, I'm sure the secret wasn't yours to tell.

If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what would have become of me when Mama died. You saved me, Wynonna and I don't just mean when you pulled me out of that icy water.

I have been remiss in going so long without thanking you. You lost so much of your childhood to taking care of me. A lesser sister might have taken that loss out on me, but regardless of what I had to endure from the males in our family, you always made me feel fundamentally safe and loved. It makes me so happy to know that you finally have someone to love and care for you. I can think of no one who deserves that more than you, my dear, sweet, kind Wynonna. I am so thankful that you were a second mother to me. Your nurture and protection is a debt I will never be able to repay.

I really don't remember that much about Mama. I can't even picture her face any more, but Aunt Gus has been telling me stories, so many wonderful stories. I see so much of you and even a bit of me in them. Apparently, she was a vibrant, sassy, firecracker of a woman, before Pa beat the joy out of her. What he did to her was a sin and a tragedy both. Gus has never gotten over losing her baby sister. I thought he'd come between us too. I was sure I'd lost you, thank God our auntie can't keep a secret. Pa is so confident of his eternal reward in heaven, I think he's in for quite a surprise when he meets his maker, the old bastard. Shocking language, I know, but you know what they say, it takes one to know one.

Still, that must all be just so much water under the bridge now. If I am to truly start my life anew, I have to let all of that go. That does not mean, however, that I intend to forgive the old sonofabitch.

I must tell you, writing this letter has been a tonic to me. I have missed our talks so much these past months. I only wish that Gus had told me sooner. We might even have had a chance to visit with one another. Alas, it is too late now, as I am readying myself for the voyage west.

If you wish to do so, we can continue our correspondence with Gus as a go-between. At least until I know how I can be reached in Montana. I would like it very much if we could. I have already lost too many people that I loved, I don't want to lose you too.

You loving sister, Waverly
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Cole sends Waverly her train ticket along with helpful travel tips and instructions

Waverly,

Please find enclosed, one ticket to the rest of your life.

I am afraid I have been impulsive and made a decision without discussing it with you first. Do not worry, this won't set a precedent, I just wanted to surprise you. Since I was quite ill with Altitude Sickness when I came west and missed out on the scenery on the final quarter of my trip, I have decided to meet your train in Green River, Wyoming and ride along with you the rest of the way. Whether you want to marry immediately, wait until we arrive home or at any point in between, I will leave to your discretion. I suppose it depends on just how scandalous you feel like being.

I have opted not to book you a berth in the Pullman car, as Frank and Eliza, a lovely couple who befriended me on my journey, had nothing but bad to say about it. Men and women sleeping in close quarters with only thin curtains between them, babies crying all night and general noise the level of which is only exceeded by that of the body odor, make a good night's rest next to impossible. I slept in my seat the entire way out and was perfectly comfortable, but just to be certain I have booked you first class passage. How lucky you are to be able to benefit from the advice of one who has already made the trip and avoid any of the difficulties I encountered on my way west. I hope that these suggestions make your journey as pleasant as it may be possible.

While it is true that unsavory characters are abundant on the transcontinental railroad, if you know what to watch for you should be perfectly safe. If there is one thing I have no doubt of, it is that you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. If anything, I imagine it is the miscreants who should be afraid.

That being said, a short primer on riding the Union Pacific rail.

The playing of cards is the leading form of entertainment on the transcontinental line. You will find yourself playing to the point that you feel your fingers may commence bleeding from it. Under no circumstances should you play for money, not even for small stakes. The trains are filled with card sharps who make their living fleecing innocent travelers and many have lost their nest eggs thusly.

I advise you not to waste your money on hot meals at the rest stops. They all serve the same menu, with little variation, regardless of the time of day and the food is of substandard quality, the hygiene of the facilities questionable and at one dollar a meal, the prices too high. My suggestion to you is bring as much food as you can from home which will not perish en route and supplement with what you can buy from peddlars at the various stations. I subsisted solely on bread, cheese and apples on my trip and let me tell you, if I never eat another cheese sandwich between this day and my last, it will be too soon.

All along the route, but particularly at the Omaha station, you will hear rumors of wild Indians and bandits wrecking or ambushing the trains. Pay this spurious gossip no mind. It is circulated by the
ticket agents themselves, in order to boost sales of insurance. Sadly, the only Indians I saw on my journey were the poor, beaten down souls selling pottery and bead jewelry outside the depots. Nor did I catch sight of a single buffalo, I wish you better luck.

Try to get a seat next to a nice married couple or at least in a group of women and children, as there are without question, unsavory men riding the rails, who prey upon young women. Please do not be frightened, but I would advise you to carry some sort of weapon upon your person, whether it be a Derringer, a knife or a very large hat pin. I have heard too many first hand accounts of women being accosted by mashers under cover of darkness, whether at night or passing through tunnels.

I would be most heartbroken if you should come to any harm.

Do not underestimate the amount of reading material you should carry on the train. I only had 3 books on my person and had finished them all before the trip was half over. Believe me, while your first glimpse of the open prairie may be breathtaking, it will be all you see for nearly three days and will become more monotonous than you can possibly imagine.

The final caveat I have for you is one I am loathe to mention, for I know you will scoff and say “I, my dear sir, am a mountain girl”. Still, I beg you to take me seriously, for I cannot stand the thought of you having to endure the discomfort which I did.

While the Rocky Mountains may be in a class by themselves when it comes to sheer grandeur, they are also unmatched when it comes to elevation. They are by far the tallest mountain range in the nation. Please trust me on this, Friend Waverly, for I speak with the voice of experience. I beg you to exercise all precaution to avoid Altitude Sickness, it is a very common ailment among those from less lofty locations when traveling through the Rockies. I, myself grew up surrounded by mountains and still I succumbed. Believe me, my dear, you do NOT want that headache. I wish that someone had alerted me to the possibility in advance, so that I might have avoided it. The most important thing you can do is drink plenty of water, as much as you can stand. Be well rested and fed and wear loose, light clothing so that you may breathe easy and keep cool. Crowded railroad cars can be quite stifling at the best of times, let alone when the air is thin. So please, heed my warning, you will be glad that you did. I will be traveling through a portion of the Rockies with you and believe me, I shall be taking every precaution, to assure that I do not have to go through the sickness again.

I have already looked into the logistics of marrying in several locations along our route, depending on what you decide. I took the liberty of purchasing your wedding band from my merchant friend Mr. Gardner. His wife assured me that if it does not fit, she will gladly exchange it for any other in her inventory, regardless of price, since I am a business associate and “such a sweet boy”. Although it is hardly widespread tradition, I have purchased one for myself as well. My Papa always wore one, he was quite the romantic and I always loved that about him. I am aware that very few men share my views on women, but it has always seemed to me that only the woman wearing a ring, smacked a bit too much of a badge of ownership. I want everyone to know that we belong to each other. I would no more dare to try and own you, than I would try to tame a full grown cougar and keep it as a pet.

Now, all that remains is for you to choose the date on which you wish to embark. If you need more than a month to prepare, then write back and let me know the date. However, if you are already prepared and wish to make a start sooner than it would take for a letter to arrive, you may send me a telegram care of Gardner's Mercantile, Silver Bow, Montana. Mr. Dolls makes the trip into town once a week, to see if Pop Gardner has any orders for us, so it will be no trouble. Either way, I will make plans so that I may meet your train in Green River on time, without fail.
Also, if you have any belongings you would like to bring along, which may not be practical to take with you, feel free to ship them to that same address. It will be no trouble at all.

I eagerly await your response.

Your devoted friend, Cole

P.S. - I cannot wait for the day I marry you and we embark upon this great adventure together, my friend.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The moment you've all been waiting for. Cole meets Waverly's train.

I had originally planned to put the wedding in this chapter, but I decided I'd rather write that from Waverly's POV, which will be in the next chapter. I'll try not to keep you waiting too long.

Three weeks to the day later, Dolls went into town for supplies and returned with a telegram, along with a wisecrack or two.

DEPARTING FRIDAY. STOP. SEE YOU IN GREEN RIVER. STOP. BE ON TIME. STOP. WÄVERLY. STOP.

“Friday,” Cole mused aloud.

“Someone sounds eager,” Dolls teased.

“Oh shit!”

“Cold feet, buddy?”

“No. Today is Tuesday!”

Waverly's train would be arriving some time between Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning, dependent on delays. For the sake of caution, Cole figured on two days for the trip from Silver Bow to Green River. Better to spend a few hours cooling her heels, than to be late and risk her darling girl suffering the same awful fate that had befallen Nicole. In the end it seemed that the Saturday morning southeast bound train was the best bet. That gave Cole four whole days to pack, rest and load up on water, with plenty of time left over for panicking.

Precautions against Altitude Sickness were an absolute must. If she were to fall ill on the train again and an overzealous doctor insisted on examining her, this would all be over before it started. Between all the water she was taking in and the butterflies in her stomach, butterflies which felt more like bullfrogs, she was spending more time than she would have preferred in the privy, those next few days. She'd gotten the packing and such taken care of too quickly and had left herself entirely too much time for the panic portion of her agenda.

Her wedding clothes were already pressed and neatly folded between sheets of crisp, clean tissue paper in her trunk. Along with the charcoal grey Sunday trousers and stiff collared linen shirt she'd purchased, Pop Gardner had loaned her a black brocade vest with silver thread running through the pattern, an emerald and black cravat and a gold nugget stickpin. She couldn't wait to see the look on Waverly's face when she caught sight of her dashing groom in his fancy new wedding clothes,
with boots to match and her white Stetson, of course. As a rule, Cole made an effort to never be conceited or egotistical, but so many people had made a point of telling her how handsome she was of late, that she couldn't help getting a little bit of a swelled head.

Somehow, Friday night came around both slower and faster than she'd anticipated. That made no sense, but Waverly had agreed to marry her, after all, even seemed eager to do it, so maybe nothing was quite as impossible as it seemed these days. Cole knew she had to be at the station by 6:30 in the morning to catch her train, so she decided to spend the night at Flossie's. To her disappointment, Polly was nowhere to be found, so the nervous groom-to-be had a solitary steak and a couple of beers to chase it with, then turned in early.

She spent most of the night tossing from pillow to post, too anxious to get any real sleep. Cole had never cared much for situations where she had no control over potential events and this being such a significant turning point in her life, coupled with her concern for Waverly, after how Nicole's journey had ended, the outcome being completely under the control of the Union Pacific timetable left the redhead feeling like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

As it turned out, the trip from Silver Bow to Green River was uneventful in the extreme. There were few other people in the car to speak of, not one that looked like anyone to strike up a conversation with and she was far too distracted for reading. A few miles before the train crossed the Wyoming border, exhaustion got the best of her and she nodded off, only waking when the conductor came down the aisle calling out the next stop.

“Green River Station coming up. Please get your belongings together and make sure all members of your party are awake. Green River Station next. ALL OUT FOR GREEN RIVER STATION!”

Cole checked her uncle's pocket watch. It was 5:30 Tuesday morning. She saw to her luggage and disembarked, headed for the ticket window.

“Good morning, sir. Any word on the transcontinental from back east?”

“Runnin' behind. Got held up by a cattle drive outside Laramie.”

“Any idea what time they'll be arriving?”

“What's the rush, you got a lady on board or something?”

“As a matter of fact I do. My betrothed.”

“Shouldn't be any later than two. Saloon's back that way if you want to enjoy the last of your freedom.”

“Thanks.”

Cole remembered how Eliza and Frank had gone on and on about the Cathead biscuits at Green River, so she took a slow stroll over to the feeding station for some coffee and breakfast. Once she saw the state of the place, hygiene obviously was not high on the list of the proprietor's concerns, she drank her coffee fast, took the biscuits to go and wandered back to the depot. Staking out a shaded bench just at the edge of the canopy, she spent the better part of the day reading and anticipating her first glimpse of Waverly.

Along about four in the afternoon, she felt the boards under her feet start to vibrate as the train came rumbling down the rails, a familiar whistle sounding off in the distance. There it was, the mighty Union Pacific Flyer, steaming down the track, brakes squealing like an army of angry piglets and carrying her future inside its iron belly.
Cole nervously observed as the porters unloaded the luggage and a slow stream of passengers began to trickle out of the train. About a dozen people had stepped out onto the platform, not a single one of them anywhere close to matching her bride-to-be's description. The anxious redhead stood under the awning, turning her Stetson 'round and 'round in her hands. Five or ten minutes passed without the train disgorging another traveler. Just when she was certain that Waverly had either missed the train or fallen victim to foul play, a petite young woman in a large feathered hat appeared. Coming down the steps, she paused on the lowest one to lift her veil.

Cole's heart started to hammer in her chest and every drop of moisture in her mouth disappeared, as the loveliest woman she had ever seen, turned and locked eyes with her.

No.

That couldn't be Waverly.

She didn't have that kind of luck.

Still, regardless of the besotted young swain's history with luck, the angelic beauty smiled, stepped onto the platform and headed straight for her. Brushing the dust from her dress and removing her gloves and her hat, to reveal a lustrous head of wavy hair the color of toasted wheat, the vision dipped her chin shyly, lifting her eyes to look up into a face located significantly higher off the ground than her own.

"Cole?"

"Yes?" Cole squeaked out like a young man whose voice was just changing. With a blush she cleared her throat, being careful to lower her voice, she replied with a smile, "If you aren't Waverly, I shall be most disappointed," then reached out to shake her future wife's hand.

"Let's not have any of that silliness Mr. Haught, we know one another better than that," she took the hand and pulled him into a hug.

The redhead knew that Waverly could tell exactly how much her heart was pounding, since the girl was so much shorter, that her head rested right against it. Cole thanked all the gods she could think of, that she'd taken care to make her binder extra tight that morning. It was quite uncomfortable, but if the young woman had lain her cheek against her chest only to feel a soft breast, it could have been a disaster. The ersatz male released a heavy sigh, coming to the realization that her days of wearing the binder, only when Dolls was at the homestead, were now a thing of the past.

"Oh my, you are a big one, aren't you?" Waverly stepped back, a teasing glint in her beautiful hazel eyes.

Cole blushed bright pink, hoping that the sunburn she'd gotten sitting out all day, covered it.

"As advertised, Ma'am."

"Ma'am? Really Cole? My name is Waverly in case you've forgotten. Don't you go getting all shy on me now."

"Sorry...Waverly."

"That's more like it."

"Well, there's no train until morning but I can see to the luggage and tickets. Here, let's get you out of this sun," Cole led her to a bench in the shade.
“So gallant.”

“Now there's two ways we can go, first is the Northwest line, it goes through Idaho and into Montana. Then there's getting back on the Union Pacific which will take us to Ogden, Utah before it turns north into Idaho and points beyond.”

“What's the difference?”

“Well, the Northwestern is a shorter trip home, but Utah has the mesas and cliffs and the Uintah Reservation, so there's a chance we could see some Indians.”

Waverly fairly bounced with excitement, “Oh, Utah please!”

“Well, that settles that,” Cole grinned.

“I'll be right here waiting when you're finished with your business, Friend Haught,” the petite beauty leaned back and closed her eyes.

The redhead slowly walked to the window, shaking her head, in disbelief, that she'd be spending every day from here on out with such a breathtaking creature at her side.

The young woman opened her eyes at the sound of two suitcases being dropped at her feet.

“All set. What would you like to do now?”

“I'd love to wash this dust off me and get something to eat, I'm starving.”

“A bath and a meal it is, then. I've already taken the liberty of procuring two rooms. We can go to the hotel now, if you're of a mind to, my friend.”

“Lead on, Macduff.”

“So, it's gonna be like that, is it?”

“As advertised, my good man. Would you expect anything less?”

Cole just grinned and shook her head.

The hotel wasn't as fancily appointed as Flossie's, but then again, it wasn't a bordello. The pair said their goodbyes and went to their respective rooms to freshen up. An hour later, the redhead was seated in the dining room, where they'd agreed to meet, slowly nursing a beer and waiting on her fiancee. She started to form a thought about women always being late, then remembered that she was a woman too. Deciding it must be the complicated clothes that made the difference, she made a mental note to stop spending so much time around Dolls.

For the second time that day, Cole's breath quite deserted her, as Waverly appeared at the top of the staircase. Her hair was up in a loose chignon, the stray hairs around her head lit up like a halo by the light of the oil lamps and she was wearing a pale pink satin dress with decolletage on display that put Polly's to shame.

“Yeah, Nicole,” she muttered to herself, “Just friends, lets see how long you can pull that one off.”

The taller girl stood as Waverly arrived tableside, pulling out her chair for her.

“Thank you, my friend. Such a gentleman.” she smiled up at him.
“You look lovely tonight, Waverly.”

“You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

Cole took a moment to consider whether or not a person could die from blushing too often.

“Mr. Dolls was right about you.”

“About my having no way with women?” she teased.

“No! About you being pretty enough to be a girl.” Cue blush. “Awww, you are so cute when you blush.”

“Waverly!”

“It's just the truth. Thankfully, you're not quite as pretty as I am, almost, but not quite. Good thing too, I'd hate to have to take the train back east so soon after arriving.”

Before Cole had a chance to react to the teasing, the waiter arrived at the table.

“Can I get you something to drink, Madam?” he asked snootily, “A cider perhaps.”

“I suppose it's not late enough for a bourbon. I think I'll have a beer.”

“We have a lovely sherry.”

“Beer will be fine, thank you.”

“Very good, Madam and another for your husband?”

“Oh, he's not my husband. I guess I ought to do something about that before some other girl snaps him up. Although, I heard on the train that there are six men for every woman out here. Is that true?”

“Yes, that sounds about right, Madam.”

“Do you think I ought to explore other options?”

The waiter took a long appraising look at Cole, “I don't know about that, Madam. He is awful pretty, for a fella.”

“I guess I'd better marry him then,” she winked at Cole.

The waiter walked away and the redhead shook a finger at her companion, “You shouldn't tease him like that, it's not nice.” Waverly grinned, as Pop Gardner would say, like a briar eatin' jackass. “I can see my future now, my hair will be streaked with white by the time I'm thirty, living with a hellcat like you.”

“All part of my nefarious plan, my dear Mr. Haught.”

It was a great relief that their special connection didn't just exist on paper.

“We can get married any time you like, you know. I got the marriage license this morning.”

“I'm game if you are, big man.”

“Oh, I'm game alright. If there really are six men to every woman in these parts we'd better get to
it. You are without a doubt the most beautiful woman I've seen since I came out west. If I don't make you my wife and quick, there will be men lined up to court you from here to Cheyenne.”

“Then I guess we'd better get married in the morning. Besides, I wouldn't want to scandalize the locals by traveling with a man who isn't my husband.”

'And what about a husband who's not a man?” the redhead thought to herself, but she didn't have long to ponder, as the waiter returned, carrying two glasses of beer.

“Would you care to order dinner?”

“Yes. We'll have two steaks please,” Cole ordered, “And could you tell me where a man can get married around here?”

“T’ve seen some fast workers in my time, Mister,” the waiter blanched, “But you must be the quickest gun in the west.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Waverly's POV and the wedding!

Sorry to post so late, this is a long one!

in the interest of clarity, a word about pronouns...if we are in Cole's POV female pronouns are used, since Cole is not transgender, but more like a butch living in a time that wouldn't allow her to live that way

If it is Waverly's POV or anyone else who thinks Cole is a man, the pronouns will be male. I hope it's not too confusing

Once again, Cole had been right. At first, the sight of foreign landscape after landscape, all of which outstretched her childhood imaginings, had left Waverly utterly bedazzled. Never, in her twenty odd years lived on the side of a mountain, had she dreamt that anything could be so flat as the plains of Nebraska. The earth and sky, running on, in uninterrupted straight lines, as far as the eye could see. Now, two days into the unbroken sameness of the prairie, the only thing she could think of was that she was not yet in the one place where she truly wished to be, by Cole's side.

As impossible as it seemed, Waverly could not deny that she had indeed, fallen a little bit in love with the shy ginger, gender notwithstanding. In truth, it was the one and only reservation she had about going through with the marriage. Having never been attracted to so much as a single boy in all her days, she was fairly confident that once she was confronted with the actual maleness of him, in the flesh, this confusion of feelings would dissipate like so much prairie dust. The trouble was, what if it didn't?

What sort of torture would she be doomed to endure, if her heart fell hard for the charming Mr. Haught, but the rest of her body neglected to come along for the ride? Everything would be ruined. The one thing she could not bear was the thought of breaking that sweet boy's heart. A boy of twenty-five? Such a queer idea, but nonetheless that was how she thought of him, he was far too shy and innocent to be anything so coarse as a man.

What would she do if Cole fell in love with her and she could not reciprocate, what then? Surely, he would come to hate her in time. The thought of it drew her to the very edge of nausea. If that or any other untenable situation should arise, would it hurt him more if she stayed or left? She needed answers now, before her heart and mind became further clouded by affection for her friend and the natural sense of excitement that accompanied weddings and new adventures.

It is at times like these, that we tend to fall back on the teachings of childhood and so, despite her aversion to religion, Waverly found herself uttering a most peculiar and undoubtedly unique prayer.

“Dear Lord, Cole is so wonderful. Please don't let me fall in love with him. Please don't let him fall in love with me. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

The poor girl had been so wrapped up in her own troubles, that she hadn't noticed when the
landscape had begun to change, but only that it was different. Now when she looked out her window she saw that the verdant grassy plains of Nebraska had begun to give way to dull brown earth, dotted here and there with the occasional tumbleweed, now and then the ground rolling with the gentle swell of small hills. That could only mean one thing. They were drawing near to Wyoming Territory.

Knowing that she and Cole would soon be within the same borders, raised her spirits immeasurably, not to mention her water intake. She forced herself to eat as well, even though her stomach was full to bursting with butterflies. So far, every bit of Friend Haught's advice had proven true. Waverly had even had to jab one particularly horrid man with her hatpin. So, it stood to follow that she ought to take his precautions against Altitude Sickness seriously, as well. After all, no woman wants her betrothed to lay eyes on her for the first time when she has just been ill for two days. Under such circumstances, she had no doubt Cole would prove to be the prettier of the pair of them.

Waverly could just hear her Aunt Gus now, “Stop being so muttonheaded, girl! Vanity is not a virtue! You are a Gibson, a woman of substance, not some piece of fluff with goose feathers for brains!”

God, she missed that thorny old woman. Like nearly everything else Gus said, she recognized the imagined admonition for what it was, the unvarnished truth. Deep in her heart, she knew that even if Cole looked like a cross-eyed mule with mange, so long as he possessed that same sweet soul, which she had come to know in his letters, she couldn't help but cherish him. In one way or another, it seemed she was fated to love the man. Waverly smiled contentedly, looking very much like an angel in a renaissance painting and crunched into a juicy red apple, her worrying done for the day.

For the first time since she'd been on the train, the young bride-to-be slept through the night, waking just before sunrise. In the blue hour, the distant foothills of the Rocky Mountains appeared purple, reminding her so much of Appalachia, that she shed a homesick tear or two. As the sun commenced climbing its ladder to the sky, the plain brown dirt shimmered like purest gold, the beauty of it filling her with awe. It was now officially Tuesday morning, a very special day indeed. For today, Mr. Haught would cease to be a ghost, whose shape was comprised entirely of fleeting thought and words on paper. He would at last have form and mass, and be a creature of flesh and bone. One who might actually be seen and touched.

As the train passed over the border into Wyoming Territory, Waverly could just glimpse the foothills in the distance, but as of yet caught no sight of the fabled Rockies themselves. Frankly, on that particular morning, a morning full of nothing but dreams of tomorrows and the endless possibilities of her brand new life, Waverly didn't give a fig about any bloody mountains. She could feel her troubled history receding into the past. She had, quite literally, left all of that behind her. Her sights set solely on the new frontier, both that mysterious brown expanse on the other side of the small, grimy window and the undiscovered country inside herself.

Just past Cheyenne, the train came to an unscheduled stop.

Mysterious shouts of “Cattle! We got cattle!” could be heard from the front of the train.

More than an hour later they were still sitting in the same spot. With no end to the cattle drive in sight, Waverly decided to put her time to some good use.

Aunt Gus,
Well...early this morning we crossed the border into the Wyoming Territory. I was so delighted at the time, now I am just frustrated. We are currently stopped just outside of Cheyenne and have been for quite some time, when we should be past Laramie and well into the Rocky Mountains by now. I am sure Cole is already waiting at the station in Green River. If it were any other man, I should be worried that he might give me up as a lost cause and head for home, but not my Cole. Mr. Haught is a gentleman, whose only care has been for my comfort and safety, since all of this began and he is nothing if not a man of his word.

Lucky me! We have had the great misfortune of encountering a cattle drive! While I was excited at first to see real cowboys and the great Texas longhorn cattle, such enormous beasts they are, it has been well over an hour and still there is nothing but steak on the hoof, for as far as the eye can see in every direction. I was aware that Wyoming was experiencing a cattle boom, but some of us are supposed to be getting married!

It is getting so hot and stuffy in this damnable car! We cannot open the windows, for the cattle are raising such a great cloud of coarse dust that it is pelting the train like hail stones, anyone could be forgiven for thinking there was a cyclone in the neighborhood. Still, I must say, I prefer the stuffiness of the train to the stench of Cheyenne. I have never smelled anything so foul in my life. The only smell I could imagine to rival it would be Hell's Outhouse.

If you will, imagine every stereotypical western railroad town you have read about in pulp novels and penny tabloids, then take it and multiply that foulness by ten. The streets are all mud, ruts, horse excrement and the leavings of chamberpots being emptied out windows. There are huge piles of rubbish everywhere and when they slaughter animals, the just toss the offal into the street. The air is rife with the sounds of profanity, gunfire and bar room brawls. Nearly entirely populated with cowboys, gamblers and desperadoes, everywhere you look there's debauchery, of every sort you could imagine and a few you couldn't. The whole place has the very air of just passing through hanging upon it like a fog.

The surrounding plains are entirely lacking in verdure, the scanty patches of long grass long since burnt and withered by the strong sun. The sky is grey, the earth buff and the winds scour the landscape with great arid clouds of dust and cover the town and everything passing through it in a layer of grime. The single tree in the settlement is no larger than a lilac bush and must be wrapped in wet towels in order to prevent its destruction by the elements. The town itself is an amalgam of shoddily constructed, haphazardly placed buildings which look like they were designed and laid out by an insane toddler. Truly this is a God forsaken and God forgotten place. I cannot wait until we leave it behind us and I am once more on a journey to the rest of my life.

The closer I get to Cole, the more I am consumed with nervous excitement and anticipation, the more I am confident that I have made the correct decision. I truly cannot wait to marry the man. Who ever thought those words would ever come from me? For that matter, who would ever have imagined both of the poor, poor Gibson girls happily married?

Thank you so much for all you have done for me, Aunt Gus, including keeping hold of my nest egg until such time as I may need it. I love you and miss you so much already.

Your loving Waverly

P.S. - Please pass this on to Wynonna once you have finished reading it.

Not long after the train resumed moving, it stopped again. Thirty odd miles after they'd cleared the cattle drive, the flyer reached Sherman Summit and the engineer took a good long break, so that
the travelers might get out and have a good long look at the view from Dale Creek Bridge. The vista was indeed breathtaking and Waverly could not wait until they had drawn closer and she could see more detail of the white capped mountains than just their shape on the horizon.

Growing ever more anxious that Cole would be horribly worried about her welfare, Waverly inquired of the conductor the next time he made his rounds. By his estimation, they ought to be arriving in Green River some time between three and four o'clock. The nervous young bride managed to wheedle a promise out of him that he would wake her an hour before they reached their destination, then closed her pretty hazel eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep. That would give her an hour or so to clean herself up, fix her hair and change into a clean dress. She didn't want to meet her intended looking like a bedraggled ragamuffin.

Waverly stayed in her seat until all of the other passengers had disembarked from the first class coach. She slowly pulled on her gloves, being very fussy about getting all the fingers the same, then set and positioned her bonnet upon her head, leisurely making sure the feathers and veil were just so. In part to be sure that she looked every bit the respectable lady but also because she needed the extra five minutes to collect herself.

She sighed deeply as she slowly made her way down the three steps, pausing on the last to lift her veil and get a good look around. Squinting into the afternoon sun, she took in her surroundings. To the north, she spotted a stout straight-sided mesa in the distance, that had to be Castle Rock. Turning her head west, a flash of flame red hair caught her attention. She locked eyes with the gentleman standing under that shock of ginger and smiled with genuine joy.

Stepping onto the platform, she strode slowly toward him, removing her hat and gloves along the way. Drawing nearer to her objective, she at last got close enough to get a good look at him. Mr. Haught was exactly as he had described, tall and broad-shouldered with very red hair and quite handsome indeed.

“Oh my, not a single whisker in sight. I may be the younger one, but everyone is going to think I've robbed the cradle,” she mumbled under her breath.

'Just look at the poor boy, hat in hand, eyes averted, he looks like he's outside the headmaster's office, waiting for a hiding. I suppose I'd better put him out of his misery.'

She lowered her head in a similar fashion, so as not to intimidate him, looking up at him from under her eyelashes.

“Cole?”

“Yes?” he squeaked. Oh God, is his voice still changing? Did he lie about his age?"

Her shy friend cleared his throat before speaking again. Much better. That's my Mr. Haught alright. Always the charmer. A handshake?!? I don't think so!

As Waverly at last stood in Cole's arms, her head against his firm, muscular chest, she could hear his heart beating so rapidly it sounded almost like a drum roll. Despite having sat in the sun most of the day waiting for her train to arrive, he had a clean woody scent about him, not at all like the usual stink of musky, sweaty men. This can be no ordinary man. Perhaps he is some ancient trickster spirit, looking for a young virgin bride. Mythology is full of such things.

She giggled and pulled back from his embrace.

“Oh my, you are a big one, aren't you?”
He blushed to his roots, did he think she had meant something inappropriate?

“As advertised, Ma'am.”

Well, that was certainly true. Cole was in all things, just like his letters, kind, considerate, old-fashioned and definitely not bad to look at, not bad at all.

Mr. Haught went to see to the luggage and tickets for the remainder of their journey, but not before making certain she was comfortably ensconced in a shady place and not before asking which route she thought they ought to take home. Given her opinion on the matter, he bowed to her wishes immediately. So gallant. Lucky girl, you didn't find many men like Cole these days.

Waverly opened her eyes at the sound of two valises hitting the rickety planks of the platform. There he stood in front of her, tall enough to climb and once again asking what she wanted rather than telling her what they were going to do. He'd even been thoughtful enough to book a hotel ahead of her arrival, anticipating her needs. Two rooms. No presumptions. Only caring for her comfort. Do you hear that, Mama? I found myself a decent, gentle man too. Oh...and he's a lumberjack.

After lounging in a decadent hot bath, putting on a clean dress and fixing up her hair into some more alluring fashion, she met Cole in the dining room. He looked even more handsome in a fresh set of clothes, with all the railyard dust cleaned off of him. He truly was more pretty than handsome, which to Waverly's way of thinking was just about the best of both worlds. If she couldn't quite work up enthusiasm for him as a man, it wouldn't take much pretending to trick herself into thinking she was with a girl.

The delightful banter over dinner, cemented Waverly's previous inkling that the spark between them was just the same in person, as it had been on paper. She had a great deal of fun teasing both Cole and the waiter, after he implied that a lady should not partake of spirits. Over a delicious steak dinner, the pair came to the mutual decision that they both had no desire to wait on getting married. The westbound train was due in just after 12 noon and they would need to rise mighty early in order to get the wedding over with and be ready to board the train on time.

So, the rather impatient bride and groom repaired to their respective rooms early, in order to prepare themselves for the morning and try and get a good night's sleep. Before turning in, Waverly plaited her hair into a long loose fishtail, so that she would have deep waves cascading down her back in the morning. Shaking out her Aunt's white satin and lace dress, she hung it by the heater in hopes that gravity and humidity would take the wrinkles out. Now, more than ever, she was wishing she'd just had the bourbon. It certainly would have helped her sleep.

In the next room, Cole was doing much the same. Hanging her wedding clothes, shining her boots and giving her Stetson a good brushing. She was so relieved that Waverly hadn't so much paused for a second, even in close quarters, to question the veracity of her gender. Perhaps this could work after all. She checked one last time to make sure the rings were safely in the pocket of her waistcoat and the gold nugget stickpin Pop Gardner had loaned her was securely in the cravat. Passing by the mirror on her way to bed, Cole shot herself a wink, doffed an imaginary hat and grinned as big as could be. Yes indeed, she was one happy fella.

At the stroke of 7:00 Cole headed for the courthouse. Waverly would follow a few minutes later so that they didn't see one another in their wedding clothes before the ceremony.

The old man who was the Justice of the Peace had tried to make his office look a little more festive for the occasion. He'd hung a white bed sheet in the corner and suspended a few anemic clusters of wild flowers from it. At Cole's request, the old man's wife and daughter, who would also serve as
witnesses, had gone out that morning and gathered wildflowers for Waverly's bridal bouquet. He could only imagine the paltry decorations had been leftovers. She told the justice of the special touches she would like added to the ceremony. The assembled party having a great laugh, when she told them that her betrothed had requested that the word obey be stricken from the vows.

Waverly arrived at the courthouse, to be greeted by the Justice of the Peace's daughter, who led her to a small anteroom where she could brush the dust from her skirts and prepare herself otherwise. Five minutes later, the girl's mother came knocking at the door.

“They're ready any time you are, hon.” She handed her a beautifully arranged bouquet of wildflowers.

“Oh, how lovely.”

“My girl and I gathered 'em this mornin' but they was all Mr. Haught's idea. Seems to me you got you one o' the good 'uns.”

“Thank you. I think you may just be right about that.”

“I'll start playing the music, then you just come out whenever yer ready, OK?”

“Thank you. I will.”

Waverly stood in the hallway, taking deep breaths to try and calm herself. Her hands were shaking like mad, not with nerves, but anticipation. Soon she heard a slow rendition of Abide With Me oozing out of a wheezy old pump-organ, obviously played by someone whose feet had seen better days. She opened the door to see Cole standing in a very similar doorway on the other side of the room. She gasped at the sight of him.

When she'd teased about him cleaning up nice, the night before at dinner, she'd had no idea. Dressed in grey flannel pants with a crease so sharp you could cut yourself, a starched linen shirt, black brocade waistcoat with a gold watch and chain, and a green cravat with a gold nugget stud in the middle, there was a high shine on his boots and his big hat just as white as fresh milk, he cut quite a striking figure. Suddenly the young bride wasn't quite so certain that she was the pretty one, after all.

Seeing Waverly standing in the doorway, Cole rubbed at his eyes, just to be sure he wasn't seeing a mirage. She was wearing a white satin and lace gown, of the sort that ladies had worn to parties about twenty years back, which were just now coming into fashion for weddings. Her long hair was held back by a crown of pink rosebuds, wavy tendrils cascading down her back and shoulders and she had a black velvet choker around her graceful neck, with a small gold locket in the middle. When she paused for a moment, in a shaft of sunlight, as she walked slowly toward him, Cole could have sworn she was gazing upon an honest to God angel.

They stood side by side in front of the wrinkled white sheet, the Justice of the Peace between them and it, both anxious to take that final step. The old man cleared his throat.

“Would you please face one another and join hands?”

Cole's hands were so much bigger than hers, that Waverly's hands fairly disappeared when enveloped by them. It made her feel safe and cared for, it was wonderful.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and the presence of this company, to join together Mr. Cole Haught and Miss Waverly Earp in the state of holy matrimony. It is not a state to be entered into lightly or with false intention, for it is the most sacred of bonds.”
If you'd been listening very carefully at this juncture, you would have heard two audible gulps coming from the general direction of that particular corner of the room.

“But first, Mr. Haught has a few words he would like to say to his intended.” with a sweep of a hand and a smile at Cole he indicated it was the young man's turn.

“Waverly,” Cole lightly squeezed her hand, looking into her eyes, as an indication that despite the others in the room, this was expressly for her alone. “A while back, you asked me which of the sonnets was my favorite and as you no doubt recall, I evaded the question. That is because I was waiting for just the right moment to share it with you and I can think of no moment more appropriate than this one.”

Tears welled up in the bride's beautiful hazel eyes, as before he began to speak again, Cole reached out his hand and ran the backs of his fingers very gently down her cheek, a gesture of such tenderness, that it conveyed, with no words at all, exactly how he felt about her.

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken.
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.”

As Cole stood reciting Master Shakespeare's 116th sonnet, Waverly felt like she was falling into his eyes, their lives laid out before her like the Illustrated Newspaper. She could swear she saw the faces of their future children and that was what pulled her up short. She had never even considered having children, not once and she sure as hellfire had never considered doing what one must to get them. Cole must have sensed something was amiss, for her squeezed her hands gently and mouthed ‘are you ok?’ In that moment, she knew everything would be fine.

“Cole Haught, do you take this woman, Waverly Earp to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love and to cherish, to honor and protect, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, keeping only unto her for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” there was no break in Cole's voice this time, it was loud, strong and very clear.

“Do you Waverly Earp take this man Cole Haught to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and to cherish, to honor and protect, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, keeping only unto him for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” the witnesses weren't the only ones with tears running down their cheeks.
“Now for the rings. Oh, isn't that pretty?” the justice exclaimed as he picked up Waverly's ring, a fine gold band with seed pearls all around its circumference, handing it to the groom.

“Cole, would you please place the ring on Waverly's left hand and repeat after me. As a sign of my love...”

“As a sign of my love.”

“That I have chosen you.”

“That I have chosen you.”

“Above all others.”

“Above all others.”

“With this ring, I thee wed.”

“With this ring, I thee wed.”

Cole slipped the ring onto her finger, it was a perfect fit. Not unlike the pair of them.

“Waverly, now it's your turn.”

The young bride repeated the Justices litany of lines, then slipped the plain gold band onto her husband's finger.

“Can't say I see many men willing to wear a ring,” the old man teased.

“I wanted everyone to know who I belong to,” Cole replied quite earnestly.

“Now by the power invested in me, by the great government of this country and the Territorial Authority of Wyoming, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Cole hesitated, not knowing whether or not it was okay, things being as they were. She was more than a little surprised when Waverly stood on tiptoe and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. It had an effect not unlike a shot of moonshine.

“Congratulations, you two. Good luck to you.”

Cole pulled her uncle's watch from her waistcoat pocket, “It's 10:00 o'clock my dear. If we're going to get out of these things and make the train by noon we'd better get back to the hotel.”

The Justice shot him a salacious wink.

Cole blushed crimson, “Oh...oh! I didn't mean...um...thank you Mr. Justice Sir,” she tipped her hat, “We really must be be going. Ladies, thank you.”

By 11:30 they'd packed their fancy things, changed into traveling clothes and were sitting on that same bench outside the depot, sipping tea and munching on Cathead biscuits, as they waited for the train that would carry them home. Home.

Cole turned to his new bride, “Happy, Waves?”

“What did you call me?”
“I’m sorry...Waverly. I haven't had a lot of sleep these past few nights.”

“No, it’s fine. You can call me Waves. I like it.”

“Well then...are you happy Waves?”

“Happier than I ever thought I could be.”

“Good.”

Cole smiled the sort of smile you only saw on a man who knew she was getting her job done.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Our newlyweds have some lovely newlywed signature WayHaught banter as they ride the train.

A short fluffy one, as that's all I could manage with neither the weather or my hands cooperating (there was actual frost on the grass yesterday morning) and I felt terrible making you all wait so long. Enjoy.

“Look out your window, Mrs. Haught,” Cole instructed, as she leaned in close to her new bride. “There...to the southwest, that rock formation over there is called Man's Face. Do you see it?”

“Indeed, I do. It looks like he's lying on his back. Tell me, Mr. Haught, do you plan to be my tour guide for the entirety of the trip?”

“Absolutely not, Mrs. Haught,” she blushed, “As I was ill for this entire portion of my journey west and possess no knowledge of the landscape, whatsoever.”


“I only know Castle Rock and Man's Face because they are visible from Green River Station and I spent most of yesterday with nothing else to look at but track, trees and a stray yellow dog, who came by now and again.”

“I'm sorry my train was so late. You're still looking a little pink,” she ran the tip of her finger along the top of the redhead's sun-burnt ear, causing all the hairs on the back of his neck to stand at attention and a shiver to run through his body.

“Don't be silly, Waves. You have nothing to apologize for, the delay was none of your doing. Unless of course, you disembarked from the train and deliberately enticed the cattle onto the tracks, in a thwarted attempt to get out of marrying me.”

“Oh no, you've found me out!” the young bride held the back of her hand to her forehead in a stage swoon, then gave her freshly minted husband a playful slap on the arm, giggling like a schoolgirl.

“Well, Mrs. Haught, one prediction I made about this partnership certainly bears up under scrutiny.”

“And what might that be, Mr. Haught?”

“I said we'd laugh a lot and just look at us.”

“Oh, my dear, tell me something I don't know.”

“I got you a couple of wedding presents.”

“That was a rhetorical response, darling, but thank you. That was very sweet of you. Although, this beautiful ring and your company would have been quite enough. Incidentally, I brought something
for you as well.”

“Your gifts are at the homestead, so I'm afraid you'll have to be patient. You really didn't have to get me anything, you know, but I'm glad you like the ring.”

“I know a gift for the groom is hardly traditional, he usually gets his wife and her dowry and that's about it, but I saw it and just had to get it for you. I'm sure you'll understand what I mean when you see it.”

“In that case, I thank you sincerely and can't wait to see it.”

“I hope you don't mind too much.”

“Of course I do, dear...don't you know all men hate receiving gifts from beautiful women. Why would I mind?”

“I meant about the dowry, silly boy.”

“Oh, Waves...of course I don't mind. Even if you had a dowry I doubt I would claim it. You, my dear are a good deal more than any mortal man could be expected to manage, let alone accounts and finances. You are a bounty far above any I ever dared hope for, all by yourself.”

“I just want you to know, that I do not come to you entirely without assets. I do, in fact, have a sizable nest egg. A bequest from my aunt, as well as some cash I managed to squirrel away on my own over the years.”

“We can set up a bank account for you when we get home, if you like.”

“Home. I like the sound of that,” Waverly smiled, “But must you be so backward, Friend Haught? The money is ours now not mine, as is everything else I bring to the marriage and vice versa, by rights.”

“Absolutely, my dear, I feel the same way. I just didn't want to presume that you did. So, we will set up a household account when we are settled in and ready.”

“Oh, did you think I'd brought the money with me?”

“That would be the logical conclusion. Now that we are married, I rather assumed you would be staying or was it fear of train robbers that made you leave it behind?”

“As it happens, Mr. Haught, there is a method to my madness.”

“Do enlighten me, my dear. I am on tenterhooks.”

“You see, my sister and her husband happen to own a very large mercantile.”

“I was not aware. Have you decided you'd like to share your history after all?”

“Only generalities and things of no particular impact, if you don't mind. As I was saying, I left the money in the hands of my favorite aunt. If we should need anything that cannot be procured locally, all I need do is let Auntie know and she will relay the order to my sister, whom she will pay from our account, at cost, thank you very much. Then it will be sent to your Mr. Gardner's establishment by rail. Which will be faster, simpler and less costly than Wells Fargo.”

“I really did manage to find myself a woman of substance, didn't I? You are quite the catch, Mrs. Haught.”
“You’re not so bad yourself, Mr. Haught.”

Cole winked at her new bride, trying to express sincere appreciation of their rapport, without conveying just how utterly besotted with Waverly she was already.

“Tell me, Cole...does it seem odd to you?”

“What’s that, Waves?”

“Communicating without your Mr. Dolls between us.”

The redhead laughed, “I am certain he is as glad to be out of it, as we are to be shed of him.”

“Oh, thank God! I did feel guilty putting him out of a job like that. I don’t imagine there’s much work for scribes these days,” she teased.

“Don’t you worry about Dolls, I keep him plenty busy.”

“Incidentally, how are your fingers?”

Cole flexed them awkwardly, “Not quite as good as new, they’re a mite stiff, yet. As is the way of such things, I’m sure they’ll be fine in time.”

“Oh good, I can’t imagine how maddening it must be not to be able to do something as simple as writing.”

“Oh, I can write. It’s just completely illegible, even to myself. To look at my handwriting these days, you’d think I was a doctor.”

Waverly laughed and gazed wistfully out the window, “When are we going to get close enough to get a good look at these storied Rocky Mountains of yours?”

“I suspect another twenty miles or so before we’re out of these foothills. A connoisseur of mountains are we?”

“You know I’m a mountain girl, Cole.”

“I know, sweetie. Just teasing.”

“It’s just that since I made the decision to come west, everyone has been telling me how enormous these Rockies are, but these foothills are no bigger than what we had back home. Frankly, I will believe it when I see it.”

“Just you wait, Mrs. Haught. We’ll make a believer out of you yet.”

“If you say so...”

“Without a doubt! Did I mention that once we turn north, there will be more mountains than even you can imagine? I dare say, by the time we reach home, you will be quite sick of the sight of them. Just you wait until we get to those steep switchbacks and towering trestles in Montana. Why, some of the track even runs across the mountain tops themselves.”

“Whatsoever you say, Mr. Haught, but everyone knows that when it comes to size, men are given to wild exaggeration,” she winked at the blushing boy.

“You are a wicked woman, Waverly Haught.”
Waverly Haught. I like the sound of that. It's the first time I've heard it all together.”

“I'm quite enamored of it myself, but you are evading the subject, my dear.”

“I know, but I just can't help myself. You are so adorable when you blush.”

Cole shook her head in a mixture of happiness and resignation and rolled her eyes.

“Well then, if it's such a long while until we get there, I guess I might as well relax a bit,” the young bride said as she stretched and reclined some on the settee, leaning slightly into her husband.

“I must say, these first class accommodations are a good deal more comfortable than the way I traveled west.”

“Thank you for being so thoughtful to me, Cole. You really didn't have to, you know.”

“Nonsense, Waves. Before you say it...yes, I know you are a tough mountain girl, who does not require such pampering and not some hot house flower from the upper classes, but what kind of cad would I be if I didn't make your journey to our home as pleasant as possible?”

“Just the worst kind, I hope you didn't spend too much.”

“Some things are more than worth the price, my dear,” Cole took her wife's hand in her own and laid a small, delicate kiss on her knuckles, “Anyway, I do alright for myself. Demand for good lumber is high in the territory these days and our parcel is about sixty percent woodland. My uncle hated the sight of unbroken prairie. He said all that uninterrupted sky made him feel like something was pressing down on him.”

Receiving no reply from her normally loquacious companion, Cole turned toward her wife to find her fast asleep, her head on her husband's shoulder.

Waverly was nothing short of breathtaking in repose. With nary an inkling of care marring her alabaster brow, she was positively angelic. For now, the redhead would let the poor girl rest. Transcontinental travel could be quite grueling and she didn't imagine her wife had gotten any more sleep the night before than she had herself. When the truly spectacular sights were drawing near, Cole would wake her. That is, if she could tear her eyes away from Waverly's beauty long enough to notice the landscape.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Mr. and Mrs. Haught ridin' the rails.

The starry-eyed groom was so consumed with the experience of being able to observe her new wife without restriction, that the thought of having to wake her made the redhead a little sad. Still, from the moment she had first set eyes on Waverly, she had resolved to devote the rest of her life to making the petite beauty as happy as was within her power and a promise was a promise.

Cole ran the tip of a finger lightly over the back of the slumbering girl's hand, whispering in her ear.

"Waverly. Waverly? Waaaa-ver-lyyy..." When that produced no reaction, she gently shook her by the shoulder, "Waves...wake up, honey."

Presently, the brunette opened her eyes, casting them about nervously, in an apparent moment of panic. Her husband immediately took her by the hand, in an effort to soothe her.

"Waves, it's okay. It's me, Cole," he spoke softly, "We're on the train, remember? Everything is fine."

"Cole?" she asked in a small voice.

"I'm right here, Mrs. Haught."

Waverly smiled blissfully then, seeming to come back to herself from somewhere far away."

"Oh! I thought I was...how long was I asleep?"

"No more than an hour, I'd venture. Not to worry, my dear. There was absolutely no snoring and only the tiniest bit of drool," the redhead teased.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Now really, Mrs. Haught...would I let that happen? Look out your window."

"Oh!" The horizon was absolutely studded with jagged, snow covered peaks.

"First impression?"

"Fine. I admit it. Your Rocky Mountains are quite breathtaking, but I reserve further judgment until we are closer."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you are strangely perceptive for a man?"

"And you, my friend are unquestionably an untamed mustang of a woman."
“Thank you. So, where are we?”

“About half way to Evanston I suspect, maybe a little less.”

“Could you translate that for those of us who haven't memorized all the stations on the Union Pacific line?”

“Barring catastrophe, we should be venturing into the Utah Territory later this afternoon.”

“I cannot wait,” she bounced excitedly in her seat for a moment, “Listen, Cole...would you mind if I dashed off a quick letter to my sister? If you'd rather I didn't, it can wait. You've had to endure an hour with no one to speak with already, I wouldn't want to be rude.”

“Don't be silly, Waves. We have the rest of our lives for conversation. You go ahead and write your letter. I have my book to read. As long as you are happy, then I am content.”

“Oh my,” Waverly flushed a little, “You are just about the sweetest man I have ever met. Have I told you that?”

“Just keeping a promise to a friend, my dear.”

“Well...that's not mysterious at all...”

“Ah ah, no need for that tone, Waves. There's not a woman on this earth, could take me from you. Someone who was very kind to me when I first arrived here, made me swear that if I ever found myself a woman, I would be good to her and treat her right, that's all. As you know, I pride myself on being a man of my word.”

“Well, you certainly have proven to be that,” the brunette smiled at him affectionately, “I'll try not to be too long winded, I just want to get my impressions down before they fly right out of my head.”

“Take as long as you like, Waves. I'm not going anywhere. Fact is, I couldn't even if I wanted to, now could I?”

Waverly winked at her husband, then reached into her satchel for paper and pencil, setting them out on the table beside the settee. She inscribed her sister's name at the top of the paper, finding it difficult to keep her penmanship legible with the train swaying so beneath her. A sideways glimpse of Cole's flame red hair captured her eye and she took a good, long look at her husband's profile, as he gazed out the window. A small sigh of contentment passed her lips and then much to her surprise, she found herself leaning over and placing a small kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you for being so understanding, my darling. You know, I think marrying you may just turn out to be the best decision I've ever made.”

Cole blushed and smiled, shaking her head subtly in disbelief, that this was truly her life.

Wynonna,

I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you and I are back in contact. I have missed you so. For a while there I was certain I had lost you forever. Believe me, I have never been so happy to find, that I was wrong about something, in my life.
One thing I was most definitely not wrong about was my decision to marry Mr. Haught. Cole is proving to be a most delightful companion. He is everything I hoped he would be and a good deal more. He is every inch the gentleman and truly his only care seems to be for my happiness and comfort. It is so refreshing to spend time with a man who genuinely appreciates a strong woman with opinions of her own. Cole is quite the polar opposite of Pa, thank heaven. I know the two of you would get on famously, were you ever to meet.

How to say this...I guess it's best to just be blunt. My Mr. Haught has turned out to be more handsome than I ever thought a man could be. Lucky me. In his letters, Mr. Dolls, a friend who was transcribing for him since Cole had broken three fingers, informed me that my future husband was “pretty enough to be a girl” and that has proved to be a very apt description indeed. It's a wonder no other woman snapped him up before I came on the scene.

Despite his fine features and utter lack of a beard, there is nothing either girlish or boyish about Mr. Haught. He is all man, tall and solid and thankfully, without that bearish quality possessed of so many big men. His shoulders are so broad, from his daily work of felling trees, that you'd swear you could easily fit him with the yoke from off the oxen and he would dig in and pull the wagon.

I must admit, that as a girl, I never devoted any time to constructing the man of my dreams in my mind, the way most young women are prone to do. Still, by some miracle of fate, I have managed to find him just the same. Did I mention that he loves to read and is in fact, quite as taken with Master Shakespeare as I am myself? As I write this he is sitting beside me with his nose buried in a book and a contented smile on his face. I do not think I would be over reaching, to presume that he is quite happy to have found me as well.

Cole met my train in Green River, Wyoming yesterday and we were married this morning. It was a simple ceremony, conducted by a Justice of the Peace, but it was quite beautiful. My sentimental husband even recited a sonnet to me and had the Justice's daughter go out and pick me a bouquet of wildflowers. He got me the most sublime wedding band of fine gold, with seed pearls all around it's circumference and believe it or not, he is wearing a ring as well, without the pearls. When the officiant made comment, Cole said entirely without irony, that he wanted everyone to know that we belonged to one another. Oh, that man!

Now we are traveling home together, as man and wife. Mr. Haught insists that he decided to meet my train early, instead of in Montana, because he was ill for this part of the trip when he came out and missed all of the scenery. I suspect that, at least in part, he was concerned for my safety and comfort, traveling through this rough and untamed country, as a woman alone. We swore to one another that this marriage would be a platonic one, strictly a matter of companionship and security, but I can already see the twinkle of love in Cole's eyes when he gazes at me, God help him. As much as it shocks me, I find that I am beginning to have an inkling of feelings for him as well. Don't you dare tell Gus! She and I have a bet going.

At present, we are in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Growing up in Appalachia, among such beauty, I never really believed that they could be as spectacular as everyone claimed them to be. Was I ever wrong. Oh, Wynonna! They are like nothing you have ever seen. Towering, massive, snow covered things they are, their peaks reaching into the very clouds. Our mountain seems like an anthill by comparison. When the sunlight hits the snow just right, they glisten as though they were shot through with faceted diamonds. I have never seen, nor indeed dreamed of anything so huge. They sit there, clustered together, like the Titans of antiquity, hunched in sleep, looking as though at any moment they may rise up and stretch their stiffened muscles, then go striding off to other unknown locales. The enormity of them! They are as fearsome as they are sublime. My ears have been popping like mad, though. Foolish Waverly, thinking that the high altitude would have no effect on me. At least I have not succumbed to Altitude Sickness as Cole did on his first trip out
and thank heaven, despite his past history, my husband does not seem affected either. Keep your fingers crossed.

I must put you down for a while, sister dear. You wouldn't want me to neglect my new husband, now would you?

***

I am quivering with excitement. My childhood dream has come true! As we were headed for the border to the Utah Territory, just over the line from the Uintah and Ouray Reservation (isn't it terrible what our government is doing to those poor souls, herding them away from their homelands like so much livestock) we saw a pair of Indians standing on a small outcropping of rock about fifty yards back from the tracks. Cole says these are the very first Indians he has seen in all the months he has been out west and insists that I must be the very spirit of good luck. He suggested we might want to join one of the poker games that are always being played on the train, silly boy. If he only knew the truth of my luck, he wouldn't so much as flip a coin within a mile of me. Then again, I did marry him, so perhaps my luck is changing.

Oh, but the sight of them! I don't know which of the tribes they belonged to, but what a serious looking pair they were. Still, I suppose if I were in their place, I'd be a bit moody too. He was quite a tall fellow, with shining black pigtails down to his waist, shot through with grey. He was dressed in a suit fashioned all of buckskin, with beadwork decoration in a sort of chevron pattern all over the tunic and long fringes hanging from his arms and the hem, with fringed breeches to match. What I found most interesting was that he wore a sort of cross between an apron and skirt around his waist, of a deep crimson hue with a broad pale band around the edge. The woman was rather short and stout, with a wide, round face and long straight hair parted in the center, as glossy and black as polished jet. She was in a doe hide dress, a few shades lighter than the gentleman's, also covered in beadwork embellishments and dripping with yards of fringe. She wore hide breeches underneath and had tall skin boots upon her feet, ringed in varying stripes of brightly colored beading and several strands of multi-colored beads hung around her neck. Never have I so wished to be an artist, so that I might draw them for you. If only you could have seen them!

I must confess that in the moment, my thoughts did go to sweet Nikki. How I wish she could have lived to see all this. So many times, we had planned to see it together. I know that I am starting anew with Cole and must leave the past behind me, where it belongs, but I shall always miss my bosom friend. She deserved so much better than the end she was given. I must believe that she is indeed in a better place now, if only for my own sanity.

How I hope you can make this trip one day, my dear sister. The sights I have seen are quite beyond description, still I shall endeavor to try and help you see them, if only through my rather inadequate powers of prose.

I think that as children, we really cannot imagine the endless variety of creation and assume the whole of it to look very much like the place in which we have spent our rather limited years. The one thing that has amazed me most about this trip, aside from my curious affection for Mr. Haught, is the unending variety of the lands of this vast continent. The places I have traveled through, so differ the one to the other, that they seem more like different planets than mere territories. First Nebraska, then Wyoming Territory and now this Utah Territory, which is so alien in appearance that I can think of nothing I could compare it to that you might recognize, dear Wynonna.

Nebraska Territory was so flat, that peering across the plains you were sure you could see forever. Unbroken prairie of long green grass that made waves like the sea, whenever the wind blew across it. Growing up in the mountains, I had never imagined a sky could be so big. This is truly a frontier I journey through. As we came to Wyoming, the green gave way to brown, arid plains, where you could travel for miles and miles without once seeing so much as a single verdant sprig poking its
head out of the dirt. Such winds! Granite dust scouring the landscape more than blowing across it, everything becomes covered in it, just like snow. It's no wonder that nothing grows here.

Have you ever heard tell of a tumbleweed? They are the darndest things. The wind blows any dried bit of brush and grass along with it until they reach a place where they catch and clump together, then literally roll across the barren land accumulating greater mass, just like a snowball going downhill. Don't get me started on the cattle drives. If Gus has shown you my last letter, you know my opinion on the subject already.

We are presently in the Utah Territory and I must say, Cole is quite transfixed. He has scarcely looked at me since we ventured into this primeval landscape. Now and then he exclaims at some rock formation or other, so I know that, despite the similarity between the color of his hair and the color of the land hereabouts, he has not, in fact turned to stone. This place is like nothing I have ever seen before, instead of granite, the craggy rocks and cliffs here are composed of sandstone, in varying hues of red, from a light shade of terra cotta to full on brick. The most fantastical shapes have been carved by eons of scorching winds blowing through this patch of desert. There are castle-like spires, oddly curved formations, that look like they've been scooped out of the stone, stout mesas, their tops entirely flat like tables and craggy monoliths in bunches, reaching into the sky like bony fingers. I do not know if it is more “local color” invented by the railroad or actual indigenous tradition, but everything seems to have a name hereabouts.

Soon after passing through a great tunnel, which took us through the mountainside into the narrows approaching Weber Canyon, we came upon the infamous Thousand Mile Tree. A lone green pine, in a desolation of rock and sage, marking 1000 miles traveled from the jumping off point in Omaha, Nebraska. To the south, passing through these great bowls, carved into the land by centuries of wind and water, known as Weber and Echo Canyons by name, we encountered Devil's Slide, Pulpit Rock, Hanging Rock and Devil's Gate. Truly, no one seems to be able to come to an agreement whether this strange land was created by the good Lord or Lucifer himself. My sweet and caring husband is pestering me to get some rest. I will pick this up again tomorrow. If only you were here to read me a bedtime story, like you did back in the old days. Goodnight, sweet Wynonna.

***

Hello again. Last night, just after dinner, we encountered a freakish torrent of rain. With the land here being largely slabs of stone, the water doesn't absorb very well and the tracks became so flooded, that looking back at the cars behind me, the wheels were churning up such a foam of mud, that it resembled a boat rushing along the water.

This morning, I thought perhaps we had entered another flood zone, for the train seemed to be slipping and stalling on the tracks, as though it couldn't get traction. As it turned out, we were moving through an enormous swarm of grasshoppers. The air was so thick with them, that the sheer volume of their bodies being crushed under the wheels, made the tracks...well, I'm sure you get the picture. I don't think either of us would prefer that I go into further detail with this particular tale.

In the past hour or so the land has begun to give over more to greenery and huge hills as opposed to the baked, dissolving clay of the most recent terrain, as we are approaching the Great Salt Lake. You know, where all that Mormon kerfuffle went on, I'm sure you know the one I mean. Pa certainly proselytized about it often enough. What any man needs with multiple wives, when so few can keep even the one happy, I couldn't say. Mr. Haught says to tell you he has some doubt of even being able to handle me, but that I am undeniably a special case. Such a wonderful sense of humor and he doesn't let me get away with any of my nonsense. He really is the best kind of man.
They weren't kidding when they called it the GREAT Salt Lake. It is so huge, that anyone might be forgiven should they look upon it and think they had reached the sea. It even has some small waves. Soon we will reach Ogden, where we will transfer to the Northern Pacific Railroad, which will carry us north through the Idaho Territory into the mighty Montana Territory, onto Silver Bow then Cole's homestead and my new home. I suppose I ought to say our homestead, it is going to take a while to get used to that. How long did it take you to become accustomed to writing Mrs. Randall Nedley?

To tell you the truth, I am reaching the point where I am quite ready for this train business to be over with once and for all. I have been on one train or another ever since I left Philadelphia. With the exception of the night before our wedding, which we spent in Green River, I am now on my sixth day of riding the rails. Let me tell you, without access to proper bathing facilities and so many taking the long ride and sleeping in their clothes, it is getting pretty ripe in here.

***

Back from lunch and here we are at Ogden, waiting for our connecting train. There is NOTHING here except for this one long, narrow wooden building, set smack in the middle between the Southern Pacific and Union Pacific tracks. Inside is the ticket office, a large dining room and upstairs, large communal sleeping rooms with only curtains for privacy. No thank you. Cole and I have decided to forgo the latter, as who knows what may befall us if we should separate. This seems the sort of place which would be prime hunting grounds for pickpockets, cutpurses and other low sorts. Not trusting the quality of the meat or cold storage, the husband and I opted for only pie and coffee. The blackberry pie was, I must confess, nearly as good as yours, although no one I have ever met possesses your gift for making delicate, flaky crust. The coffee, however, tasted like roofing pitch. We have already been marooned here for two hours and the gossip is that some are stuck here for as long as eight. I pray that is not the case, for there is something weird and eerie about this place. Being dropped down in the middle of the mountains, there is nothing else for miles. There is no sound of life, wild or otherwise, to be heard outside, only the rattle of the trains and the howling of the wind. Thank God I have good company in Cole.

We ended up waiting a further two hours before our train arrived. Mr. Haught had gotten involved in a long conversation with a man from Idaho Territory, about high altitude farming techniques. I suddenly felt the need for a nap. I never imagined a man's lap could make such a comfy pillow. I don't know what it is about that man, but he always smells good, even after two days on a train, nothing like the smelly boys we grew up around back home.

We have reached the Idaho Territory and yet another of Mr. Haught's predictions has come to pass. I never imagined these words would come from me, but I swear, if I see one more mountain I may vomit. It has been nothing but mountains, day and night, since just before Cole and I met up in Wyoming. The husband tells me we will be moving into the foothills soon and the scenery ought to change. There should be more towns and less wilderness for a while. Right now it is very much the same, towering snow capped mountains, but with a few stands of evergreens starting to mix in here and there. One of our new seat mates tells me that in some places in Idaho, the railroad has simply blasted through the mountains rather than tunneling, effectively removing large sections, like taking a slice out of a cake. I am most anxious to see such a wonder. I am trying my very best to seem enthusiastic. I am the one who chose this route, so I have no right to complain. If I had opted for the more direct line, we might have been home by now, but we would have missed the Indians and the fantastical sights of the Utah Territory. Forgive me, I am just peevish from five nights of sleeping on a settee. I am ready to be tucked up in a real bed, in my new home, with my new husband, making a start at our new life together. I am sure my mood will improve once we are out of this section of track. At present we are descending and the tracks run along the actual tops of the mountains. It is most disconcerting to look out the window and see nothing but air.
Here I am, back again. We let a couple in the next row talk us into playing cards after breakfast and now it is mid-afternoon. Next time I shall be more careful who I'm friendly to, some people simply cannot take a hint. We are now, thankfully, out of the high mountains. The area we are now passing through is a collection of foothills with valleys alongside, forming a sort of topographic bowl. There are acres upon acres of open field, stretching to the horizon and being as it is Spring, there are wildflowers in bloom all over the place. It truly is most breathtaking.

Our card playing chums tell us that the next stop has a greater variety of fare than the average feeding station, so Cole and I have decided to treat ourselves. Apparently, there are a lot of immigrants in this area, Mexicans, Chinese and Japanese who came to build the railroad and have stayed. Dull as they are our card pals couldn't bring themselves to ingest food prepared by “dirty foreigners” but husband and I are the adventurous sort and even if we cannot travel the world as we might wish, we can at least sample the cuisine of other cultures. It can't be any worse that Emmaline Platt's squirrel stew.

Wynonna, if you ever, in some other life, get the chance to try Mexican food, I urge you to be brave and give it a try. I am afraid I cannot explain properly what Tacos are. Imagine a sort of unleavened corn bread, folded over and filled with spiced beef and cheese along with some mushy beans. I know it does not sound appetizing in the least, but trust me. Tacos are tasty! The Chinese food smelled delicious as well, but since the Tacos were portable we decided on them. Now, with bellies full and darkness upon the landscape, we are preparing to crawl under the covers and get some sleep. I have been feeling unaccountably exhausted, so Cole is insisting that we turn in early as a precaution. Surely you remember how I am never warm enough, would you believe that wonderful fellow somehow talked the porter into giving him two more blankets? Not just one extra blanket, Wynonna, but a bonus blanket as well! I suspect some money must have changed hands, but I would never risk upsetting Cole by mentioning it, he is so old-fashioned.

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Good morning, sister dear! Why yes, I am chipper, thank you for asking. I am feeling ever so much better after finally getting a decent night's sleep. You know, instead of telling young girls fairy stories about princes to get them interested in marriage, they ought to just tell them the plain truth of it. That the quality of sleep you get is so much better, when you have a warm body to snuggle up to during the long, cold night. I'm certain it would yield much better results. This morning we are well into the part of the territory most dedicated to farming. Apparently, the soil here is excellent and the townsfolk are exceptionally proud of their gardens. Even in town, every house has a large vegetable patch and nearly every yard has a flower bed of some sort as well. It is so colorful and cheerful after the all the brown, dust and stone of the previous territories. Aunt Gus would doubtless be in heaven, you know how she is with her roses.

It won't be long now before we cross into the Montana Territory. Yes, I know. More mountains. They named the whole place after mountains for Pete's sake! Of course, once we are in Montana, it is only a matter of a day or so until we are home. The homestead is a good fifty mile ride, by buckboard, once we arrive at Silver Bow. Whether we head out immediately or stay someplace for the night depends entirely on what time our train arrives at the terminus.

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Another big time jump here. I don't mean to always be dropping you and picking you up again, but my new husband seemed to think I should pay some attention to him. Can you imagine? The nerve of that man! Actually, it was another of my sweet Cole's many kindnesses. Unbeknownst to me, we were approaching a series of steep switchbacks. Let me tell you, I was holding onto that man's hand so tightly, that it's a wonder he didn't end up with more broken fingers. He has such wonderful
hands. They are so large that my hand fairly disappears when he holds it. It makes me feel so safe and cared for. After growing up with Pa and Will, it never really occurred to me that a man's hands were for anything but hurting.

So far, most of the towns we have passed in Montana have been ghost towns. Mining towns that sprang up in the Gold Rush of 1864 and were abandoned once the gold was tapped out. Towering, craggy mountains and lakes make up a lot of the landscape. The one bit of beauty we have encountered so far was the Camas prairie, just at the border. A vast field blanketed with pink wildflowers, stretching as far as the eye could see. Mr. Haught assures me that our place is a lot easier on the eyes than this part of the state, all 160 acres of it.

Our homestead, hey I got it right on the first try...Our homestead is on a bend of the Blackfoot River and about sixty percent woodland, hence the lumber business. The closest town is about fifty miles northeast, so there is plenty of privacy. With Cole being in business with the owner of the local mercantile, whose establishment you will be shipping to, and his partner Mr. Dolls going into town weekly to pick up the orders, we won't have to go into town at all unless we really feel like it. Any supplies we cannot grow, hunt or fish for, Dolls can bring back from Mr. Gardner's. Cole already has a a horse, a cow and some chickens as well as an apparently foul tempered ginger cat. We will be getting some more livestock, but he wanted to wait so we could pick what we would like together and yes I have warned him that they will most likely end up as pets. I suppose I shall be getting my own horse. Although I doubt it will be as fine a piece of horseflesh as the one I stole from Pa. Sorry, I am feeling unaccountably happy and full of myself and simply could not resist.

Well, sister dear, I must wrap up now. We will be arriving at Silver Bow within the hour. It is still early, so barring cattle on the tracks between here and there, which is certainly within the realm of possibility, we will no doubt be heading to the homestead straight away. Mr. Dolls will be waiting at the station with the buckboard. I am so excited at the prospect of sleeping in my own bed tonight.

Give Gus a kiss from me and please keep an eye on her. She will never admit it, but she gets lonely alone in that big house without Uncle Curtis and now that I have left, I imagine she will be feeling quite melancholy. Perhaps you and Mr. Nedley might invite her for a visit? Take care of yourself, Wynonna.

Your loving sister,
Mrs. Cole Haught

P.S. - I think I may be embarking upon another journey. One I never expected to take. Falling in love with my husband.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The newlyweds arrive in Silver Bow and do a little shopping before they head home.

As the newlyweds stepped down onto the platform in Silver Bow, Waverly let out a whoop like a cowboy who'd just been given a two for one special at the whorehouse.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” she entreated, covering her mouth with her hand, daintily, “I am just so glad to be through with trains. I would get down on my knees and kiss the ground, if it weren't for all the horse poop.”

“Waverly! What am I going to do with you, woman?”

“Fall down on your knees every morning and thank the good Lord for me, I suspect.”

“You're probably right.”

“I usually am. The sooner you resign yourself to it, the more time you'll save.”

“Someone's full of themself this morning.”

“What can I say, I'm happy.”

“As am I, my dear. I do believe marriage agrees with you, Mrs. Haught.”

“I think you may be right, Mr. Haught.”

“I'll tell you what, since I am just as over trains and stations as you are,” particularly this station, Cole thought and quickly banished the idea, lest it show in her face, “What say you find a porter and see what has become of your luggage and I shall endeavor to locate our Mr. Dolls.”

“That, my dear Mr. Haught, sounds like a grand plan, since I have no idea what Mr. Dolls looks like and it would be rather inefficient the other way round.”

“Well, once you have completed the business with the luggage, look for a green buckboard attended by a dashingly handsome redheaded fellow, grinning like a fool and a large colored man, who is nearly as handsome, but not quite. He will undoubtedly be looking at me like I am crazy. Oh, and the wagon will have H&D Lumber painted on the side.”

Waverly rolled her eyes at her silly, but undeniably adorable husband, waved her hand at him in a shooing motion and headed off in search of a porter.

It didn't take Cole long to find her friend.

“Dolls!” she exclaimed, giving him a mighty slap on the back, “How are you this fine morning?”

“Obviously not as good as you, based on the spring in your step.”

“I don't believe there's a man on Earth as happy as me this morning.”
“I take it Miss Waverly was everything you dreamed she'd be.”

“Oh, Dolls! Mrs. Haught is a vision! An angel made flesh! And one hell of a pistol!”

“A real spitfire, huh?”

“See for yourself, here she comes now.”

Waverly smiled and waved at the two men, as she and the porter approached with her trunks.

“You can put them right there, porter. The gentlemen will load the wagon,” she stepped aside, giving her husband a small peck on the cheek, “Pay the man, Cole.”

Dolls broke into a smile so wide, that if he'd been wearing make-up, he would have had lipstick on his ear lobes, then made the sound of a whip cracking. Jumping down from the driver's seat, he landed right in front of Waverly, executing a shallow bow.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs. Haught.”

“Oh please, Mr. Dolls. I feel like you and I are old friends. You must call me Waverly.”

“That wouldn't be proper, Ma'am.”

“I won't tell if you don't.”

Dolls helped the new bride up onto the buckboard, then went around back to assist her husband with the trunks and such.

Slapping him on the back, he laughed, “Cole, you done hit the jackpot, boy! The grand and glorious jackpot, but don't tell Delia I said so.”

Cole and Dolls mounted their respective sides of the wagon, leaving Waverly in the middle, so that she would catch the least of the mud splatter.

“Is there anything else you need before we head home, my dear?” the redhead asked.

“Well, that depends, Mr. Haught. How many blankets do you have at the house?”

“To the mercantile, Dolls!” Cole called out like the skipper of a boat.

The pair of them were scarcely through the door, before Old Man Gardner called out, “Cole, you're back! And this must be your lovely bride.” At the sound of the word bride, Ma Gardner suddenly appeared at his side.

“Ma and Pa, this is Miss Waverly Ear...oh, pardon me...this is Mrs. Waverly Haught,” the redhead introduced her wife, taking hold of her hand, “Waves, my good friends and business associates, the Gardners.”

“A pleasure to meet you, child,” Ma Gardner twittered, “I see the ring was a perfect fit.”

“Oh, yes...it's so beautiful. You have exquisite taste, Mrs. Gardner.”

“Thank you, I was so hoping you'd like it and please, Mrs. Haught, call us Ma and Pa, everyone else does.”
“Then you must call me Waverly.”

“Well then, Waverly dear, what can I help you find today?”

“What have you got in the way of quilts and blankets?”

As the women folk went off to find a solution to Waverly's unending chill, Pa Gardner leaned in close to the redhead's ear.

“Oh, she's a honey, Cole.”

“Thank you, Sir. I think so too.”

“Boy, if I had luck like yours, I'd be at the poker table day and night.”

“You're not the first to express that sentiment, I suppose there must be something to it.” Cole teased, “Seriously though, I know exactly how lucky I am.”

“Have to be blind not to, boy.”

“It's not her looks I'm talking about, although I'm certainly not complaining. It's her mind and her spirit. Sassy as all get out, really keeps a man on his toes.” Nicole had become so accustomed to referring to herself in the male, that she didn't even have to think about it any more.

“A real firecracker, huh? My Elsie was like that when we first met, still is to tell the truth. Woman had a mouth on her, coulda outrun Voltigeur in the Epsom Derby.”

“Yup, sounds like my Waverly.”

“Good for you, Cole. Good for you. Let the other men have those dainty, demure girls. You catch yourself a woman like that, with a will of her own and a spine of iron and you've got yourself the boss, the very boss, indeed.”

“Are you trying to imply she'll be wearing the pants in the family?”

“No, boy...the boss! The best! You gotta come into town more often, you're not up on the slang.”

“Oh no! Are my clothes still in fashion?”

“Smartass! So, can I get anything for you today?”

“Not unless that hack saw's come in...otherwise I'm just waiting on the little lady.”

“She is kinda puny, ain't she?”

Just then, the women folk came trudging along, their arms loaded up with purchases. They dumped a big pile of goods on the counter. Two blankets, three quilts, two pairs of Levi’s, a couple plain shirts, a pair of work gloves, a set of long underwear, some wool socks and a pair of heavy boots.

“I think you've made a mistake there, Elsie,” the old man addressed his wife, “Those shirts and trousers ain't gonna fit Cole.”

“That's because they're not for Cole,” the petite brunette spoke up, “They're for me.”

“Trousers? For a young lady?” the storekeeper sounded shocked.
“I always wore 'em to tend to the livestock back home.”

“Well, you may find things is a bit different out here, this ain't Boston.” the old man winked, but it was obvious he wasn't joking.

“I ain't from Boston,” Waverly snarked, “Tell me something, Cole. Do you wear a dress when you muck out Bobo's stall or milk Tessie?”

“Of course not, Waves. Why would I do that?”

“What about you, Mr. Gardner? Do you slip into a ballgown before you unload the stock?”

No answer.

“Then why should I have to, when trousers are so obviously better suited to the task?”

The men folk stood silent and abashed.

“Well then, if you can't come up with a reasonable answer, I guess I'll be buying them.”

“Yes, Ma'am, I suppose you will,” Pa replied meekly, “Can I get you anything else, young lady? A lovely new bonnet? Some candy? Hair ribbon, perhaps?”

The petite brunette reached into her satchel and pulled out a '61 Navy Colt, setting it on top of the pile, “I could use some caps for this.”

Pa Gardner began to cough furiously, sounding like he might bring up a lung at any moment.

“Waverly dear, perhaps we ought to head home, before you give the poor man apoplexy,” Cole turned to the elderly gentleman, “What do we owe you, Pa?”

“Oh, just consider it a wedding present and welcome for the young lady,” Ma replied, “The old fool had it coming. Congratulations to the both of you.”

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Gardner,” Waverly pulled her into a hug like they were old friends, “I'll be sure to have my sister send you those sweets, the next time I write.”

“Have a safe trip you two. Better get a foot under ya, wouldn't want to get caught out after dark. Gotta keep an eye out for wolves and cougars.”

“Thank you for everything, Ma'am,” Waverly said, with a smile and wave, as she walked out the door.

“Good luck, boy,” Pa mumbled under his breath, “Oh yeah, she's a pistol alright.”

Back at the wagon, Dolls was howling with laughter, tears running down his cheeks.

“Then she pulls out the Colt and says 'I could use some caps for this' I swear!” Dolls bent double, gasping for breath.

“Stop! Stop!” Dolls exclaimed, “You're gonna make me piss myself.”

The young bride folded her arms across her lovely bosom, shaking her head, “Men!”
The three of them rode in silence for quite a while, until Waverly spoke up, “I don't believe I'll have any trouble not going into town regularly, Cole.”

“No, I don't expect so, my dear.”

“I think you're just what this one needs, Waverly,” Dolls said, “You'll keep him in line and put a little bounce in his step. He gets mighty objectionable when he's lonely. Glad that's all over.”

“Me too, Dolls,” the young bride replied, “Me too.”

Cole was conspicuously silent. She just smiled.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Waverly, Cole and Dolls travel to the homestead and then Cole gives the wife the ha'penny tour.

Chapter Notes

This one turned out a lot longer than I originally planned. I suppose my muse wanted to play catch up after so long without an update.

Thank you all for waiting. Just to make it up to you all, I've just stayed up until 2am finishing the rewrite and proof-reading so I could post before turning in...I hope you all enjoy it.

One a vaguely related side note, I bought a new car today, only 5 miles on the odometer and since she's sleek and sporty and sexy in blue, I named her Sheriff Haught.

“Dolls?”

“Yes, Ma'am?”

“Dolls...” the petite beauty required no other words to convey her sentiment, her tone was admonishment enough.

“Oh...pardon me...Miss Waverly.”

For a moment, the young bride considered chiding him about the “Miss” but after some brief thought, decided it was the least formal term of address she was likely to get from the gentle giant and wrote it off as a lost cause. Anyway, it was a damned sight better than Ma'am.

“I am, at present, on the horns of a dilemma and find myself in need of the perspective of a neutral third party. Might I ask you a question?”

“I don't know about that, Miss. I haven't got a very good history when it comes to that sort of thing, as you no doubt recall.”

“Stuff and nonsense. That unfortunate incident notwithstanding, I set great store by your opinion. After all, was it not you who told me that Cole was pretty enough to be a girl? There's certainly no questioning the validity of that statement.”

“Told you so,” Dolls grinned and Cole blushed to her roots.

“So, then... will you help me out?”
“Glad to be of service, Miss.”

“Excellent. So, tell me, Friend Dolls, which of us is prettiest?”

“Miss Waverly!”

“I am? Oh, Dolls! You flatter me.”

“No, Ma'am, I didn't say that.”

“Oh, so you think Cole is prettier?” she pouted.

“No...I mean...you...oh, Miss...I can't answer that question and you know it.”

“I won't hold it against you, Dolls. I promise. We're all friends here.”

“Yes, Ma'am...and I'd like to keep it that way.”

“Uh-uh...Waverly.”

“Waverly, Ma'am.”

“That's better. I suppose. So?”

“Miss Waverly?” the big man was clearly anxious.

“I'm waiting...”

“I told you, Miss. I can't answer that.”

“Why not, Dolls?”

“Because, Miss Waverly, I don't favor walking all that way home.”

“You actually think I would do that to you, Dolls? I have half a mind to be offended.”

“Oh no, Ma'am...I mean, Miss Waverly...but this one,” he jerked his thumb at the redhead, “I've known him longer than you, we work together near every day and...”

“Surely you're not suggesting that my husband is untrustworthy.”

“Of course not, Miss. I'd trust Cole with my life, it's just that...”

“Just what, Mr. Dolls?” the petite brunette was beginning to sound a bit peevish.

“Well, Miss...sometimes he's got a mighty peculiar sense of humor. I wouldn't put it past him to do it just for a laugh.”

“Mr. Haught would never make you walk all that way. Would you, Cole?”

“Of course not, my dear,” the redhead smirked, then mumbled under her breath, “Maybe half way.”

“What did you say?”

“I thought not. So Mr. Dolls, what say you?” Waverly leaned in so that she and her husband were cheek to cheek, “Who's prettier?”

“You can ask me from now until Judgment Day and you are not going to get an answer to that!”

“Dolls!” the young bride whined like a petulant three year old, stomping her foot.

“Darling, leave the poor man alone,” Cole scolded, giggling just a tiny bit, “You are, without question, the single most ravishing creature on the whole of this great continent.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart,” Waverly somehow managed to sound genuinely surprised and blushed prettily, just as though she hadn't been hectoring Dolls for the last several miles.

“He is awful pretty, though,” Dolls teased.

“He is that, Mr. Dolls,” Waverly chuckled, enjoying the instantaneous flush of pink that rose from her husband's throat to the apples of his cheeks, “He is that, indeed.”

For the next several miles, the trio rode in silence, lost in the magnificence of the scenery and their own respective thoughts.

When she could no longer abide the quiet, Waverly began to sing.

“As I was walking down the street, down the street, down the street...A pretty girl I chanced to meet...And we danced by the light of the moon...”

Cole joined in on the chorus, lending a harmony in a rich tenor, “Buffalo gal won't you come out tonight, come out tonight, come out tonight. Buffalo gal won't you come out tonight,” Dolls took the last line in a booming baritone, “And we'll dance by the light of the mooooooooon.”

The impromptu choir sang every verse, then made their way through Old Dan Tucker, Sweet Betsey From Pike, The Bluetail Fly, My Old Aunt Sally, Two Sisters, Tassels On My Boots and O’ Susannah before their voices gave out and they had to pass the jug around.

“Oh, that was fun,” Waverly enthused, “Do you sing much at home, Friend Dolls? You have a beautiful voice.”

“The boys and I do Miss, but my Delia couldn't carry a tune if it had a handle on it.”

“Aren't you awful?” she teased, slapping the big man on the thigh.

“It's the gospel truth, Waves,” her husband concurred, “I've heard it with these very ears. Delia is a lovely woman and the salt of the Earth but when she sings, it sounds like someone's choking a goat.”

“You boys had better behave yourselves or I'll tell her you said that.”

“I'm not afraid, you go right on ahead. My beloved is perfectly aware that she has a voice like a rusty hinge.”

“I will be meeting your Delia, won't I? I'd like to pick her brain about any special skills a frontier wife might need.”

“To be sure, you will. She's been planning it ever since you and Mr. Haught began your
“correspondence.”

“All that time? Truly?”

“Yup. There's some say Delia's got the sight. Me, I'm not so sure.”

“What do you think, then?”

“I think she just pays attention. She pays attention like nobody does. From the time that Red over here got your first letter, she could see that he was going around looking dopier than a mule with a bellyful of fermented choke-cherries,” the big man laughed.

“Is that so?” the young bride grinned.

Cole pulled her Stetson down lower on her forehead, trying to hide as much of her hot pink face as possible.

Waverly bent low to try and see his eyes, then pushed the hat up with the crown of her own head, giving him a sweet kiss on the cheek, “You adorable man, you.”

Taking pity on his compatriot, Dolls endeavored to introduce a new subject.

“My Delia may not be able to sing like a bird, but she sure as heckfire can cook one. If that woman don't know her way around a stove, like Cole knows his way around a broad axe! Her chicken and dumplin's will make you want to slap yer mama!”

“Slap my, Mama?!? Why would I...oh...I get your meaning now. Well then, if she's the type to share recipes, I certainly would welcome the advice. My mother was taken from us when I was quite young, so my sister and I had to teach ourselves to cook. While my fare isn't inedible, it is exceedingly plain and I am hopeless when it comes to baking, my sister got all the talent in that area.”

“As a matter of fact, Delia already has a cookbook made up for you. Sort of a welcome gift.”

“Oh, isn't she sweet?”

“Now, if it's baking you want to know about, your husband just so happens to be in possession of the best bread recipe in the territory. Won't share it neither.”

“Really? Were your family bakers, husband?”

“No, my dear. I got the recipe from a grateful friend, along with a promise to keep it confidential and as you know, above all else, I am a man of my word.”

“I'll see if I can't get it out of him for you, Friend Dolls.”

“I look forward to you trying,” the redhead teased.

Dolls let loose a blast of a laugh, his mind taking the express train to a rather different track than the one Cole had intended.

Desperate to change the direction of the discussion, Cole interjected, “Waverly dear, pay attention now, we're approaching the first bend of the river and our homestead is just beyond it.”
The young beauty sat up taller in her seat, setting her eyes upon the river, with the same focus as a prospector trying to glean the glimmer of gold from the grains of sand in the bottom of his pan. As the wagon rounded the bend and the first glimpse of the homestead came into view, Waverly's eyes damned near popped out of her head. This was not at all what she'd been expecting. Despite Cole's description, the young bride had not allowed herself to imagine anything like it. She'd been alive long enough to know of the male tendency toward exaggeration and so, had made a point of underestimating her potential home. Once more it was made apparent that her husband was first and foremost, a man of his word.

Had she not known better, she would have guessed that this was the property of some prominent politician or community leader, a lawyer, perhaps or maybe a banker. Spread out before her very eyes, spread being the operative word, were a full sized barn, with attached corral, a chicken coop, four or five small outbuildings of indeterminate function and a good sized garden, with plants already a foot high. The main house was a long log building, fully chinked, with a wing on either side, giving it an almost cruciform shape and an enormous fieldstone chimney on one end. Instead of the thatched roof that some cottages had, this one was made of real shingles, coated over with pitch. Obviously, the builder planned on staying around for a while. The whole affair was wrapped 'round by a buck and rail fence, separating it from the surrounding plain. It was impressive, to say the least and those were only the bits she could see from this angle.

Dolls turned the wagon down a long treeless lane and as they drew nearer to the homestead, Waverly could make out an arch above the gate, with what appeared to be a lettered sign stretched across it, but it was impossible to read at this distance.

As they approached the arch, Cole squeezed his bride's hand, “Welcome home, Waverly.”

“Serendipity?”

“It seemed appropriate.”

“Are you certain you didn't mean serenity, my dear?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you very much. Serendipity is exactly what I meant, for no lesser force could have brought me such as rare creature as yourself, as the result of a single advertisement, placed in a single periodical, one single time.”

“Well then... when you put it that way,” she replied.

Dolls pulled the buckboard to a halt in the dooryard, hopping down and setting about unloading the luggage, as Cole helped his wife down from her high perch.

“Oh, I have been sitting for so long it feels heavenly to be on my feet again,” she exclaimed, stretching mightily and letting slip an almost carnal sounding moan. She took a few wobbly steps, “Although, I am feeling a bit like a newborn foal,” the young brunette beat at her thighs with her hands, trying to get some blood back into them, “This calls for a good walk, I think.”

“Well then... when you put it that way,” she replied.

Dolls pulled the buckboard to a halt in the dooryard, hopping down and setting about unloading the luggage, as Cole helped his wife down from her high perch.

“Oh, I have been sitting for so long it feels heavenly to be on my feet again,” she exclaimed, stretching mightily and letting slip an almost carnal sounding moan. She took a few wobbly steps, “Although, I am feeling a bit like a newborn foal,” the young brunette beat at her thighs with her hands, trying to get some blood back into them, “This calls for a good walk, I think.”

“Well then... when you put it that way,” she replied.

“Then I'd best be saying my goodbyes now, I expect,” Dolls interjected.

“Oh no, you must stay to supper,” Waverly wheedled.

“Thank you kindly, but I best be going if I want to make it home before dark. I don't want Delia thinking I picked up a lady friend for myself while I was at it.” he laughed loudly and deep, “I will see you bright and early as usual, Cole.” He bowed shallowly, “Miss Waverly, it was a genuine
pleasure meeting you. I'm sure we'll see each other again soon enough. Welcome to the wilds of Montana.”

“Why, thank you Mr. Dolls and thank you for all you've done for us. Be sure to give my regards to your Delia and also my guarantee that she'll be spending a lot more time with her husband at home, now that I'm here to babysit this one,” she teased jerking her thumb at Cole.

The large, jovial man mounted the wagon in one great leap, grasping hold of the reins, “And on that note, I shall leave you newlyweds to it.” He slapped the oxen on the butt with the buggy whip and headed down the lane.

The pair of newlyweds stood in the dooryard, grinning like fools and waving to their friend until he reached the turning and the wagon disappeared from sight.

“So, Mrs. Haught, you said you wanted a walk,” the redhead gestured, sweeping her arm to take in the whole of the homestead, “How about the ha'penny tour?”

“Lead on, Mr. Haught, by all means.”

“Well then, Mrs. Haught,” he turned toward the large log home, “This, as you have no doubt deduced from the path leading to the door, is the front of the house.”

“It's so much bigger than I ever imagined.”

“Well, my dear, there's a long story behind that. The story, in fact, of how you came to be here. When I realized that, in my effort to consume the lonely hours, I had already built every structure I could possibly construct without looking like a crazy person and had done all the detail work inside, I gave in to Dolls' constant hectoring and decided I'd best find myself a wife.”

“Oh Cole, you'll turn my head, you old fashioned charmer,” Waverly simpered, “I know we said this wasn't a love match, husband, but no woman wants to hear that you married her because you had exhausted all other options beforehand.”

“Oh, Waverly,” she took the shorter woman by the hand, looking deeply into her eyes, “Please forgive me, that is not what I meant at all. I am afraid you must bear with me if I do not possess the same facility of expression face to face, which I do on paper. It has been a long time since I had anyone to talk to other than Dolls and while he has become a dear friend, the discourse which can be heard above the whack of axes and crashing of tree trunks, can hardly be called conversation.”

“OK then, since you are so rusty, I shall permit you another go at it, but do try harder this time.”

“Yes, my dear. Th-thank you, my dear.”

“There now, no need to get flustered, dear boy.”

The redhead smiled shyly at her new bride, “What I was trying to say was that when I first arrived, I whiled away the lonely hours constructing the corral and all of the outbuildings you see here. Once Dolls and I had finished the house, that is, then after we'd completed the barn, I devoted my time to plowing up the plot for the garden. With all of that completed and the interior features finished and no other thing to consume my solitary hours, I am ashamed to say, I went a bit potty that Winter.”
“A bit potty?”

“Closer to stark, staring mad, in truth. I stopped bathing, stopped shaving, stopped changing my clothes. If I’d had a mirror, I am certain I would have been too frightened to gaze upon myself. I had no company to speak of, save Miss Jane, who wouldn’t come near me and the few field mice she couldn’t quite catch. As you recall, I had only two books in my possession, which I re-read so many times that I have them committed to memory. By the time the thaw set in and Dolls was finally able to get to me, my voice was so disused that I could barely whisper and I stunk so badly that he picked me up bodily and dropped me in the horse trough. I still shiver when I think about it.”

“I fell through the ice once when I was a child. I have never felt warm enough since.”

“No doubt you have noticed the size of the chimney. I made a fireplace big enough to heat a castle.”

“I knew I liked you.”

“Where was I, my dear?”

“In the trough, I believe.”

“Ah, yes,” the redhead shivered involuntarily, “Now, Dolls had been trying to convince me that I needed a wife since the first day that we met, but after that I finally started to listen to what he had to say and after a month or so of soul searching, I decided that he had been right all along.”

“Friend Dolls is obviously a wise soul, you should listen to him more often.”

“Of course, once you came on the scene, I started building again.”

“What else could you possibly have had left to make?”

“Your room and a few other features that I thought you would appreciate.”

“I knew you couldn’t have done so much in the short time since you proposed, even with Dolls helping. When did you start?”

“A while back,” the redhead blushed, which seemed to have become her main occupation since meeting the young brunette.

“Cole, when did you start?”

“After I received your first letter.”

“You really are too adorable, Mr. Haught,” Waverly kissed her husband on the cheek and tugged at his hand, “Shall we continue?”

Falling into a lazy gait, Cole headed around the house in a clockwise direction. “As you can see, the windows are only oilcloth at the moment, but once I knew for certain that you were coming, I put the glass on order.”

“Have I told you lately how sweet you are? You know, some window boxes might go a long way to brighten it up.”

“They’re already built and in the barn, waiting for you to choose a paint color.”
“You must be one of a kind, Cole Haught.”

“You have no idea, how right you may be,’ the redhead thought sheepishly, “Over here to the left we have the smokehouse and the root cellar, so we still have food outside the growing season and of course that's the privy over yonder. This section, jutting out from the main body of the building is the bedroom. Moving on, if you look to your right, closer to the river you will see the icehouse and there where the water has been diverted to cool it, is the springhouse.”

“You really have thought of everything, haven't you?”

“And that's only on this side...”

“I can't wait to see the rest.”

“Right this way, Waves.” he smiled bashfully at his bride, “As we turn the corner here, you will see that I opted to put the porch on the back side of the house, since the view is so much lovelier from here.” Cole ran up the porch steps “Here we have his and hers rocking chairs, with a table between for setting down a book or a drink or what have you,” he crouched down for a moment and came up with his arms simply overflowing with orange fur, “And this, is the infamous Miss Jane, who owes her great heft to a steady diet of moles, voles and mice, as well as being a Maine Coon Cat. I have absolutely no idea how she came to be so far west.”

The ginger furball wriggled in the redhead's arms, mewled in protest and leapt down to the steps, stretching out to her full length on the bottom one. Waverly inched over and reached out a hand toward the portly feline, so that she might sniff it. To Cole's eternal surprise, Jane bumped her head against the proffered hand, then rubbed her cheek against it, before allowing the young beauty to scratch her between the ears.

“Traitor!” the redhead teased as she descended to ground level, reaching for her wife's hand once again, “Shall we, my dear?”

“Yes, let's.”

“And on this side of the house we have your room. For the sake of your comfort and modesty, you will see that I have provided you with a separate entrance and your own privy.”

“You are just too much, Cole Haught. If you don't mind, I believe I will have a closer look at that one, it was a long ride.”

“By all means, take your time.”

“I won't be a minute.”

While her wife attended to her personal business, the redhead sprinted to the other side of the house to take care of her own, determined to be back before Waverly was finished. Setting an all time record in speed peeing, Cole ran back to Waverly's side and struck a casual pose against the house, trying not to breathe like a hyena with tuberculosis.

“Feel better?”

Waverly nodded, “Do you need to sit in the shade? You seem to be breathing a little hard.”

“Hay fever.”

“Um...Cole?”
“Yes, my dear?”

“What’s up with the horse collar?”

“It’s not a horse collar, its a...” he mumbled the last part.

“What was that?”

“I said, it’s not a horse collar. It's a hand carved, maplewood seat, covered in leather for comfort's sake.”

“OK then. I must say, I've never seen anything like it.”

“I was worried, that given the nature of our marriage agreement, it might be more than a bit awkward if either of us were to get a sliver in the...um...”

“Caboose?”

“Yes...that. If you'll look over that way, you'll see we have a full sized barn, a chicken coop and there in the corral, that's Bobo, best horse a man could ever ask for, let me tell you. If you like, we can get you one of your own.”

“I'll think about it.”

“There is one more thing I'd like to show you. Another item in a series of, what I have just realized to be, far too many wedding gifts.”

“Oh, tosh! A girl can never have too many gifts or too sweet a husband.”

“If you'll just accompany me to that small stand of spruce, yonder.”

“Lead on, McDuff.”

“So, I thought you might like a nice quiet place to be alone, in the event that I eventually start getting on your nerves.”

When they drew close enough, Waverly spotted something she hadn't seen from her previous position.

“Oh, a gazebo! It's beautiful. Thank you, Cole,” she kissed his cheek, for what seemed like the hundredth time since they'd been married.

“I'm so pleased that you like it. There's an attached bench all around the inside and it is a most excellent spot for viewing the setting of the sun.”

The redhead took her bride by the hand and led her into the idyllic structure, sitting down beside her.

“Just look at the intricate detail work. You are a true artist, Mr. Haught. Don't you let anyone tell you differently.”

“I just wanted you to have someplace nice, is all.”

“You know, I see no reason why we couldn’t sit and watch the sunset together.”

“I suppose we could at that. If you wouldn't mind my company too much.”
“Look at you getting all shy on me now that we're married. I thought you understood that the reason I accepted your proposal was because I find your company quite endearing.”

As Cole was about to respond, Waverly let loose a mighty yawn.

“Perhaps it's time we had a look at the interior of the house, Mrs. Haught. In my happiness at finally having you here by my side, I'd forgotten what a trying week you've had.”

“I am pleased that you are happy, Mr. Haught, but yes...I believe the sunset can get by without us for tonight. Shall we?”

Soon the newlyweds found themselves back on the porch; Jane rubbing herself against Waverly's legs.

“Would you care to be carried over the threshold, Waves? Given the nature of our arrangement, I thought I'd best ask.”

“Thank you, sweet boy...but no thank you, I don't believe that will be necessary. Perhaps you should ask Jane.”

“Miss Jane is perfectly capable of moving under her own power, don't let her fool you.”

“Sorry, Jane. I tried.” The cat meowed and strutted into the house ahead of the pair of them, taking up residence on the hearth of the enormous fireplace.

“There's not quite so much to see in here, especially when the lamps aren't lit,” Cole made his way around the large room lighting oil lamps as he went, revealing new features with each flame that arose.

“This is the enormous fireplace, but I guess you knew that. Over here, I've made us a little reading nook, with lots of space for all of your books,” the corner's walls were covered in bookshelves, floor to ceiling, with light sconces strategically placed at just the right height for reading, one beside each of the deliciously comfortable looking chairs.

“It's perfect.”

“Over here is the kitchen, with the latest in cook stoves and Dolls and I installed an indoor pump, so that you won't have to freeze yourself going out for water in the morning. The table of course, cabinets over here for cookware and food storage, wood box there against the wall, so you always have plenty of dry wood for cooking and heating.”

“How did I get so lucky as to find a treasure like you?”

“I just tried my best to think like a woman, then put in everything that I would want myself.”

“Colette didn't want curtains?” the cheeky brunette teased.

“She figured you'd prefer to choose the fabric for yourself. And now...” Cole stopped in front of a door, “This is your room,” she placed her hand on the knob, “May I?”

“Of course.”

She opened the door and Waverly walked in, spinning around to take all of it in, “Oh, Cole...it's perfect. There's even bookshelves and a rocking chair.”
“I was thinking of putting in a picture window here,” he indicated the west wall, “So that you'd have a view.”

“Oh yes, that sounds wonderful.”

“Now, if you'll close your eyes for just a moment, I have another of your wedding presents here.”

Cole stepped behind the privacy screen and dragged out a large object covered with a bedsheet.

“You may open your eyes now, dearest. Go ahead, pull it off.”

Waverly tugged at the cloth, to reveal a full length oval mirror, encased in an oak frame and stand, “How did you...”

“Ma Gardner told me every lady ought to have one.”

“She is indeed a wise woman. Although, I think I'll like it even better when I haven't been traveling all day. My, I look a mess.”

“I think you look lovely,” Cole nearly whispered, reverently, blushing.

“You are so good to me, dear friend,” she reached up and caressed his cheek, which spawned a fresh blush on the tail of the one previous.

“How about you look around or tidy yourself up a bit or whatever else you care to do, while I bring in your things, I won't be long.” Cole walked out before she could answer, closing the door silently behind her.

Finally alone, the young bride set about the one thing she'd been dreaming of all day, she tore off her overblouse and set about loosening her stays.

A few moments later there was a soft knock at the door and Waverly went to open it, with her corset half unlaced, her impressive bosom quite advantageously displayed.

This time instead of blushing, Cole visibly paled, which was quite the considerable feat given his complexion, “Oh! I'm sorry. I am so sorry, my dear,” he shaded his eyes with his hand, as though to avoid staring into the sun, “Please, do forgive me.”

“There is no apology necessary. I am your wife, Cole. Anything I have is yours to see, by law. Anyway, there really isn't much more showing than in the dress I wore the night before the wedding. It's just perceived as more shocking because you can see my underthings. Trust me, I am wearing a lot more than you think I am. There are simply layers and layers. So...take a deep breath...now let it out...now put your hand down, please...see, not so bad.”

Staring bashfully at his shoes, Cole parroted, “Not so bad.”

“Mr. Haught?”

“Yes?”

“Would you please look at me?”

“I'm sorry.”

“No apology is necessary,” placing a finger under her husbands chin, the young bride raised his gaze until he was looking into her eyes, “Cole...” she uttered, the huskiness of it surprising them both.
“Yes, my dear?” He asked nervously, his hands sweating.

“Could you bring in my bags and the small trunk, please? The larger two are books.”

“Right away, Waves.”

“Thank you.”

When Cole returned with the luggage, Waverly was seated on the edge of her bed, her hair out of its braid and cascading to her waist. With the light of the lamp shining from behind her, she looked just like an angel.

“Oh my,” the redhead gasped, before letting out a long, slow breath, “You're...so beautiful.”

“Thank you, husband,” she paused, seeming to catch herself in the act of comprehension, “Oh my...that really sounded like you meant it. I'm not sure I've ever heard it said quite like that before...not ever.”

“Its just the truth.”

This time, it was Waverly who blushed.

“I'm sure you'll become accustomed to it in time. I can't imagine not telling you often.”

“There's that smooth Haught charm again.”

“Waves!”

“I know...I know...I'm not very good at accepting compliments, I haven't had much practice. I tend to make jokes. I suppose I'll have to work on that.”

“Yes, you will.”

Cole imperceptibly began to lean in, wanting so badly to kiss the girl then, but caught herself before it was too late, trying to steer the topic to a more banal subject.

“So, tell me Waves...how do you like it...hard or soft?”

The young bride's mind raced to a rather fevered place and she blushed furiously, unable to speak.

“The bed! How do you like the bed?!?”

“Oh, it's fine.”

“If it's too soft for you, I can tighten the ropes. Dolls built the beds and he showed me how to make adjustments.”

“I'll have to thank him, it's very comfortable or would that be considered improper? Things are so different out here, it's hard to know.”

Cole shrugged, “Are you warm enough? Would you like me to light this?” he asked indicating a small pot-bellied stove in the corner.

“No thank you, dear. I think the extra blankets will do the trick, presuming I can find them.”

“Well then, I guess I'll turn in...your blankets are right here on the Parson's bench. Is there
anything else I can get for you? Some water, perhaps?”

“I think I'm all set,” Waverly assured her husband, craning her neck upward in hopes of a goodnight kiss.

Cole leaned closer, looking into her eyes, then at her lips, then slowly he reached out his hand...and patted her on the head.

“G'night, Waves.”

Before she could respond, the shy boy had rushed out the door, closing it behind him.

Waverly lay in the darkness, pondering how materially her life had changed in the past few days. No matter how she tried, she couldn't seem to shut off her ever whirring brain. Tossing and turning, sleep managed to elude her, regardless of her extreme state of exhaustion. The new bride's mind drifted back to the train and how wonderfully she'd slept curled up next to Cole. Never before had her bed seemed quite so empty, despite the fact that no one else had ever shared it. This simply would not do.

Wrapping her dressing gown around her, Waverly turned the knob as quietly as she could, opening the door and peering into the great room. The only light in evidence came from the smoldering remains of the fire and a small sliver of lamplight escaping under a door on the other side of the room. Waverly turned slowly, nearly crying out as her eye alit upon a flash of ginger.

“There you are...you nearly scared me half to death. I just can't seem to get to sleep. Come cuddle up with me, will you?”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

The newlyweds first morning of wedded bliss at the homestead

Based on how long it took to write it doesn't seem very long, but there's a momentous occurrence in this one. Hold on to your hats.

thanks again for your patience and ego stroking.

See if you can spot my little tribute to that old school game Oregon Trail

Chapter Notes

Sorry this posting is so late. I had to take one of my dogs to the emergency vet yesterday and then late this afternoon her sister came up with the same symptoms, just got back about 45 minutes ago. Both should be fine, fingers crossed although the older one got hit harder. hemmoragic gastroenteritis, no idea what set it off. I have a feeling I may be on the sofa dog watching tonight just like last night, she's not wanting to settle despite the medication.

When Cole awoke, the house was silent as the grave. Even without opening her eyes, she could tell that her new bride was not yet awake. Thanking her lucky stars, the tall redhead got out of bed as quietly as she could manage, got dressed and made a beeline for the privy. The last thing she needed after all of her careful planning, was for Waverly to inadvertently discover her true gender on their very first day sharing a home.

Back inside and feeling much relieved, but considerably chilled, she decided to light the stove and fireplace, before going out to milk Tessie and tend to the chickens, so that her new companion would awaken to a warm and welcoming home. Since it was Sunday, neither of them was the church going kind and the petite brunette had endured such a trying voyage, she would allow her the rare luxury of sleeping in, at least until breakfast was ready.

Before heading to the barn, Cole opted to indulge herself just a bit. With the utmost care, she turned the knob on the door to Waverly's bedroom, hoping to catch a good, long, unobserved peek at the young beauty, only to find her in bed with a corpulent redhead.

“Really, Jane?” she scolded, sotto voce, “You've never once deigned to sleep in my bed, but you crawl in with her on the very first night? I should have known better than to get a kitten from a brothel.”

The redhead gazed enraptured at her new life mate or at least at what she could see of her. Near every bit of the girl was buried beneath a veritable mountain of blankets, save for her closed eyes, forehead and her luxurious hair, spread across the pillow like a sheaf of remarkably shiny toasted wheat. If she listened very closely, Cole could hear a light snoring emanating from beneath the pile
of bedding.

“God help me, even her snoring is adorable.”

A few words sporadically popped through the low rumble, one of which was quite distinctly “Cole”. The nervous bridegroom jumped back as if she'd heard a rattler, silently mouthing “oh shit” a number of times before realizing that Waverly was only talking in her sleep.

“Come on Jane, you trollop. Let's leave your new Mama to sleep while we go and tend to the animals.”

Waverly awoke on her own to a familiar and favorite aroma. Coffee.

“That sweet man,” she mused aloud as she wrapped herself in her dressing gown and pulled on her boots in preparation for a quick trip to the privy, “A girl could get used to this, yes indeed.”

Soon after she'd returned, from an entirely too frigid for her tastes trip to the necessary, the young bride was lying in bed wondering if she'd ever be warm again and pondering whether Cole might be able to devise a way of heating his newfangled seat, when she heard a soft rapping at the door.

“Waves? Are you up? Breakfast is almost ready.”

Poking her head out from under the stack of quilts, she called out, “I'm still in my dressing gown, Mister Haught.”

“I don't mind if you don't.”

“A lady usually doesn't appear outside of the boudoir in her night things, are you sure, Cole?”

“It's been my understanding that as a rule, married men frequently see their wives in their dressing gowns.”

“That coffee does smell awfully good.”

“Don't worry about it, come on out, before it gets cold.”

“Oh my, that smells amazing.”

“Have a seat, my dear,” Cole entreated, pouring her a cup of coffee, “I wasn't sure how you took it, so here we have milk, fresh from the cow and yes, even sugar.”

“Oooh, so extravagant.”

“Well, we are still in the honeymoon stage, after all.”

“What smells so good?”

“Just my special pancakes, I even warmed the maple syrup, on account of it being so cold this morning.”

“Maple syrup? This far west?”

The tall redhead indicated two good sized kegs stacked beside the stove, “Uncle had a sweet tooth.”
“So, tell me...what exactly makes these pancakes so special?”

“Mmmmm, secret ingredient,” Cole mumbled through a forkful of sweet, fluffy goodness.

“And just what might that be?”

“If I told you it wouldn't be a secret, now would it?”

“Really, Cole? You won't even tell your own wife? This isn't like the bread thing is it? Have you perchance left a trail of heartbroken cooks behind?”

The older girl smiled, smugly, “I'll tell you when we've been married longer. Maybe. If you behave yourself.”

“Cad!” the young bride teased, “They really are quite delicious, though.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“Feel free to cook me breakfast any time you like, Friend Haught.”

“Don't you go getting used to it now. Today just happens to be Sunday, this isn't an every day thing.”

“So, you only eat pancakes on Sundays? Are they holy pancakes? Did a priest bless the hen who laid the eggs?”

“Someone's sassy this morning,” Cole winked at his wife, “You see, while I don't happen to be the churchgoing type, Dolls is, so we don't work on Sunday. Anyway, a man ought to have at least one day a week to spend with his wife and family.”

“Well, if you were going to get one thing from the church, I'm glad that it was Sunday as the day of rest. Especially our first Sunday together.”

“Me too, Waves.”

“I like the idea of getting to spend a whole day of the week alone with you.”

“There's always a few things need doing around the homestead.”

“Of course.”

“That doesn't mean we can't spend a good part of the day by the fire with a pot of tea and a good book.”

“You know, Cole, that sounds exactly like my idea of heaven.”

“Was that a religious joke?”

“Not intentionally, but I just might be willing to sell my soul for another cup of that coffee.”

“Milk, no sugar, right?”

“Someone's head of the class.”

“Just because I noticed how you take your coffee? Isn't that the sort of thing husbands and wives are meant to do?”
“Your parents' marriage was obviously quite different from mine.”

“Well, my dear, I suspect our marriage will be quite different from most,” Cole finished the thought silently, 'If you only knew how different.'

“Yes...I'd already arrived at that conclusion.”

“You might as well resign yourself to the idea here and now, Mrs. Haught. I intend to treat you right.”

“Then I suppose that once I've finished this coffee, I shall have to cease being a slovenly layabout and go put on some clothes like a proper wife.”

“Afraid people will talk, are we? There's no one here apart from Jane and I and she's not much of a chatterbox. Take all the leisure you like, might as well relax while you can.”

“No. Thank you just the same, but that won't do. I may be a heathen when it comes to social etiquette, but I want you to know that you've taken a proper wife, not some tramp who lies about the house all day, sipping spirits.”

A bemused smile spread across the redhead's face, “Whatever you say, my dear.”

“Are you humoring me?”

“What was that, my dear?”

“I said, I don't appreciate being patronized.”

“Forgive me, Waves. I'm still learning this whole game, men and women and all that. What can I do to make it up to you?”

“Well, there was something I've been wanting to ask...”

“By all means, ask away.”

“It is, how shall I say...a matter of a rather intimate nature.”

“Oh...Mrs. Haught...I....that is to say...I'm not really at my best right now. That train trip really took it out of me.”

“Cole Haught, you egotist!” the brunette scolded, “I was trying to ask for your help doing up my corset!”

“Oh! Do forgive me, but please don't feel like you have to wear one on my account.”

“Really, Cole?”

“I grew up with a mother and sisters, such things weren't hidden from me. I know what horrid contraptions they are. It can't be good for you, I don't imagine, squashing up your innards like that. As far as I'm concerned, you may consider this a corset free zone.”

“Truly?”

“You know I am a man who means what he says.”

“Oh my, I think I may love you already, Mister Haught.”
“So...” Cole blushed.

“So...what shall we do now?”

“Well, I had planned to muck out Bobo and Tessie's stalls after breakfast. You may do as you wish my dear.”

“And if I wish to help you in the barn?”

“I couldn't let you do that, Waves.”

“Am I not your wife, Mister Haught?”

“Yes, you are. Thank heaven.”

“Is this your homestead or is it ours?”

“Why, it's ours, Waves. Of course.”

“Ergo, logic dictates that the barn is ours too and the livestock as well as any products they may produce.”

“As always, your logic is unfailing, my dear.”

“Was it not you who said that we were a team? As I recall, you compared me to an ox...didn't care for that. Therefore, a team is what we shall be.”

“Yes, my dear. You are right, as always.”

“It will be so nice to get back into my trousers again.”

“First no corset and now trousers, what would Pa Gardener say about such a libertine of a woman?”

“You know, Mister Haught, I don't believe I give a damn.”

“I truly did find a prize when I found you, Waverly Haught.”

“That reminds me...”

“Of what, my dear?”

“You have given me so many wedding gifts and I still haven't had the chance to give you mine,” she began to back away toward her room, “Stay right there.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Cole teased.

A minute later she returned to the table, handing her husband a rectangular package wrapped in brown paper and hair ribbon. She elected to remain by his side rather than returning to her chair, so that she might see his face when the present was revealed.

Carefully, as if the contents might bite, the excited bridegroom freed the object from its wrappings, his eyes lighting up like fireflys.

“Oh, Waverly! Leaves of Grass! Thank you...thank you so very much!” he effused, “I have missed it so.”

“I came across it in this wonderful used book shop I found, while I was waiting for a connecting
train in New York. I knew that you'd lost your copy and since it's your favorite, I thought...” she shrugged, “I hope you don't mind that it's used.”

“Well, I don't know that I would refer to it as used.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“A first edition! It's exactly what I would have chosen, if I'd had everything in the world to pick from, it's perfect.”

“Open it. There's an inscription.”

“That's very sweet of you, Waves...but you know, you really shouldn't write in books.”

“I am aware of that, husband dear. The inscription was already there when I purchased it, but I thought the sentiment most apropos.”

“To my dear friend ---” Cole read, “Now you've got me there, it's like it was made just for us. Perhaps you were destined to find it.”

“Perhaps,” she smiled like a sphinx, “Turn the page.”

“Oh, there's more...Most devotedly, Walt Whitman,” there was a beat of silence, soon followed by, “What?!? How?!?! Is this? Walt Whitman? THE WALT WHITMAN?? Oh, Waverly!”

Cole leapt to her feet, throwing her arms around the shorter woman, lifting her off the floor and giving her a great big kiss, right on the lips. Coming back to her senses, she jumped back, covering her mouth with both hands, acting more like she hadn't just been embraceing her wife, but a hot stove.

“Oh, shit! Oh, Waverly! I am so sorry! I got quite carried away with the...I would never...not without asking...oh dear,” she hung her head, refusing to look the young beauty in the eye, “Oh, I am such a cad! Can you ever forgive me?”

Waverly, for her part, paused a moment, running a thumb along her lower lip, then burst out laughing.

“Cole! Cole...look at me.”

The mortified young woman reluctantly elevated her gaze.

“Don't be such a silly goose. You were overwhelmed with joy or gratitude,” she squinted as if studying her husband, “Maybe both, but that doesn't matter. It happens.”

“So, you're not angry with me?” the redhead asked, so sheepishly that Waverly half expected him to sprout wool.

“Not at all, I am your wife, you know.”

“Yes. That is true...”

“Legally, you are fully within your rights to...”

“Technically, yes,” Cole interrupted, “But we...”

“But nothing.”
“If you insist...”

“I do,” the blushing bride looked away then, grinning shyly, “Besides, it was quite nice.”

A moment later both of them looked like they might be coming down with Scarlet Fever.

“Tell me,” Cole was desperate to change the subject, lest she be tempted to do anything else so rash. In truth, at that moment, she could think of nothing else but kissing the young beauty again, “How did you ever manage to find a signed first edition?”

“The owner of the bookshop actually knows him. It seems he used to live in the neighborhood.”

“Why would anyone ever sell a thing like that?”

“As the shopkeeper tells it, the book belonged to a former paramour of Mister Whitman's who couldn't bear to keep it.”

“I could see how she wouldn't want to, associated memories and all that.”

“He.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said he,” Waverly repeated, putting extra emphasis on the pronoun, “I have it on the best authority that your Mister Whitman rides sidesaddle. As does the shopkeeper, actually. He was such a dear, sweet, older man.”

“Well, that certainly would explain I Sing the Body Electric,” Cole replied, causing his wife to giggle.

“You're serious, Waves?”

“Serious as dysentery.”

“Thank you very much for that image.”

“No problem, whatsoever, Mister Haught.”

“I can't believe it. This casts his work in a whole new light. How exciting! It will be like reading it for the first time all over again. Oh, Waves...this is the best gift I have ever received...apart from you, that is”

“So you don't think it's an abomination, as the clergy call it? I was so frightened that I might ruin it for you. I debated whether or not to tell you until the very last moment.”

“You know, I have never understood what's so damned wrong about it. Maybe it's because I was raised without much in the way of religion, aside from my mother reading from the Bible. It always seemed to me that if everything is supposed to be an ineffable part of God's grand plan, than this must be too.”

“I am so pleased that you feel that way. That shopkeeper was such a nice man, I'd hate to think of him spending eternity in Hellfire.” Waverly sounded genuinely concerned.

'Although, I can't help wondering, whether your opinion on the matter would change, if you knew your wife felt the same way about girls.'
“Thank you so much for the book, Waves. I don't know that I can top this and I hope you won't be angry with me, but...”

“What have you done this time, Cole?”

“I'm afraid I have one more gift for you in the barn.”

“You're a pretty nice man too, Cole Haught, you know that?”

Wanting desperately to kiss her bride again and feeling the blush begin to creep up her chest, Cole stammered, “I-I'd better see to that barn.”

“I'll be right behind you, Mister Haught.”

'A shameless hoyden in her trousers.'
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Apparently since I deleted the note about my computer and replaced it with this it
didn't get bumped to page one with the update, so let's try this

I know a lot of people were waiting for the chapter to be posted and I just want them to
know it's here

I tried to make it so my chapter numbering wasn't off and have to make it that way anyway
Chapter Summary

I need your help with inspiration...are there any artists out there?

Are there any artists out there among the fans of this story?

I would love to have an illustration of Cole and Waverly in their wedding clothes.

I already have pics of the clothing I want them in which are closest to story description, so you would just need to draw our newlyweds in pictured clothing with minor modifications for color etc.

C & W are based on Season 1 Nicole and Waves.

How much would you charge for commission? How do we handle payment? Can I view a sample of your work etc? Please message me. Thanks...

-Sandi (aka SometimesWaverlyDressesLikeaHooker)
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Cole and Waves do some work around the homestead and try to settle into the groove of their new lives together.

Note: At one point Waverly calls Cole a foozler. I looked into some more 19th century slang. It means a bumbler or a clumsy man who's prone to fucking things up.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this update has been so long in coming. Life happens. We're back on track now though. I'll try my best not to take so much time between posts again. Thank you for hanging in there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Before Cole even had the chance to decide what to do first, Waverly appeared in the barn doorway.

“That was quick,” the redhead observed.

“Well, getting dressed takes a lot less time without all those silly layers. You men don't know how easy you've got it. Just pull up your trousers, button up your shirt and you're ready to go.”

“I see...”

“Anyway, I didn't want you doing all the work before I got out here, so I left off clearing the table until after we've finished.”

“Is that so?” he teased.

“Uh-huh,” the brunette rolled her eyes at her silly husband, wondering why he was acting so strangely, “So...what would you like me to do, Mister Haught?”

“Well, that all depends, Mrs. Haught,” Cole replied, locking down a few reflex reactions to that question.

“Really?” she replied, perplexed by his obtuseness, “On what precisely, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“On which you prefer, my dear, horse manure or cow.”

“So kind of you to give me a choice, husband dearest,” she quipped, “I believe I will go with horse, if it's all the same to you.”

“As you wish, my dear. You may see to Bobo's stall and I shall take care of the radiant Miss Tessie. Just let me take them out to pasture and I'll be right back with the barrow for the manure.”
“Aye aye, O’ Captain, my Captain,” Waverly saluted, grinning at her husband, as she grabbed hold of a pitchfork.

“Whitman,” the redhead smiled, “Nice.”

Lift.
Turn.
Pitch.
Repeat.

Lift. Turn. Pitch. Repeat.

The petite beauty quickly settled into the soothing rhythm of the repetitive motion, setting her mind free to wander.

God, it felt good to be in trousers again!

Waverly missed her Aunt Gus terribly, but the weight of all those petticoats, the constricting pressure of a corset and those damned uncomfortable high-button shoes, that she'd had to wear since leaving Hope, she didn't miss at all. Finally here in her new home, her new life, in the wilds of the Montana frontier, with her muscles working, her blood pumping and the collar and underarms of her shirt damp from her exertions, she felt more alive than she had in a very long time.

The young woman had stoically borne many a heavy burden in her short life and the one refuge she had always found from it all had been in hard work. The key to her escape lay in the utter mindlessness of it. Pushing oneself to one's physical limits required no concentration. With her muscles running purely on memory, she'd allow the hypnotic monotonous rhythm to lull her into an almost trance like state, her mind free to entertain whatever flights of fancy it saw fit to pursue, leaving her grim reality behind her.

To this day, Waverly found herself possessed of too much nervous energy to ever achieve true stillness, but as a child it had been so much worse. Church in particular had been a nightmare. She could no sooner count all the times she'd gotten a lickin' for fidgeting while Pa was preaching, than she could count all the stars in the heavens. The old man was always going on and on about everything under the sun being part of God's divine plan and yet he persisted in trying to beat and scare out of her something that was a natural part of her being. She couldn't help that she'd been born into a body that craved movement. Wynonna had tried to tame the wild thing inside her by getting her hooked on reading. It had helped some, but as much as she enjoyed those quiet times alone, hiding in the hayloft with a good book, if she didn't burn off all that excess energy first, concentrating on the text was hopeless.

On the days when she didn't have school, young Waverly was expected to spend the morning tending to the livestock or working in the vegetable garden pulling weeds. Idle hands and all that, but as soon as her chores were finished, she would leave the churchyard behind her, literally running off in search of adventure. Her first stop was always the swimming hole. On days when it was very hot indeed, she might actually swim, but as a rule, her main goal was to find someone who was game for a race or wrestling match. If that quest bore no fruit and she was in a particular sort of mood, she might hunt down some of the more obnoxious, slightly older boys. The ones who
loitered in front of the barbershop, more often than not with a certain type of empty headed girl hanging on their arms.

First, she would challenge one to a tree climb and then, after she inevitably bested him, the preacher's daughter would taunt them from her high perch, declaring herself a better boy than any of them, playing to the crowd. She would laugh as their formerly clingy companions slowly let go their arms. One of the girls had even winked at her that one time and her inner boy had puffed up with pride to see that pretty smile turned in her direction. As the mortified young men fairly foamed in pubescent rage, she would draw a book from her pocket, make herself comfortable in the crotch of the tree and settle in for a leisurely read, while she waited for the boys to tire of laying for her.

The way she felt in those moment...well, young Waverly reckoned, it was just about the best thing in the world.

The freedom she'd come to know, since marrying Mister Haught, felt an awful lot like that.

Gone were the shackles of Pa's narrow view of how the female of the species ought to act and the somewhat less restrictive expectations of Philadelphia society were as much history as the books she'd obsessively read while she lived there. With Cole, Waverly felt like she just might have the chance to be exactly who she was born to be, with certain limitations, of course. That bit about liking girls, for instance, but barring that it seemed that she could do as she pleased and her new husband wouldn't mind one bit. When in correspondence, Mister Haught had assured her that he regarded women as equals, his prospective bride had taken it with a rather large grain of salt, but it was becoming clear that in this, as in all else, her husband was a man of his word. The young bride laughed aloud to think that while most girls traded in their freedom for a husband, in marrying the redhead, she had been granted hers.

Despite whatever initial misgivings she might have had, marrying her Mister Haught was shaping up to be the best decision she'd ever made. Not only had she gained a new lease on life and fulfilled a long held dream of seeing the frontier, but that wild child who still lived inside her, had been provided with a built-in worthy adversary, even if her sparring matches with Cole were strictly verbal.

By God, she felt good.

Hot and a little sore, after her working muscles had lain so long unused, but damned good indeed.

When Cole returned from the pasture, she found her wife standing in a shaft of sunlight, beside the rain barrel, completely unaware that she was being watched. The instant the redhead had first seen Waverly in her men's attire that morning, she had found herself feeling unaccountably aroused and rather awkward and had in fact comported herself quite like a lovesick schoolboy, but this was another kettle of fish altogether.

The young beauty had rolled her sleeves up past the elbow and there were a couple more buttons undone on her work shirt, than would have been acceptable in polite company. The older woman stood enraptured, barely breathing, as her wife dunked a bandana in the rain barrel and throwing her head back, commenced to wring the cool water out of it onto her flushed face. Tiny droplets of moisture clung to the soft down of her cheeks and caught in the halo of springy hairs which had come loose from her braid in her work. With the golden light illuminating her from behind, they sparkled like crystal, lending her the appearance of an angel in a holy painting.
Still ignorant of her husband's eyes upon her, the shorter girl squeezed another flood of coolness onto her head. This time, the amber brown eyes followed a single drop of water, as it ran down her cheek, hung off her chin trembling for a moment, then meandered down the front of her neck to disappear into the undiscovered country beneath her shirt.

Oh my.

However many times her wife had boasted of her might, Cole hadn't quite believed that one so tiny could be so strong, but as she watched the rivulets of water run down her wife's flexing forearms, she saw for the first time what a compact bundle of corded muscle Waverly truly was, scarcely able to believe her own eyes. Try as she might not to think of it, the self-conscious older woman couldn't help wondering if she looked quite so alluring in her own boy clothes. All things considered, she found it difficult to imagine within the realm of possibility.

Perhaps if her bosom wasn't tied down.

Still, she knew one thing for certain, her binder wasn't the cause of the sudden ache in her chest, that stung like she had somehow managed to sprain her heart. As for the ache further down in her anatomy, somewhere quite near that strategically placed pair of gloves, well...she'd just have to try not to think about that.

“Oh, Waves...” she accidentally let slip aloud, “You are positively breathtaking.”

“Aaaaauuugghhhh!” the startled brunette screamed, jumping nearly a foot, “Jesus! You scared the hell out of me, you idiot! What was that you said?” she inquired, tying the damp bandana around her neck.

“Oh...nothing really...just...um...here's that barrow. When you need it the fresh hay is just outside the door there, to the left.”

“Thanks,” gosh, he was acting peculiar this morning, “You'd better be getting a move on, Friend Haught. I'm nearly half way done with the mucking. What would Pa Gardner say if he knew you'd been bested by a woman?”

“Oh, I'll catch you up in no time, Mrs. Haught, don't you worry. Anyway, there's plenty more needs doing after that's finished.”

“Is there now? Do tell.”

“Well, the chickens need fresh straw, then I thought I might go down to the river and catch something for supper or maybe go hunting, I haven't decided yet,” Cole rambled, “Oh! That reminds me, your present! I don't know what's gotten into me today, I swear I'd forget my head if it wasn't sewn on tight.”

The redhead disappeared into an unoccupied stall he'd been using for storage and came back with an enormous scatter gun, its double barrels still blue black in their newness. Waverly raised a skeptical eyebrow in response.

“You know...for snakes,” he explained, passing it to her, “Or anything else you might want to shoot.”

“You really do think of everything, don't you?” she asked, sighting down the barrel.

“I just want to know you're safe when I'm not here.”
Satisfied that the gun would shoot straight, Waverly stood it upright, resting the butt on the ground.

“Hell, it's taller than I am!” she exclaimed, “Oh, that was rude. I'm sorry, Cole. I do appreciate the sentiment, I really do. Thank you. I'm just afraid it may be too much gun for me. The kick's liable to knock me all the way back to Pennsylvania.”

The older girl chuckled at her wife's turn of phrase, “Then I guess its a good thing that hack saw finally came in the other day. We'll just have to cut it down to a size more in keeping with your stature, is all. Coming right up, one sawed-off shotgun for my sawed-off lady.”

“Short jokes, Mister Haught? Really? I thought you were better than that,” she teased, “Now you'd better be getting back to work if we still intend to spend the evening by the fire.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“That's enough out of you, beanpole.”

It seemed like in no time at all, the stalls were cleaned out and furnished with fresh bedding, fodder and water. Funny how lively conversation made the work go by like it was nothing. Cole found she had worked up a powerful appetite just the same and wondered if her companion's stomach was in a similar situation.

“Hungry, Waves?”

“To be perfectly honest, Mister Haught, I could eat the southern end of a northbound mule right about now. Just let me wash up and I'll go make us some lunch.”

“I wouldn't dream of it, not after all you've done. You rest a bit. I made some bread before you woke up this morning, I'll grab us some of that and see what I can forage in the garden.”

“You are just the sweetest man, have I told you that? Although, you didn't have to remind me that I'm a layabout.”

“What can I say, I like to see you smile.”

Waverly did just that.

“Why don't you take a stroll over to the spring house and find us a cool drink, then wait for me in the gazebo. I'll be back before you even know I'm gone.”

“Whatever you say, Mister Haught.”

“Why can't you just call me Cole, woman?”

“Can I help it if I find you adorable when you're all twisted up on yourself?”

Arriving at the spring house, Waverly found herself met with a meager selection of options. Milk. Buttermilk. Oh, what was that in the back? A most promising looking jug.

She was sitting in the gazebo, watching the tall grass sway in the wind, when she heard Cole whistling a jaunty tune as he came down the path. His maleness notwithstanding, she could not
deny the plain truth of the matter. He sure was nice to look at, very nice indeed.

“I'm afraid we have a rather motley repast, my dear,” the redhead apologized, laying out bread, tomatoes, radishes and baby carrots, “But at least it's fresh.”

“And not a cheese sandwich,” the young bride teased.

“And definitely not a cheese sandwich,” her husband laughed.

“It looks fine to me, my friend.”

“And what did you manage to procure in the way of drink, Mrs. Haught?”

“I thought this looked promising,” she lifted the container into his eye line, “In my experience, quite delightful libations often come in jugs of this sort,” hefting the jug onto her shoulder she took a swig before passing it to Cole, “Woohoo...where did you find cider out here?”

“Peddlar coming from the northwest,” he took a second swig before passing it back, “You better take it easy on that stuff, there's still work needs doing.”

“Aye aye!” she saluted.

“Would you stop that, please?”

“Only if you insist, Mister Haught.”

“I do.”

“Have I ever told you how much you remind me of my sister sometimes?”

“Pardon me?”

“She has a tendency to become disagreeable when she's hungry too, rather like a fussy baby.”

“I shall let that pass without retort, due to my lack of familiarity with your sister's demeanor and also on account of my, at times, mystifying fondness for you, Mrs. Haught.”

“Why, thank you, Mister Haught. I find myself most beholden to you for your forgiving nature. Now shut up and eat your lunch.”

The redhead chomped into a tomato with perhaps a bit more orneriness than she ought to have, juice streaming down her chin.

Waverly tore apart a piece of bread, handing her husband half, “Here, wipe it with this.”

Biting into her own half, she let loose a moan, followed by a sigh.

“There's something so familiar about this.”

“I know, right? I'm still getting used to that feeling.”

“A while back, I decided to just give in to the whole predestination/soulmate business and let myself be carried along on the current. I suppose the fact that these incidences have all been of the positive has made it easier. Still, I can't help wondering if they will stay that way, you know?” she stared off into the middle distance, “Pass me that jug, will you?”
“Oh, Waves! My mother would have a fit if she heard you say that. She'd say you were just inviting trouble into your house, then she'd spit, cross herself, knock wood and probably run out and hang a horseshoe up over the door. Good thing I didn't inherit her superstitious nature.”

“You'll be needing some good luck if you start spitting on my floors.”

“I shall do my level best to restrain myself,” Cole teased.

“So...what have we got left to do?” his bride asked.

“Chickens need new straw, gotta catch something for supper, that shotgun needs cutting down and I promised a lovely young woman that I'd spending the evening by the fireside with her.”

“You cad! Barely just married and cheating on me already!”

“Waves!” the redhead singsonged, grinning like a fool and giving her wife a gentle push.

“Well, I was loathe to say anything,” the shorter girl half-whispered, “But I, myself have a date with a rather dashing gentleman. So, let us get back to work post haste.”

“What would you like to do, my dear?”

“I suppose I'll tend to the chickens.”

“And I shall see to your scatter gun.”

Having gathered up a good bundle of straw, Waverly made her way toward the chicken coop. She could see the hens scratching about in the yard and the rooster pecking in the grass, none of them paying her much mind, with the exception of one fat red hen, eyeing her suspiciously. Taking a deep breath and holding it, she ducked inside. Her whole life, she never had been able to abide the smell of chicken shit. Working as quickly as was possible, she set about fitting out the nesting boxes with clean straw. When she had finished, she stepped outside, her lungs starving for fresh air and took an extra large breath, then promptly let loose a tremendous sneeze. When she opened her eyes again, she saw nothing but red, which she soon realized was that damned fat hen, just about to crash into her face. Raising her arms to shield herself from the foul tempered fowl, she let loose the remaining straw which then rained back down upon her, as the shrieking bird made contact with her forearm, sending feathers every which way.

“Why you rotten little...” she cussed, kicking out impotently at her attacker, “Yeah...you better run!”

When the exasperated brunette returned to the barn, her husband looked up from his work and at the sight of his disheveled wife, her hair sticking out every which way and shot through with straw and red feathers, her face nearly the color of the radishes they’d had for lunch, he promptly burst into raucous laughter. He knew he was trying her infamous temper, but if he’d kept it in he would have exploded.

“Cole Haught! You ass!”

“Looks like someone had a run-in with the red devil.”
“Would it have killed you to warn me?”

“I had thought her venal nature was directed specifically at me. Sorry, Waves.”

“Well, she'd better learn her place pretty damned quick or she's gonna find herself in a stew pot.”

“Don't you dare, she's my best layer.”

“And I am your wife...” she folded her arms across her lovely bosom.

“True enough, but can you lay eggs?” Cole teased, unadvisedly.

“Haven't you finished with that damned gun yet? I'm having a sudden yen to shoot something.”

“I'm afraid not. This is quality metal, it's not like cutting butter. Perhaps you might find a bit of fishing relaxing, my dear.”

“I wish I had the Colt with me, I don't suppose you've got your pistol on you?”

“At the risk of incurring your wrath further, perhaps messing about with guns isn't the best idea when you've got a bee in your pretty bonnet.”

“Cole, you foozler! I'm not going to shoot you or that accursed hen, for that matter. That being said, if you'll turn that way and observe the way the grass is moving, it would seem that our main course may be heading straight for us.”

They both squinted at the patch of grass in the distance and before long a peculiar looking critter ambled out of the grass, on a direct heading toward the barn.

“What is that thing? A porcupine?”

“Well, it is brown and there are bits sticking out here, there and everywhere,” Cole replied puzzled, “But it doesn't seem quite...”

“No, it doesn't, does it? Do you think it may have hydrophobia? It's definitely not right...”

“Oh...my...God!”

“What, Cole? Is it dangerous? Should we be running?”

“It's...it's...” he couldn't seem to get the words out.

“It's Jane!”

“Oh dear God!” the redhead fussed at her sister in gingerness, “Jane! What sort of calamity have you managed to get yourself into now?”

The cat stretched out at Waverly's feet and started purring, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was covered in an amalgamation of goo, prairie grass and sticks.

“What is that mess? Please tell me it's not pitch. I don't even want to think about shaving her.”

The shorter girl squatted down beside the cat and reached out to touch the mysterious mess.

“Whatever it is, it's certainly sticky,” she lifted her finger to her nose, “Hmmm, smells sweet.”

“Is it honey? Oh, I hope she hasn't been stung.”
Waverly touched her finger to the tip of her tongue, “Maple...the damned fool thing's gotten into the syrup!”

“Jane, you little shit! You don't know how lucky you are that your new Mama and I are fond of you,” angry as she was, Cole couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation. Before long her bride joined in and they both found themselves doubled over, clutching at their sides.

Once she'd caught her breath, the young beauty turned to her husband, “Well, my dear, since you seem so amused by everything today and are obviously in a more jovial mood than my own, I shall leave you to deal with Calamity Jane here. I,” she paused for effect, “Am going fishing.”

“But that's not fair...you're the one who left the syrup out.”

“And apparently, you are the one who left the door open when you fetched the bread, thus allowing the damned cat to get in...”

“You don't know that.”

“Mister Haught, have you or have you not, on several occasions, told me how impressed you are by my intelligence?”

“I have...” he didn't like where this was leading.

“Then odds are that I am correct.”

“I don't see how...Waves!”

“Since you are, as you have freely admitted, well aware of the agility and sharpness of my mind, it ought to have occurred to you by now, that I am far too smart to try and wash an angry cat.”

“Waverly!” Cole whined.

The self-satisfied brunette walked away laughing, waving to her husband as she went, not once looking back, “Have fun, you two!”

When the redhead flopped down in a chair by the fire, Waverly could plainly see the collection of scratches on his hands, arms and neck, as well as the generally sodden condition of his clothing.

Stifling a wicked giggle, she said sweetly, “Dinner will be ready in a bit. Can I get you anything? A cup of tea, perhaps?”

“Nope.”

“Whiskey?”

“No thank you.”

“Some dry clothes?”

“You're not as funny as you think you are, you know,” Cole groused.

“I think I'm delightful,” the brunette teased.

“Whatever, I'm gonna go change,” the tall man snarled, “I'll have tea!”
“I can do that,” she said contritely, leaning over and giving him a kiss on the cheek, “I'm sorry I laughed, Mister Haught. You're just so cute when you're all worked up. I couldn't help myself.”

“Uh-huh,” the redhead muttered, standing.

“Forgive me?”

“Yup,” he replied unconvincingly, a pout still hanging on his pretty lips, as he disappeared into the bedroom.

Waverly sighed. Perhaps she had gone a bit too far. It seemed that marriage certainly could be a treacherous trail, when you hadn't got your footing.

The penitent bride was sitting in front of the fire, staring into the flames and sipping a cup of tea, when she felt a pair of hands come to rest upon her shoulders, followed by a kiss to the crown of her head.

“I'm sorry, Waves. I had no call to snap at you like that.”

“No, I'm sorry...I'm just so used to the teasing, I wasn't thinking of your feelings. Sometimes I'm a bit too impressed with my own wit, I'm afraid.”

“It happens to the best of us.”

“And then I forget what a lovely, sensitive man you are,” she turned her head and kissed his hand.

“What say we call a truce?”

“I guess this marriage business is going to take some getting used to, huh?”

“It's been a while since I lived with anyone...other than Jane, of course.”

“Calamity Jane,” Waverly sighed.

“I doubt we'll be seeing her tonight, she was pretty peeved.”

“Yes, I gathered that much. Do those hurt terribly?”

“It's nothing, “ the redhead lied, “Dinner smells delicious,” she moaned, trying to get back into her new bride's good graces.

“It'll be ready soon. I hope you like it. I think I made too much.”

“I'll have four bowlsful, no doubt.”

Waverly chuckled, “Have a seat, Mister Haught. I'll get you that tea.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“Let's not start that again.”

“As you say, my dear.”
All it took was a cup of hot tea and about a third of Song of Myself, before the tall redhead was asleep in the chair. A short while later, she awakened him with a kiss to the cheek and a plaintive whisper.

“Cole, honey...time to wake up. Supper's ready.”

“Maman?”

“No, my dear,” that was odd, “It's Waverly, your wife.”

“Waves?”

“Yes. That's right.”

“How long was I out?”

“Not long. Hungry?”

“Famished.”

“Well, come to the table, then.”

Cole sat back, smiling, as she watched her wife ladle the soup into their bowls. Wait. She knew that smell...

“Fish chowder?”

“Uh-huh, you do like it don't you?”

“Yup, I was practically raised on it, but how does a mountain girl from Pennsylvania know about chowder? It was always my understanding that it was strictly a New England dish.”

“Oh, I had a good friend who came from Mai...” Waverly wasn't sure why, but something stopped her from saying it, “Massachusetts, she was from Massachusetts. She gave me the recipe.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“How is it?”

“It's delicious, if I didn't know better I'd swear it was my mother's. Of course, she used cod.”

“Why thank you, Mister Haught. I am most flattered.”

After that, they ate in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

Waverly, to recollections of Nikki and puzzling over why mentioning her to her husband felt both disloyal to her memory and disrespectful to the tall redhead at the same time.

Cole, for her part, knowing that she was falling hard for her new bride, was wondering just what in Hell she was gonna do about it.

Chapter End Notes
I hope it was worth the wait.

PS - I am still in the market for an artist to do an illustration of Cole and Waves for me, for anyone who might not have seen the last post.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Waverly's first day alone at the homestead

Regarding a couple things in this chapter: I've been researching again, when Waverly says Tessie is "shushtly" that's appalachian slang for reckless

if you are interested in hearing the songs Waverly sings, there is a lovely rendition of "Pretty Saro" by Iris Dement on YouTube

If you want to hear "The Man on the Flying Trapeze" I'm sure you can find it there as well

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Waverly awoke with a start. It had been a while since she'd been roused by a rooster. Once she'd ventured to the privy, performed her morning ablutions and dressed, she found that the man of the house had already gone. Sitting beside the coffee grinder, she found a note in her husband's scrawling hand. It was easy to imagine it had once been rather beautiful, before his fingers had been crushed by an errant Ponderosa pine.

Mrs. Haught,

I hope you slept well. Friend Dolls came to collect me just before sunrise. This is not usual, but we have an early delivery quite a ways down the river. I shall be back to check in with you some time around luncheon. Do not bother yourself with making a meal for me, as Delia is in the habit of sending her husband with far too much food and we have become accustomed to sharing.

I am certain you will have enough to keep you busy, on this your first day alone on the homestead. I have not attended to any of the morning chores. So, you will need to feed and milk Tessie, feed the chickens and collect their eggs (watch out for Big Red) and at some point you should check the garden and see what needs picking. The weeding can wait for tomorrow. Since I am riding on the wagon with Dolls, would you also please tend to Bobo and put him out to pasture for some exercise?

I am never really certain of what time I will finish for the day, trees and wagons being the capricious creatures that they are, but I shall try and be home before dark. At any rate, it will most likely be best if you make something for supper which will not be ruined by a bit of extra time on the heat.

Aside from tending to the animals and cooking, the day is yours to do with as you please. All I ask, is that if you decide to go off exploring please bring a gun along. You never know when you might happen upon a snake or some other dangerous animal. I look forward to seeing you at lunch.

Yours, Cole
P.S. - I started some dough this morning. If you punch it down and set it in the pans to rise after you milk Tessie and collect the eggs, it ought to be ready to bake just before lunch.

The young brunette ground some coffee beans and set the kettle on to boil. While she was waiting she sat down at the table and wrote out the things she had planned for the day. While an itinerary wasn't strictly necessary, oh how she loved the feeling of crossing things off a list. It gave one such a sense of accomplishment.

Feed and milk Tessie.

Feed the chickens and collect the eggs.

Feed Bobo and put him out to pasture.

Punch down the mysterious bread dough.

Unpack trunks while dough rises.

Bake bread.

Cole ought to be back by then. That gave her something to look forward to and therefore motivation for the rest of the list. When he and Mister Dolls had returned to the woods, she would do a bit of hunting, come back and dress the game. Pick the vegetables, get dinner started and while that was cooking she'd continue unpacking and perhaps take an inventory of the house and see what she'd need to have Wynonna send her. By then it ought to be close to evening and time to return the animals to the safety of the barn.

Just about that time, Cole ought to be coming home to dinner. As Waverly poured the hot water over the coffee grounds and set it to steep, she thought how nice it would be if she surprised the tall redhead with a treat, something sweet to go with his evening tea. Perhaps she'd find some berries while she was out hunting and make a pie. If not, there was always gingerbread. Of course, among all the other chores, came the constant vigilance of keeping the stove lit.

Oh yes, Cole...I'll have the rest of the day to do with as I wish...so much free time...if I'm lucky, I may even manage a scenic trip to the privy!

Men really didn't have a clue about woman's lot in life. While Cole had been taking care of the animals and himself before she came along, it was clear he had been doing the bare minimum after long days spent in the forest. If the state of the pantry was any indication, he'd been living very much like a bear with furniture.

Once she'd had a couple cups of coffee and some bread and butter, Waverly slipped into her boots, collected the milk can from the spring house and headed toward the barn. Soon enough, a certain ginger furbull fell in step behind her.

“'You know where I'm headed, now don't you Calamity Jane? I think someone is hoping her new Mama might be the generous type and aim a few squirts her way,’” she bent down and scratched the hungry feline on the head, “'Oh, you're so soft after your bath. Although, it was awful mean of you scratching your Daddy up like that, since you got yourself into the mess in the first place, you little heathen.'”

When thy reached the barn, the enormous cat sat down in the doorway, apparently apprehensive about following. Odd behavior for a barn cat, but then she hadn't had time to get used to her new
mistress just yet.

“Oh, come on, you silly thing...you know damned well you're gonna get some milk. Just you mind those big feet of Tessie's and don't get yourself stepped on, now. Cole would give me a hiding if anything happened to you.”

After pitching some alfalfa into Tessie's feed box, Waverly tied her up and sat down on the tiny stool, Jane sitting a few feet to her side and watching her every move intently. Being sure to warm her hands first, she lightly caressed and massaged the udder to get the cow used to her touch. Taking a little extra time to get acquainted was always a good idea when dealing with an animal large enough to stomp you to death. Next she cleaned up the teats and bag with a damp rag. Milk with hair and cow shit for flavoring was not one of her favored beverages.

“It's only me, Tessie girl. You and I are gonna be like old friends in no time, just you wait and see. Tell you what, let's make a deal. You don't kick me and I'll do my level best to be gentle with you, what do you think?”

She stroked the cow's flank a few times, before laying her cheek against it.

“You ready, girl? I haven't done this in a while so please be patient with me. Well, here goes nothing.”

Gingerly taking hold of a pair of teats, Waverly rolled her fingers down them in a gentle squeezing motion, firing a couple of shots in Jane's direction. The cat jumped back, when the milk landed just a few inches from her front paws, but then settled in lapping up her treat.

“See, girl...I told you I'd do right by ya.”

Tessie was giving pretty well and the brunette had settled into a good, steady rhythm when all of a sudden, a heavy tail whacked her in the side of the head.

“None of that now, Missy. You be good.”

The jersey cow settled for a few minutes, then whack! There it was again.

“So, it's like that is it? Well, Miss Tess, I'll have you know this is not my first turn around the fairgrounds,” Waverly stood, pulling the long hair ribbon from around her braid, “I have come prepared.”

Taking the ribbon and tying one end securely around the cow's tail, she lashed the other to an upright beam. That taken care of, she sat down again, ready to get back to work, but the cow was fidgeting and pawing at the ground, obviously not of a mind to settle.

“I know, girl. You don't know me from Adam and here I am pulling at your personal parts and you're feeling all shushtly. How about a song? It always helped our milk cow back in Hope relax. Let's see now, how about a little mountain music? This is one of my favorites.”

“When I first come to this country in eighteen and forty-nine,
I saw many fair lovers but I never saw mine
I viewed it all around me, saw I was quite alone
And me a poor stranger and a long way from home

Fair the well to ol' Mother, fair the well to my father too
I'm going for to ramble this wide world all through
And when I get weary, I'll sit down and cry
And think of my Saro, pretty Saro, my bride

Well, I wished I was a turtledove, had wings and could fly
Far away to my lover's lodgings, tonight I'd draw nigh
And there in her lily-white arms, I'd lay there all night
And watch through them little winders for the dawning of day”

“You like that one, girl? I know, it's a bit lonesome, isn't it. Most of the songs back home seem to be that way, either that or they're about Jesus. Something more modern, maybe? Let's see how you like this one...”

“Once I was happy, but now I'm forlorn
Like an old coat that is tattered and torn
Left on this wide world to fret and to mourn,
Betrayed by a maid in her teens.

The girl that I loved she was handsome
I tried all I knew, her to please
But I could not please her one quarter so well
Like that man on the flying trapeze.

He'd fly through the air with the greatest of ease
A daring young man on the flying trapeze
His movements were graceful, all the girls he could please
And my love he purloined away.”

“Well, I believe that's just about enough of that for today, we'll save the other verses for tomorrow;” the young chanteuse stood, stretching, “You filled the can almost all the way to the top, Tessie. Good girl!” she patted her side, untying her tail, “Let's get you out for a graze then I'll see to those damnable chickens.”

With the cow out to pasture and the milk put up in the spring house, Waverly headed inside to check on the bread dough. Finding it not quite doubled as yet, she went to give Bobo his feed and set him out to pasture as well, tossing a bale of hay over the fence for good measure. Then she lit out for the hen house, hoping against hope that Big Red was in a better mood that morning.

“Here chick chick chick,” she chanted, scattering the feed all about, “Heeeeeere chick...here chick chick chick chick.”

Once they were all preoccupied with their feed, she took the empty basket and ducked inside the coop.

“No brooders today, easy work for Waverly,” she sang as she gathered up the eggs.

Ducking back outside with her booty, the young bride squinted up at the enormous, impossibly blue Montana sky. It was so peaceful, that she could easily imagine she was the last person left on Earth.

“This frontier really is something, alright. Oh Nikki, how I wish you could have seen it,” she sighed forlornly.

Meanwhile, back in the house, Cole's secret dough was easily doubled in size, hovering buoyantly over the lip of the bowl, like a fat man's belly hung over his belt. So, she punched it down and after
giving it a few turns on the counter, formed it into three loaves and set it into the pans for a second rise. There was no sense in going off hunting until the bread was finished, so she filled the kettle, put it on to boil and spooned some tea leaves into the pot, so that she'd have it to fortify her through her next task.

“Hmmmmm, which should I unpack first, the books or my clothes?”

Realizing that she had not yet felt the need to wear any of her clothing apart from her work things and her nightie, she opted for the former. To her way of thinking, a home just didn't seem like a home without a lot of books about and how pleased Cole would be to come home from a day in the woods and be able to relax in their little reading nook, surrounded by color and the smell of aged leather. Waverly couldn't wait to see what he thought of her collection. Now for the eternal question, how to sort and arrange them. Color? Size? Author? Alphabetical? All of the above?

The hardest part of the job, she knew was not in physically moving the books from one place another, but in not allowing herself to become distracted and end up sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by piles of books, reading one that had caught her eye. What would Cole think if he came home to that? Knowing him, he'd probably think it was adorable.

Opening the first of the trunks, she set about removing the books and sorting them into piles alphabetically by author. Once that was finished, she sat in her comfy chair and enjoyed some tea, while the blood flowed back into her legs. Sitting on the floor cross-legged, while she made her way through the trunk's contents, had left them feeling like they were being stung by a hundred bees. Having finished her cuppa, she checked on the dough and seeing it needed more time, put another log in the stove, just to be sure the oven was hot enough when it was ready to bake. That being done, she returned to her task, making a start on the second trunk. By the time the dough was ready to go in the oven, she had it half way emptied.

Having put the loaves in to bake, there didn't seem to be much sense in going back to the books, as Cole would doubtless be returning soon. So, she went out to check on the animals and made a quick trip to the necessary. On her way back, she stopped off at the garden for a nice ripe tomato and made herself a meal of it, along with plenty of salt and pepper and the remnants of yesterday's bread, while she waited for her husband to arrive.

The whole of the house was filled with the heady aroma of baking bread, far and away her favorite smell in the world. It never failed to make her nostalgic for the precious times she and Wynonna had spent seated at the big kitchen table, chatting and drinking tea or if they were feeling particularly wicked, playing cards, a practice that Pa strictly frowned upon, while they waited for the daily loaves to bake. Gods, but she missed her big sister. Who knew when she might hear from her again.

That of course lead her to thoughts of how long a letter would take to get from eastern Pennsylvania to the Montana territory, which she inevitably measured against how long it had taken the post to get from Hope to Aroostook County, ME. That of course lead her on to all sorts of thoughts she oughtn't to be thinking. Waverly could feel herself skating along the edge of a fairly epic bout of melancholia. Thankfully, a ruckus in the dooryard shook her out of herself, just in time to take the bread out of the oven before it got too dark. As she rubbed the tops of the hot loaves with a bit of butter, Cole came stomping up the steps and in through the front door.

“My my, Mrs. Haught,” he exclaimed, coming up behind her to kiss her on the cheek, “It smells just like heaven in here.”

“Been there, have you?” she teased.
“Can't say as I have, but being married to a spitfire like you doesn't make it very hard to imagine what the experience might be like. When my time comes, I don't suppose I'll notice much of a difference.”

“Nope...no way with the ladies at all...you, Mister Haught are as full of horse manure as Bobo's stall was yesterday morning.”

“It's my opinion and I stand by it. What's more I shall lick any man who tries to contradict it.”

“I suppose it's a good thing I'm not a man then. Never took you for the wife beating type.”

“Judging by the level of sass coming my way, I'm guessing you had a productive morning?”

“Astute as always, Mister Haught. Aside from a slight difference of opinion with Tessie over my rendition of Barbry Ellen, none of the animals gave me any trouble at all.”

“She is a bit of a charlatan when it comes to the arts, I could have told you that. I see you've been unpacking your books. It will be so nice to have a good selection at hand again.”

“That's what I figured. I cannot imagine what it's been like for you, all these months with only two books. Rather a lot like Hell, I suspect.”

“As I've said many a time since I made you my wife, you are indeed a wise woman, Waverly Haught.”

“Tell me something I don't know.”

“Yeah, I walked right into that one didn't I?” the redhead admitted, “So, what are your plans for the rest of the afternoon, my dear?”

“Well, once you've gone, I plan to do a bit of hunting. Then while dinner is cooking, I'll finish up with the books.”

“And what delicacy of home cooking are you planning on dazzling my innards with tonight, my darling?”

“That all depends on how much luck I have, worst case scenario, we have plenty of eggs. I can always make fried bread and omelets.”

“If your eye is even half as sharp as your wit, I am sure there shall be a sumptuous repast.”

“I'll do my best. If nothing else there's plenty of bread and vegetables.”

“Dolls and I will be working the back corner this afternoon. Gotta fell and notch a few Ponderosa pines to finish out that delivery we have going out tomorrow.”

“It makes me feel so much better to know you'll be industriously employed rather than out prowling the streets and carousing with fancy women, as is your usual.”

“Fancier than you? Perish the thought!”

“Why, Cole Haught, did you just call me a whore?”

“Oh, Waverly! No! Of course not. I'm sorry, I thought you meant the other kind of fancy, but speaking of carousing...”
“Now if that isn't a leading statement...do tell...”

“I was wondering if you be interested in doing a bit?”

“Me? Carousing with fancy women?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of exploring the countryside. Dolls has some business tomorrow afternoon for Delia's church, so I was wondering if you might like to come along for the ride on my afternoon delivery. It's on a real pretty parcel southeast of here.”

“Oh, Cole...yes! I would love that. You won't be expecting me to unload will you?”

“No. Of course not. Although I don't doubt you have the strength to manage it. The order's going to a German fellow, a Mister Schwan and his new bride, just back from their honeymoon. Pa Gardner assures me he's more than big enough to unload the whole thing all by himself.”

“Well, good for Frau Schwan.”

“I've said it before and no doubt I'll say it again, you are a wicked woman, Waverly Haught.”

“That's why you love me.”

Cole's face turned strawberry pink and very suddenly he seemed to be in a great hurry.

“Oh, I'd better get going if we're going to finish that order in time, bye Waves,” he called back while literally running out the door.

When the gentleman of the house arrived back at the homestead that night, his wife was sitting in her chair by the fire, admiring her handiwork.

“It looks great, Waves,” he kissed the top of her head, “there's something so comforting about a home with just shelves upon shelves of books.”

“I'm glad you like it and I agree. It was a bit of a struggle. I couldn't decide whether to arrange them in color blocks or not, but decided just to go full on alphabetical. I like the unpredictability of the random colors and sizes, plus it makes them easier to find. Of course, they're sub-sorted by title within each author's oeuvre.”

“Oh, but of course. I would have expected nothing less.”

“Tea?”

“Yes, please.”

“How was your day? Get the Schwan order finished?”

“All set and ready to travel. What smells so good?”

“Rabbit stew.”

“Only my all time favorite. You are amazing.”

“Why thank you, there's pie too. I found a blackberry patch when I was out hunting. I picked just scads and scads of them. So, I was thinking I might bring some to the Schwan's tomorrow as a sort
of welcome gift.”

“How thoughtful of you. I'm sure they'll appreciate it. Um, Waves?”

“Yes, Mister Haught?”

“I was wondering…”

“Yes?”

“Why is there a very large, very dead snake nailed to the wall outside?”

“Oh that? It's a warning.”

“Oh, that? she says,” Cole shook his head in disbelief, “A warning to whom, exactly?”

“A warning to any of his buddies who might think about coming around when I'm trying to get my work done.”

“I see,” he was almost afraid to ask, but he couldn't help it, “And what did this unfortunate fellow do to inconvenience you, as it were?”

“Well, I was picking berries when I heard a familiar sort of sound. Now, we have mountain rattlers back home, so I knew to go still. Luckily, I'd been keeping an eye out for rabbits and both barrels were loaded.”

“And?”

“And I blew his head off and went back to my berrying, no big deal” she looked at him like he had a very tenuous grasp on the obvious.

“No big deal? Who the hell did I marry, Davy Crockett?”

“What was that Mister Haught?”

“Nothing...anyway my dear, while I appreciate the sentiment and at the same time find myself suddenly rather loathe to risk crossing you, I'm not so sure that hanging him up like that is going to, as you said, keep his buddies away.”

“What else would you have me do with it?”

“Well, there are those who say they're good eating. It's not a good idea to waste meat out here. You never know when you might have some next.”

“Don't be disgusting, Cole.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

“I'd eat Calamity Jane before I'd ever consider putting a nasty, revolting, creepy, slithering serpent in my mouth. Anything that can move that fast without legs and can bite you a half hour after you cut its head off, has got to come straight from the devil himself. That's the one part of the Bible I never had trouble believing.”

“Snakes of the world beware! I know what you mean though, I can't stand them myself. Just the sight of them makes my flesh crawl. Just the same, I'd feel better about being away from home if we got you a dog.”
“Oh yes, Cole! I'd love a puppy!”

“I'll have Dolls ask around next time he goes into town.”

“You're the best husband I've ever had, now let's eat. We need to get to bed early if we're going traveling tomorrow.”

“Whatsoever you say, Mrs. Haught. I'm not about to say no to a woman who's quicker on the draw than a Ponderosa rattler.”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Waverly accompanies Cole on a delivery and finds a surprise waiting at their destination.

Chapter Notes

Sorry I didn't post yesterday as promised. Life has a way of interfering. I was working on the rewrite, it was going great and then I got an annoying phone call that completely destroyed my creative flow and I couldn't get it back. Hope you find it worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning, Waverly tended to the animals on autopilot, thinking only of the upcoming excursion, while her husband went off to fetch the wagon. After the milking and feeding were done, she hurriedly packed up a picnic lunch and took a bath. As she stood naked before the mirror, braiding her still damp hair, the young bride suddenly came to a galling revelation.

Oh.

Dear.

God.

For the first time since arriving at the homestead, she was going to have to wear a corset.

She couldn't very well go to meet the Schwans in her boy's work clothes. This was a business call and she could not risk doing anything to jeopardize Cole's livelihood, not if she wanted to continue eating as a regular habit. Laying out her skirt, blouse, chemise and petticoats on the bed, she stared across the room at the offending item, which lay threateningly atop her, as yet not unpacked, steamer trunk. Oh, how she wished she could go without it, but that simply wasn't an option.

Shit.

The best she could do was put on everything she could, excepting the miserable contraption, and then don it and the nearly as uncomfortable shoes at the last possible minute, after the husband arrived at home. Which, if she was reading the position of the sun right, ought to be any time now.

Apparently, her solar assessment was correct, since the redhead arrived just a few minutes later.

“Waves, are you in here?”

“Just a moment, Mister Haught.”
The redhead nearly fell on her ass when her wife came out of the bedroom, clad in a long plum hued skirt and an ivory corset, trimmed in pink ribbon. It was loosely laced, but still doing the job it was intended for, well enough to put Waverly's ample assets on advantageous display. The nearer the brunette came, the more Cole's hands began to shake.

“Hey, you,” she leaned in close to kiss his cheek, her breasts grazing his arm, “Could you give me a hand with the laces?” she asked, turning her back to him.

Cole held her breath, willing her hands to still, even as the rest of her body trembled with feeling. This wasn't some scantily clad working girl at Flossie's, this was her wife and this was the most of Waverly she'd seen so exposed. All that soft, alabaster skin, so close and so inviting and technically, all hers to touch if she wanted to and my how she wanted to, but she didn't dare. The redhead squirmed a bit, trying to release some of the heat in her pants, suddenly finding the stiffness of her leather gloves, against that heat, very much a point of focus.

“Uh, Waves..” she stammered, “I don't know...I mean...I'm not sure how...I can't possibly...”

“Of course you can, silly boy! It's just like lacing up a shoe.”

“If you say so,” Cole conceded, although she couldn't recall one incidence of a shoe ever causing her nipples to stiffen and chafe against her binder like this, no matter how hard she tried.

“Don't be afraid to make it tight. I want to make a good impression on your clients.”

As the redhead gave the laces a particularly enthusiastic tug, Waverly let loose a moan that caused every drop of moisture to disappear from her husband's mouth. Gasping, Cole began to cough uncontrollably.

“Are you quite alright, Mister Haught?”

“Uh...yes...the roads were dry...just a bit of dust in my throat.”

“Get yourself a drink of water, my laces can wait.”

“No...cough...I'm OK now,” the taller woman insisted, taking in a deep breath to try and steady herself, then blowing it out through pursed lips, feeling like she might never breathe again. Then she saw her wife's milky white back break out in gooseflesh and the shorter girl shiver.

“You cold, Waves?”

“No. I guess someone musta walked over my grave. Are you? Your hands are trembling. I hope you're not coming down with something.”

“Feeling a little light headed, I probably just need to eat is all.”

“I packed us a lunch for the drive, but I'll tell you what, why don't you sit down and have a good bit of bread and butter while I finished getting dressed. And fill up that water jug, will ya?”

“Whatever you say Mrs. Haught. You know, we got lucky, it really is a beautiful day for a drive.”

“Oh good, I'm so excited to see more of the countryside and meet some new people. It was so sweet of you to invite me.”

“What can I say, it makes me feel safer knowing I have a crack shot on the bench beside me.”

“Oh, do I need to bring my shotgun?”
“I was only kidding, my dear, but you may do as you wish.”

“Have I mentioned how much I like your attitude?” the young bride teased.

“I'm not always going to let you have your way, you know.”

“Uh-huh, whatever you say, Mister Haught. If you'll be a dear and take that basket with the food and the jug out to the wagon, I'll be with you in a minute. I just want to make a quick trip to the privy.”

“Aye aye, Captain!”

Cole thought for a moment and then decided to make her own trip to the outhouse. However male she might appear to be, tending to her business while on the road was a tricky affair. It would be a genuine tragedy to lose her new love due to a combination of too much coffee and the inability to find a tree large enough to hide behind.

As they trundled along the dusty, rutted cowpath that passed as a road, Waverly sighed.

“It truly is a lovely day, not too hot, not too cold, a nice breeze. I'm so glad you asked me to come along, Cole. Is it a very long way?”

“It's not short.”

“Well then,” Waverly pulled a small brown book from her basket, “I guess it's a good thing entertainment has been provided.”

“You're just about the best wife a man could ask for, have I told you that?”

“I don't know about that, I'm pretty sure most men would prefer a wife who reads less and is more affectionate.”

“We're not talking about most men, we are talking about Cole Haught. Plus, I have not yet given up hope that the other might come in time, that miracle you spoke of...”

Waverly just smiled a cryptic smile and recited clearly,” The Innocents Abroad by Mark Twain. This is the one I told you about, do you remember?”

“By all means, read on Mrs. Haught.”

“As you wish, my dear.”

“For months the great pleasure excursion to Europe and the Holy Land was chatted about in the newspaper everywhere in America and discussed at countless firesides. It was a novelty in the way of excursions – its like had not been thought of before, and it compelled that interest which attractive novelties always command. It was to be a picnic on a gigantic scale. The participants in it, instead of freighting an ungainly steam ferry-boat with youth and beauty and pies and doughnuts, and paddling up some obscure creek to disembark upon a grassy lawn and wear themselves out with a long summer day's laborious frolicking under the impression that it was fun, were to sail away in a great steamship with flags flying and cannon pealing, and take a royal holiday beyond the broad ocean in many a strange clime and in many a land renowned in history! They were to sail for months over the breezy Atlantic and the sunny Mediterranean; they were to scamper about the decks by day, filling the ship with shouts and laughter – or read novels and
poetry in the shade of the smokestacks, or watch for the jelly-fish and the nautilus over the side and the shark, the whale, and other strange monsters of the deep; and at night they were to dance in the open air, on the upper deck, in the midst of a ballroom that stretched from horizon to horizon, and was domed by the bending heavens and lighted by no meaner lamps than the stars and magnificent moon—dance, and promenade, and smoke, and sing, and make love, and search the skies for constellations that never associate with the “Big Dipper” they were so tired of; and they were to see the ships of twenty navies – the customs and costumes of twenty curious peoples – the great cities of half the world – they were to hob-nob with nobility and hold friendly converse with kings and princes, grand moguls and anointed lords of mighty empires!”

“Would you believe that after ”many a land renowned in history” that was all one sentence?”

“He does run on. I must say, Waves, I never took you to be the type to admire such purple prose.”

“It’s meant to be satire, silly boy.”

“In that case, I'm impressed.”

“Is that something you'd ever want to do?”

“Write satire?”

“No, silly...go on an ocean voyage.”

“Most definitely not.”

“No? Why not?”

“Well, speaking as a person who has in fact, as your Mister Twain says, “sailed the breezy Atlantic” I can categorically say never ever in a million years would I consent to go on an ocean voyage.”

“You did not enjoy it?”

“Would you enjoy vomiting over the side so much that you were convinced that the next thing to come out of your mouth would inevitably be your shoes?”

“I can't say that I would.”

“Believe me, my dear, the Atlantic rolls and rolls until you lose all sense of your own body and quite forget the proper way to move. Frankly, I don't know how they are able to sell it as a pleasure cruise.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“An oceanliner?”

“A whale!”

“Oh, Mrs. Haught, it sometimes seems to me that the average man would need a map to follow your train of thought.”

“Well then, I guess you must not be an average man.”

'You have no idea.'
“I suppose not. Yes, I have...”

“You have what, Mister Haught?”

“Seen a whale.”

“Tell me everything!”

“This was no evil monster, as the illustrious Mister Melville would have you believe. In my personal experience, it seemed to be a most gentle and friendly creature. It came right up alongside our boat and just stayed there a while watching us, it seemed to be as curious about us as we were of it.”

“You must be teasing me. Weren't you scared? What did it look like? Was it huge?”

“I must admit, I was rather taken aback by its size, it had to have been at least thirty feet long, but I don't think scared is the proper word, more of a wary respect.”

“More please...describe it in as much detail as you can remember, I want to know everything,” Waverly commanded, enthralled.

“Well, it's upper parts were a shiny blue black, but smooth, not scaled like a fish, speckled here and there with barnacles and white scars. The underside was a greyish white, ribbed lengthwise from end to end. It had enormous tail flukes, very much in the style of Mister Melville's illustrations, and most surprisingly, long almost wing-like fins with which it seemed to fly through the water.”

“Why are you stopping?” the excited girl prompted, “Go on...go on...”

“After a few minutes of observing us, it disappeared under the boat. I must admit, that gave me quite a fright. If it had come up beneath us, we would have been goners. Then, just when I was sure we had seen the last of it, there appeared a great waterspout, about fifty yards starboard of our fishing boat. Next, the miraculous creature came leaping out of the water, in what seemed like nothing so much as an expression of great joy, diving in with such a splash that our small craft rocked violently for several minutes.”

“Oh my! How thrilling! O' how I wish that I might see one.”

“Perhaps one day you will, my dear. I hear tell that the Pacific is just as full of whales as the Atlantic and that is not so far to us that seeing it one day isn't within the realm of the possible. It has always been a dream of mine to behold it.”

“Oh, Cole! I think marrying you is just about the best thing I have ever done. It's like a whole new world has opened up to me and I don't just mean the frontier.” She slid her arm around his waist and kissed him on the cheek, before resting her head on a broad shoulder.

“Remind me to tell you about dolphins.”

Waverly playfully slapped at his arm, “Oh, you!”

“Incidentally, Mrs. Haught, I'm mighty pleased that you married me too.”

It wasn't long before the pair arrived at the Schwan place. There was little on the plot aside from a couple of horses, a wagon and a small sod house, but the surrounding land was indeed beautiful,
gently rolling hills, simply covered in wild flowers and the river winding through it on the diagonal.

As soon as the wagon rolled to a stop, a very large, very blonde man came striding up alongside.

“Herr Schwan?” Cole inquired, jumping down from the wagon and going around the other side to help Waverly dismount.

“Ya,” the big man answered, “Und you must be Herr Haught.”

“That I am, sir, that I am,” Cole reached out to shake his meaty hand, his own nearly disappearing inside it, “And this is my lovely wife, Waverly.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Frau Haught,” he executed an old fashioned bow at the waist, “My new bride shall be along any moment now, she is most anxious to meet anozer lady.”

Waverly cast her eyes upon the landscape and sure enough, a woman, nearly as blonde as her husband, was making her way across the field of flowers.

“Ah, here she comes now,” as the young woman approached, Herr Schwan began making introductions, “Herr Haught, Frau Haught, zis is my new bride...”

Waverly interrupted, in stunned recognition, “Polly?”

Cole following a second later, “P-Polly?”

The trio stood staring at one another in stunned silence until the blonde began to speak “Why, Miss...”

“Mrs...” Waverly interrupted, “It's Mrs. now, Polly. Mrs. Waverly Haught.” cutting the girl off before she could expose her true identity, “I knew that bread tasted familiar!”

“So, you've been using my recipe, Cole?” the blonde said flirtatiously, forgetting for a moment that she was married, “You naughty thing, why didn't you tell me you were marrying a girl from back home?”

“How was I supposed to know? Neither of you ever got specific about towns, you know.”

“And just how do you know Mister Haught, Polly?” the brunette asked, somewhat suspiciously.

“Oh, I've known this tall drink of water since he first come to town, haven't I, Red?”

Herr Schwan cleared his throat, “Herr Haught, Vy don't ve let ze ladies catch up, vile ve unload zis vagon?”

“What a great idea, Robert!” Polly enthused, kissing him on the cheek, “Come on, Waverly...there's something behind the barn, I just know you'll want to see.”

As the two women ambled in the general direction of the structure, Polly commenced her questioning, “So, Michelle...is there some reason you're living under an assumed name?”

“I'm not...Waverly was always my name, it's just that I hadn't quite resigned myself to it back when you and I knew one another, so I went by my middle name,” the brunette explained, “Anyway, Cole and I have this arrangement, where as he said in his advertisement, we were born the day
before we met. Neither of us have divulged anything of consequence about our pasts, this is a chance at a new beginning. That's why I answered his ad in the first place.”

“I see, I suppose we'd all put in for a new past if we could.”

“So, I'd be most beholden to you if you didn't call me Michelle or talk about back home in front of him. Can I count on you?”

“Oh, Cole used to come in when I was working at Flossie's...as a waitress,” she added quickly, with a wistful smile, “He was just about the sweetest, most polite fella I ever met, except for my Robert. You are one lucky girl.”

“Believe me, I know exactly how lucky I am. Mister Haught is one in a million. So kind and thoughtful, I've never known another man with so much respect for women. He even built me my own bedroom, since we only knew each other through letters.”

“You mean to tell me you aren't sleeping with that gorgeous hunk of man?”

“Nope.”

“And he doesn't mind? Why he must be practically unique.”

“He says he only cares for my comfort and never wants me to feel pushed. You and I haven't seen each other in a long time, Pols. So you wouldn't know about recent events. Let it suffice to say that Cole and I both suffered great losses before we found one another. Getting over that kind of thing takes time.”

“You don't have to tell me...I was a mail-order when I first come out too, but when I got here my Mister Francis was dead. That's how I ended up at Flossie's.”

“Oh, Polly...I am so sorry. You must have been so scared. Flossie's...that's where you met my Mister Haught? Is that where you met your Herr Schwan too?” Waverly giggled.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Just remembering how your Oma was always trying to teach you German and how you were never interested. I bet you're glad she was so persistent now.”

“It sure as heckfire didn't hurt when Robert came along and yes, I met him at Flossie's. One night, about two months back, he came in for the first time and I serviced, I mean served him. After that he kept coming in night after night and he always asked for me special. Then one night, he comes stomping across the dining room, in those big black boots of his, trailing mud all over the carpet and he honest to God, gets down on his knees and asks me to marry him.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I told him he didn't want me, I told him he deserved someone better than the likes of me, someone who was good enough for him, and he said,” Polly effected a German accent, “Stop zis, Polly. I know all I need to know about you. Now, stop fighting zis und let's be happy.”

“That darling man!”
“Then he literally swept me up in his arms and carried me out through the swinging doors. I never looked back.”

“Oh, Polly...I am so happy for you.”

“Thank you, Waverly. We did pretty good for a coupla mountain gals, didn't we?”

“We sure did...only...”

“What?” the blonde asked apprehensively.

“Your babies are gonna be enormous!”

Polly burst out laughing, “Cole's no midget, you know.”

“Oh, no...we won't be having children...Mister Haught and I are strictly friends. This is a marriage of convenience, not a love match.”

“Whatever you say, Waverly.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Only that you look at that boy, the same way you used to look at the buttermilk pie, back at Aunt Martha's tea room.”

“I am certain I have no idea what you're getting at, Mrs. Schwan.”

“Have you not noticed the way Red looks at you?”

“Mister Haught looks at me in any number of different ways, none of which stand out as particularly noteworthy.”

“You are young aren't you?”

“Excuse me?” Waverly huffed.

“Don't go getting your back up now, Mrs. Haught, but when that boy sets eyes on you, he's as twitterpated as a squirrel in Springtime.”

“You really think so?”

“I've dispensed all the wisdom I care to for today, you get to decide if it's true or not.”

“Can I ask you a question?” the brunette said softly, “As one mountain girl to another?”

“Of course you can, my friend,” Polly replied, pulling her into a one armed hug.

“When Cole and I were driving out to the homestead for the first time, my husband's partner, Mister Dolls, kept teasing him about how he'd managed to get your bread recipe when no one else could and how nothing in the world could make him share it, not even with me.”

“Hmmmmm...I knew I was right about him. That's one honorable man you've got there.”

“Polly...were you and Cole...um...you know...together?”

“No, Waverly...I swear on my mother's grave. Cole and I were never together.”
“Then why did you give him your secret recipe?”

“I'll tell you...”

“Well?”

“I gave Cole my bread recipe because he did something for me that no other man had done before him.”

“And what was that?”

“He treated me with respect, like an equal, not a servant or like he was better than I was just because he was a customer. He complimented my bread, made a noise one generally only hears coming from behind bedroom doors, when he took a bite, then asked me if he could have it. Others have begged me for it in the past, tried to bribe or trick it out of me, but Cole was so shy and sweet and polite, that I just couldn't say no.”

“Yeah, I might know a little bit about that.”

“Can I be honest with you, Michelle?”

“Uh-uh-uh...”

“Sorry...Waverly.”

“Please...”

“You got yourself one fine man there. Truth be told, he's just about the best man I ever met. You damned well better hang on to him with both hands. There's lots of girls out there who'd be glad to take him off you, girls who would be perfectly willing to be more than friends. I'm not gonna lie to you. I took a shot at him myself, but you two were already writing each other by then. The moment I saw the look in his eyes, when he told me about you, I knew I'd lost. He was already yours in his heart.”

“Thank you for being so honest, Polly.”

“You know what my Oma used to say? Don't throw away the future worrying about the past.”

“Perhaps I do need to take a good long look at my relationship with Cole.”

“Good girl.”

“Now, what was it you wanted to show me?”

“Oh, it's right back here, just on the other side of those hay bales.”

“Oh my God!” Waverly squealed.

“I can't imagine what's happened to those women,” Cole grinned, shaking his head.

“You know my Polly,” Herr Schwan said, with obvious admiration, “She loves to talk.”

“Waverly suffers from that same affliction.”
“You do know her...my Polly...don't you?”

“You might say we're acquainted.”

“Just how do you know her?”

“From Flossie's.”

“Ah, I see,” the hulking blonde suddenly looked very tired and sad.

“Yes, she waited on me a few times in the dining room. She's a marvelous cook. You're a very lucky man.”

“So, you've never...”

“Oh, no! Never...I swear!”

“God be praised.”

“Then you know...about Polly?”

“I do.”

“And that doesn't bother you?”

“Everyone has a past, Herr Haught, und everyone deserves a second chance.”

“I'm so glad you feel that way. Polly's a good girl, she's just had some rough breaks. She deserves to be happy.”

“I'm glad you feel zat way, Herr Cole. You a nice man. It vould have been difficult for me here,” he placed his enormous hand over his heart, “To kill you.”

The redhead chuckled, nervously, “Oh look, here come the ladies now.”

The women were coming over the rise, laughing like school girls. The shorter of the two had her arms full of something.

“Oh dear, what has my wife managed to find now?”

“Ah...zat vill be a pup. My good hunting bitch had a litter a couple of months ago. At first I zought she had been pregnant ven ve came over from Deutschland, but ven zey came out it vas obvious ze little strumpet had gotten friendly vith a local volf or perhaps coyote.”

“Well, we have been wanting a dog.”

Waverly came striding over to her husband with a blanket in her arms, looking just like she was carrying a baby. Lifting the flap. Cole saw a chubby, stumpy little thing with black fur tipped in gold, huge eyes and funny ears that drooped at the tips.

“Ah, I see you picked ze runt.”

“He's so little,” Waverly cooed, “I just couldn't leave him there for the others to bully. I'm gonna call him Champ, so he'll have more confidence.”
“Well, hello Champ,” Cole said, scratching the little fella between the ears, “Welcome to the family.”

“I'm afraid we ought to be going if we want to make the homestead by dark,” the redhead told his wife, taking hold of the pup, so that she could climb up into the wagon, “It was good to see you again, Polly. When you disappeared I feared the worst. I'm so glad to see you well and happy.”

“The same to you, Cole. You got yourself a great girl there.”

“Don't I know it,” he said handing the puppy up to the woman in question.

“Oh...I almost forgot,” Waverly cried out, “I brought you these,” she handed the basket to Cole who then passed it to the enormous blonde fellow, “I picked just a passel of them yesterday. In the way of saying welcome and good luck.”

“Ah, brombeeren,” Herr Schwan smiled, looking into the basket, “Danke schoen.”

“Thanks for the puppy, Pols and congratulations on your nuptials.”

“Thank you for the blackberries, Waves. They'll make a nice pie.”

“You let me know if you have any troubles with that cabin kit, you hear?”

“I vill, I vill...auf wiedersehen.”

“Bye bye, Polly...Herr Schwan...hope to see you soon,” Cole called back as they pulled away.

“Ah, that was nice,” Waverly sighed.

“Yes, it was...so...” the redhead asked, “How do you know Polly?”

Chapter End Notes

The excerpt from "The Innocents Abroad" by Mark Twain appears courtesy of The Gutenberg Project
Fic prompt please

Chapter Summary

I need a little change of pace. DO NOT WORRY I AM NOT ABANDONING THIS

I am just craving a little variety...

Please submit fic prompt for a humorous one-shot...canon or any A/U of Wynonna Earp

I REPEAT I AM NOT ABANDONING THIS! JUST IN THE MOOD TO WRITE SOMETHING SILLY...JUST A ONE SHOT
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Waverly gets some mail from back home

As Waverly waited for her husband's mid-day visit, the most excitement she was anticipating was a chance to go to the privy, without having to worry that Champ would chew up another one of her books. Certainly, the last thing she'd expected was for Cole to come home with mail, an exciting occurrence at any time, but this mail had a return address in Pennsylvania. This mail was for her. Also, this wasn't just a letter, but an enormous parcel. Its return address an embossed stamp, reading Nedley & Son Mercantile.

“Oh Cole,” she exclaimed with glee, “It's from my sister!”

Carefully freeing the package from its wrappings, there was no way she was going to waste that much good brown paper, she pried open the crate underneath it all. The first thing she spotted, resting on the very top, was a letter addressed to herself, which she set aside to read when she could give it her full attention.

“What do we have here?” Waverly announced each item as she removed it from the box, “Apple butter, jam, honey, boiled sweets and what can be in these tins, I wonder?” she removed the lid from the smaller one, “Oooh, pretzels! And in this big one...Oh my God, it's my sister's apple cake! You, Mister Haught, are in for a treat. My big Sis always was the best baker in town.”

“Better than Polly? I find that hard to believe.”

“Polly doesn't count, she only came in Summer to work in her aunt's tea room. To my way of thinking that doesn't qualify her as a resident.”

“Your sister must be a uniquely generous soul, sending such a large package all the way from the East Coast.”

“I can't be certain, mind you, but I'm pretty sure this is a wedding present,” she removed one last very large item from the box, tearing off the fabric it was wrapped in, with the thought that it might do for curtains, “I take that back, this is most definitely a gift in honor of our recent nuptials. It's a Wedding Ring quilt.”

“Look at that intricate stitching, someone put a lot of work into this. You'll definitely be warm enough at night with that on your bed.”

“Oh no, Cole,” she shook her head vehemently, “It's considered very bad luck to sleep alone under a Wedding Ring quilt. It's meant to shelter a man and wife as they share their marriage bed.”

“Ah, well then...” the redhead ducked his head shyly, “The sentiment is nice, anyway.”

“It is...but knowing my sister, she thinks she's being funny. She's always had an odd sense of humor.”

“So, she knows about our arrangement, then?”
“Yes, I told her all about you.”

“I must say, I do admire her commitment,” Cole replied, “Even I wouldn't go that far for a joke. Still, it's a shame all those hours of hard work will go to waste.”

“You never know, it may be put to good use one of these day,” the brunette answered, with a quizzical smile, “Really now, Mister Haught, I must say...giving up hope? That's so unlike you.”

Cole found herself struck mute by her wife's statement. Unable to move, she could do nothing but blush and smile. Then it hit her.

“Waverly, what is that God awful smell?”

“Champ! You little bastard! How many times do I have to tell you? You do that outside!”

“He's still a baby, Waves. He doesn't know any better. I guess now that he has a handle on staying on the homestead, we ought to concentrate on housebreaking him. You sit, I'll pick it up.”

“By all means, go right ahead. I've been cleaning up puddles all morning. Remind me again why we needed a dog.”

“When he's older, he really will be an asset, good protection from strange men and dangerous animals. Plus he'll sound the alarm if anyone is approaching.”

“Well, I wish he'd hurry up and get older. I've about had it with his shenanigans. The little shit chewed up my Herodotus this morning!”

“Oh, Champ! Bad idea, big guy,” Cole swept the puppy into her arms, speaking to him in a serious fatherly tone, “If you want either of us to have a good, long, happy life, you mustn't eat Mama's histories!”

“You're too soft on him.”

“You get a lot more loyalty out of a dog that loves you, than a dog that's afraid of you.”

“If you say so. Why don't you pick up the loving gift he left you and I'll wrap up some of this apple cake for Friend Dolls and his family.”

“I'm certain Delia and The Flowers will love that.”

“Just you make sure you men folk don't eat it before it gets to them.”

“Aye aye, Captain. Can I ask you a question, Waves?”

“You may,” she grinned mockingly, correcting his grammar.

“I hope this isn't prying...I know we discussed being more open with one another, but I don't want to overstep...”

“Just ask already.”

“What's your sister's name?”

“Really, Mister Haught...I can't believe you're still so cautious when we've been married over a month now. You ask me things like you suspect the answer may be scandalous.”
Cole shrugged, “I am loathe to offend your sense of privacy, my dear.”

“You still haven't answered my question.”

“Here,” she handed him the envelope, “Read it yourself.”

“Mrs. Randall Nedley.”

“Apparently, that's what she'd calling herself these days.” the brunette shook her head, “I'm so glad I didn't lose my personal identity when I got married.”

My Dear Sister,

First of all, allow me to congratulate you on your marriage! I am so happy for you. Even if it is, as you say, only one of convenience. Gus seems to think it won't stay that way for long. The old devil even tried to entice me into a wager, based on how long it would take all that companionate marriage business, as she calls it, to fall by the wayside. Loyal sister that I am, I refused her. I am prepared to take you at your word on the matter...for now. It's not that I doubt you, dear one, it's just that as you well know, Aunt Gus is very seldom wrong.

As for the quilt, please know that I do not send it as a nasty joke at your expense. It is simply that there are a lot of Mennonite ladies in our little town and their chief pleasure in this life is a quilting bee. As soon as I let it slip to one of the ladies I was helping, that my sister had recently wed, she absolutely insisted. Apparently, your marriage would have been doomed if we didn't make you one. I'm afraid that I am still becoming accustomed to the life of a merchant's wife and have not yet perfected the art of conversing with the customers without actually saying anything.

As I have learned, a quilting bee is more about the women coming together free of men to gossip and relax, than it is about the actual quilt. Since you are my sister, I was required to participate by default. I did some of the simple stitching, but I assure you, the quilting and design was nothing to do with me. You know I never did have the patience for needlework. I know that right now, you don't feel it likely that you will ever have use of this quilt, but life is a funny thing, little sister. There are surprises around every corner and they seldom appear from the places you might anticipate. So, hang on to this women's work, Baby Girl. You never know, you may be glad to have it one day. In the meantime, just be thankful I talked them out of including fertility patterns.

More than anything, I do hope for your sake, that your Mister Haught has turned out to be everything you hoped he would be. Randy and I really are the very picture of wedded bliss. We are so much in love, that if I were a casual observer rather than a participant, I should feel compelled to make sarcastic comments about us, we are that sickeningly happy. My Mister Nedley truly is the most wonderful of men. He treats me like a rare treasure. Having him in my life, a life away from
Pa's domineering influence, has shown me precisely what pathetic excuses for men our family managed to spawn.

So no, my darling, I do not hold it against you that Pa and I no longer speak. How could I speak to that horrid, hateful man after how abominably he treated you? Frankly, I am glad that you stole his horse and best rig. Had it been up to me, I would have devised a much more Shakespearean sort of punishment for the self-righteous bastard. Sincerely dear, I think the very best thing we can do is live our lives happily, however we see fit and never waste another thought on that old sonofabitch again.

The very thought of you wed to that clod Champ Hardy, nauseates me. I agree, you really had no other choice but to leave. Still, I am sure I don't need to tell you how afraid I was for you, when I learned that you had run off in the night. I have never felt such blessed relief as when Gus told me that you were with her. Part of me wishes you had come here instead of running to Philadelphia, but I understand that, being barely acquainted with my Mister Nedley, you could not take that chance. At any rate, please do not be cross with Gus for breaking your confidence, she only sought to ease my mind. I was quite beside myself with worry.

As to Pa's litany of your various sins...I would never accept the slanderous ravings of a bitter, resentful, old codger as gospel truth, even if he is a minister, over my faith in the true nature of the sweetest, kindest, most loving girl anyone has ever been privileged to call sister. So, have no fear, my darling, I would no more dream of reporting you to the authorities, than I would abandon my husband and run off with the traveling circus. No matter what wild and unimaginable circumstance might befall us in this life, I will always be on your side, Baby Girl.

As for the other matter Pa was so unpleasant about...

The answer is no. I never had any idea that he was not your real father. Were I in your place, I should be glad that I did not have the blood of that self-important hypocrite poisoning my veins. Believe me, I certainly wish that I did not. I am sorry to say that I do not remember much about your Mister Earp. I was still quite young then. As I recall he was a very nice man, friendly to us children, not cold like so many adults tend to be. The thing that sticks out most about that Summer, is how at times Mama seemed so lighthearted and gay, as you know that was far from the norm. I wish that you had been old enough, when we lost Mama, to really remember her. What little memory I have of her is all but faded now. Still every now and again, something will catch me, a smell, a taste, a piece of music and I will feel her presence again. I am so glad that Aunt Gus has been sharing her stories. You have grown up to be so similar to her in your way. There was always something so ephemeral about her, something we mere mortals couldn't quite catch hold of, rather like the way you live so much of your life in your books and imagination.

While I would give anything to have spared you the traumatic way in which you learned of your true parentage, I am so happy that you have found your truth and used it as a passageway to a new beginning. Since marrying Randy, I truly feel like my life has begun anew, my fondest hope is that your frontier endeavor progresses so felicitously.

I was so dismayed to read the news of your Nikki. I know how close you had become after all those years of correspondence. Please accept Randy's and my sincerest condolences for the depths of sorrow you must be experiencing. I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you. The only comparable loss I have suffered would be Mama and I was both too young and too busy caring for you, to allow myself to truly experience that grief. You, I know, have always been an exceptionally sensitive soul, appearances notwithstanding, and I have no doubt that this tragedy has stripped you down to your bare bones. Please promise me, that for your own sake, you will at least try and allow your Mister Haught the chance to try and mend the damage to your precious heart.
I hope so deeply, that he is teaching you that not all men are like Will and Pa. I never could get you to believe me when you were younger, but perhaps now that you are a grown up married lady, you might give some consideration to the possibility that men really are more fun to kiss than they are to beat up. It is of course, your business and yours alone, how you conduct your personal life, but I think it would be a sort of tragedy if you were never to have children. With your kind and gentle heart and your ability to find the joy in even the most wretched of situations, you would make such a wonderful mother. I am truly not trying to influence you, Sister Dear, but as older sister/mother it is in my job description to express my opinion on these matters. If you should need to unburden your soul on a willing ear or have any questions about marriage, I am always only a letter away, but I will not hold it against you if you prefer to keep your own counsel. As they say, there is no ocean so deep as the secrets of a woman's heart. We are all made differently and wouldn't it be a boring world if we weren't?

So, tell me about this frontier of yours. Is it everything you always dreamed it would be? What is the Montana Territory like? Please share with me the story of your transcontinental journey. I want details! Did you see any Indians?

Most of all, please tell me about this mysterious man with the silly name. Cole Haught? Cold Hot. You know that's gotta be made up. I hope not, for your sake. It doesn't speak much to imagination. Tell me all about your wedding. Was it oddly romantic or more like a civil service exam?

Has your Mister Haught turned out to be as handsome and sweet as advertised? How do you like living with him and keeping house out there in the wild west? You have Aunt Gus convinced, but I want to know, is this tall, broad-shouldered, charming redhead really good enough for my little sister? I think you and I both know that no one ever will be. For his sake, I hope he is close.

I really must be getting back to work, the afternoon rush is about to start. So I'm afraid I must sign off now. Please let me know if the package did not arrive in good condition and whether or not there is anything else I can send you. We have quite the booming concern here and there is very little we cannot get our hands on, so do not be timid about asking.

Lastly, my dear sister, please don't ever feel that you must thank me for raising you or feel like my being both sister and mother to you was a burden. Indeed, until I met my Mister Nedley, you were the love of my life. How could I not wish to protect such a kind, sensitive, loving soul from the horrors of the world, even if it did come wrapped in the trappings of a brash hoyden, who had a serious problem with authority?

I love you, Baby Girl. I always have and I always will. I consider myself privileged to have experienced being both your mother and your sister. You taught me so much more about myself, than I ever could have taught you. More than anything else in this world, my wish for you is that you find your happiness as I have found mine.

Your loving sister, Wynonna

P.S. - Randy and I are expecting a little angel come Autumn. So, I hope you have no problem with sharing your mother, Auntie Waverly.

The young newlywed had just begun her sixth read through of the letter, when Cole came home. Of course there had been several interruptions by Champ during the previous five. Her husband couldn't help noticing that the girl's eyes were red and there was no dinner on the stove.
“Waves? Are you okay?” the redhead rushed to her wife's side, kissing her on the head, as had become their custom, “Have you had sad news?”

“Huh?” she replied, distractedly.

“Waverly? Are you quite well? You're scaring me!”

“Oh...hi Cole,” she stood and kissed his cheek, “I hope you don't mind pancakes for dinner. I got sidetracked.”

“I can see that you've been crying, dear. Have you had bad news from back home?”

“Oh, no...nothing like that. I just miss my big sister. Actually, I've had good news...You're going to be an uncle...I mean I'm going to be an aunt...my sister and her husband are expecting a baby...well, she is...although, I suppose he had to have been involved at some point.”

“You are adorable, have I told you that lately? Any other interesting news or is that too personal?”

“She did mention you, as a matter of fact.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“She wanted to know if you were as handsome as advertised,” Waverly giggled.

“Oh, is that all...”

“Not quite...still, I don't know if I should tell you...it is rather personal, but it concerns you and we have been trying to be less guarded with one another.”

“I know I've been trying. It's up to you, Waves. Remember, this is a safe space. No judgment.”

“Well, my dear...she did ask if you were good enough for me...if you were treating me well and making me happy...”

“I feel like there's more...”

“Um, she...well, she urged me to give you a chance to try and mend my broken heart,” Waverly admitted in a near whisper.

The redhead kept silent out of respect for the rawness and deeply personal nature of the reveal. When wet, hazel eyes met hers, Cole took her wife into her arms, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

“Of course, that decision is yours and yours alone to make...I would never presume...but please, just know that if the day should ever arrive when you feel like you might be willing to let me attempt such a delicate operation, I would feel deeply honored to be allowed to try.”

Waverly squeezed her then, sighing as she lay her cheek against the broad chest, the tall redhead returning the embrace and kissing the top of her head, once more.

“Thank you, Cole.”

“Anytime,” she could feel her wife smile against her breast, “Can I ask you a question, Waves?”

“Yup.”

“Do I?”
“Do you what?”

“Do I make you happy?”

“Do you really not know the answer to that by now, Cole Haught?” Waverly leaned away from her husband, crossing her arms over her lovely bosom and smiling at him.

“Just making sure, my dear.”

“Okay then...and Cole?”

“Yeah, Waves?”

“Believe me, if that day we were talking about ever comes, you'll be the first to know.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

As is bound to happen when two women cohabitate, Cole and Waverly find themselves butting heads a bit.

Chapter Notes

I decided to go with two shorter chapters rather than one long one. It would be too anti-climactic to continue after the way this one ends.

I got to thinking about the challenges of two women living together. Which made me think that by now their cycles would have synched. Given as this is already a period piece I didn't feel the need to make it a PERIOD PIECE, but still. Even though with her essentially 0% body fat, I doubt Cole still gets visits from Aunt Flow, there would still be hormonal changes that could cause tensions to run high and as for Waverly, she's dangerous even when she doesn't have PMS. So anyway, that was the inspiration behind this chapter, without beating you over the head with it.

The flame-haired young woman sat silently, observing her wife over the dirty breakfast dishes, the latter slowly nursing her coffee and staring blankly into the middle distance. They were both a bit woolheaded yet, having gotten up at the ass crack of dawn to tend to the livestock.

“Waves?” the older girl asked, timidly.

“Hmmmmmm?”

“I realize you’re only half way through your first cup and I’m probably risking life and limb by even speaking to you, but I was wondering…”

“What?” her other half grunted.

“Well, Grumpy Bear,” Cole teased, pouring herself another serving of the dark elixir and hotting up her wife’s cup, “I was wondering if you might be persuaded into an outing today? Since it’s Sunday, I was thinking perhaps a nice ride through the countryside?”

“It isn’t nice to tease a girl before she’s had her second cup of coffee, Mister Haught.”

“Who’s teasing?”

“Got another old girlfriend you’d like to pay a call on, do you?”

“How many times do I need to tell you, that there was never anything between Polly and I, before you’ll believe me?”

“Just until you can manage it without that dimple popping.”
“Waves!”

“Cole…”

“Anyway, with Dolls and I spending so much time in the woods these past few weeks and you being by yourself all of the time, I imagine you must be wrestling a formidable case of cabin fever. I know being home alone with Champ hasn’t exactly been a picnic, your demeanor of late makes that much plain.”

“That dog! Sometimes I wish I could just…you know, a few geese would serve much the same purpose and they would neither chew up my shoes or shit on the kitchen floor.”

“Despite your triumphant attainment of Calamity Jane’s favors, I doubt even you could charm a goose into hunting rabbits,” the redhead teased.

“You doubt me…really?” Waverly replied, her tone not altogether joking, “By the way, Cole…the judging between when it’s OK to tease and when it’s potentially dangerous…still needs work.”

“You see what I mean? I confess, in part I was hoping a bit of fresh scenery might improve your mood, but I also have a bit of business that I need to finish up. It’s a big ranch a ways west of here and I figured if you and I ran the errand, you’d get to see some new parts of the countryside, we could spend a nice day enjoying each others company and Dolls and I wouldn’t have to forfeit valuable time in the woods tomorrow.”

“Really, Cole?”

“Really, Waves.” he replied, tenderly.

“How fast can you get ready?” she asked enthusiastically, bolting out of her chair.

“How fast can you?”

“Half an hour tops…if you help me with my corset.”

‘Dear Lord, no…not that…anything but that…I just can’t…I mean how much can a girl be expected to control herself with all that soft, smooth skin just…just there…begging to be touched…those womanly Waverly curves just crying out to me to run the tips of my fingers lightly down her spine…to plant a kiss between those exquisite shoulder blades…don’t make me do it…please God…not again…’

“Cole?”

“I was gonna… and then the…”

“Cole!”

“I suppose I could…if I must…”

‘If he must? Seriously? Here I am doing everything I can to try and tempt this man into acting more like a husband than a sister and he reacts like I’ve asked him to muck out the privy! He did seem awfully excited about my Whitman gossip…maybe he’s a…that would explain why he was so specific about not looking to find love…all talk and charm and not much else…’

“If you must? Really? You listen to me, Cole Haught…I would venture that plenty of men in these parts would be overjoyed to help me with my corset. No doubt a few would even be glad to pay for
the privilege, if I were that kind of girl. I am considered quite the good looking woman, you know!"

“Yes, you are, my dearest,” he leaned down and kissed the top of her head, “I was kidding, Waves! So sensitive these days, I can’t think what’s gotten into you.”

“I suppose I have been a bit of a shrew lately. Been cooped up with that hellhound too long, I suspect…like you said. Perhaps I could do with a bit of fresh air, after all. I’m sorry, Cole.”

“No apology necessary.”

“Come on, let’s get ready!”

“You go ahead, my dear. I want to clean up this mess before Miss Calamity gets her big paws into it.”

“Shit!”

“Pardon me?”

“I forgot…what about Champ? He’s destructive enough when we’re watching him, let alone home by himself. Ah well…anyway, it was a nice idea”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine if we leave him in the barn with Tessie and Jane for company. That cat has started to take a shine to him I think. I saw them snoozing together by the wood pile yesterday morning. I’m sure she’ll keep him in line.”

“If you think so…”

“Go get dressed, woman.”

“Whatever you say, Mister Haught, but don’t come crying to me if he eats Tess while we’re gone.”

As she stepped from the wheel onto the bench, Waverly asked, “Pardon my being inquisitive, but what kind of business can you possibly have with an empty wagon?”

“I never said it was a delivery. I just need to tie up a few loose ends on a deal I’ve been working on and I thought you’d enjoy coming along for the ride. I even packed us up a little picnic while you were getting ready. Nothing special…”

“You always do that…nothing special…I’m beginning to think you’re trying to make me feel better about you being a better cook than I am, by pretending it isn’t so. Ah well, I’m still the prettiest.”

“That you are, my dear.”

“And the funniest…”

“You’ve certainly got me there…”

“And the smartest…”

“Hey now…don’t you go getting carried away,” Cole teased.
“Mister Haught, sometimes I swear you make me want to…”

“I know,” the redhead smiled, “That’s why I do it. You just look so magnificent when you get your dander up and that high color comes to your cheeks, your eyes sparkling with the anticipation of battle. You like a good fight, Waverly Haught. Don’t even bother to try to deny it.”

“I wouldn’t call them fights,” she hedged, demurely, “Intellectual sparring matches, maybe…verbal tennis, if you will.”

“Then allow me to serve, Madame Haught. While it may be true, as you say, that there are plenty of men in this territory who’d be willing to pay just for the privilege of lacing up your stays, I don’t think there’s a single one among them could handle you.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Yup. That’s gospel truth, as sure as my hair is red. I guess it’s a good thing you’ve already got yourself a man tailor made for the job, huh?”

“Now, don’t you go getting all full of yourself, Haught.”

“Aww, Waves…you know you love me,” he teased.

“Soooo,” Waverly changed the subject, gracelessly, “Shall we play a game to pass the time?”

“Twenty Questions?”

“OK, I’ve got one. You go first.”

“Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?”

“Yes.”

“Cole!”

“Vegetable, I suppose…That’s one.”

“Does it grow in our garden?”

“Nope…Two.”

“Is it something I’d have to forage?”

“Uh-uh…Three.”

“Would Calamity eat it?”

“I really don’t think there’s much that CJ wouldn’t eat…Four.”

“Could I buy it in a store?”

“Nope, but there’s no reason it couldn’t be sold in one…Five.”

“Could I order it in a restaurant?”

“Nope, but if it was on the menu it would definitely be popular…Six.”

“Does it grow on trees?”
“Absolutely…not…That’s seven.”

“Does it grow in the ground?”

“Nope…Eight.”

“It doesn’t grow…hmmmmm…so, is it made from vegetables?”

“Something like that…Nine”

“Is it something you enjoyed as a child?”

“Uh-uh…Ten.”

“Is it something very old?”

“I wouldn’t say that… no…Eleven.”

“It’s new then.”

“That’s not a question, Waves.”

“Is it new?”

“Not to you…Twelve.”

“Not to me…Hmmm…is it new to you?”

“Pretty much…Thirteen.”

“Could it be accurately described as a delicious treat?”

“It most certainly could…Fourteen.”

“Is it my sister’s apple cake?”

“Yes. Your turn.”

“I love winning,” the petite brunette smiled, “Now let me think…”

“Take your time, Mrs. Haught, it’s a long trip,” the driver teased.

“Whatever you say, my dear,” she replied, mockingly, “OK…I’ve got it.”

“Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?”

“Yes…That’s one.”

“Hey, that’s not fair, which one?”

“All of the above…Two.”

“So, I would be correct in assuming it’s man made?”

“You would…That’s three.”

“Is it larger than a loaf of bread?”
“Definitely…Four.”

“Is it smaller than a saddle?”

“I would certainly hope so…Five.”

“Could I buy one in a store?”

“You sure could, Cole…but I imagine you’d get some awfully funny looks…Six.”

“Could you make your own?”

“I suppose you could, yes…if you enjoyed that sort of thing…that’s seven.”

“Is it something which might frighten those of the fairer sex?”

“I’m not sure frighten is the proper word, horrify perhaps…Eight.”

“Would it scare men?”

“Some men of a certain sort, I suppose. I can think of one, right off the top of my head, who would definitely be spooked…Nine.”

“Hmmmm…and could it be used in hunting or trapping?”

“Not the type you’re thinking of…that’s ten.”

“Is it associated mainly with a particular season?”

“If only! Eleven now.”

“So it’s utile year round…could I make one from wood?”

“I suppose you could, technically…but it would be utterly ineffectual for its intended purpose…and twelve.”

“Is it made of glass?”

“Uh-uh…Thirteen.”

“What else is manufactured…let me think…is it made from textiles?”

“Yes…Fourteen.”

“Is it something I would wear into town?”

“I would certainly hope not…although, it would cause quite the sensation if you did…Fifteen.”

“Ah, is it something you would wear?”

“I have been known to on occasion…Sixteen now, you’d better start narrowing it down, Mister Haught.”

“Larger than a loaf of bread…smaller than a saddle…an amalgam of animal, vegetable and mineral…you would wear it but I would not…is it one of those fashionable new ladies hats with the dead bird on them?”
“Imaginative guess, my dear…but that’s a no…seventeen!”

“Is it a bustle?”

“Nope…Eighteen.”

“Ladies would find it horrifying but I might be spooked by it?”

“Yup…Nineteen.”

“Hey, that wasn’t a question! I was thinking out loud!”

“Technically it was a question, Cole. Don’t start cheating just because you’re about to lose.”

“Fine…”

“Mighty fine…last chance, husband dear.”

“Is it…oh Hell, I’ve got no idea!”

“Do you give up?”

“Yes, Waves…I give up…you’ve bested me once more.”

“Yeah! I win again!”

“So…”

“So?”

“What is it?”

“It’s a corset!”

“What? Waverly Haught, I am not afraid of corsets!”

“Well, you’d certainly never know it, by the way you act whenever I ask you to lace mine up.”

“That has nothing to do with fear.”

“What then, Cole? You always seem to be busy with other things or manage to find some way to try and talk your way out of it. Don’t think I haven’t heard your labored breathing or felt your hands trembling.”

“One of these days, woman…perhaps it might occur to you to think on whether you really want to know the answer before you speak in such a manner.”

“Pardon me?”

“Did it never once occur to you, Mrs. Haught, that with yourself in such close proximity to my person, that I might be trying to restrain myself from acting inappropriately?”

“Inappropriately?”

“That I might be stopping myself from behaving in a manner which would not be in accordance with the parameters which we discussed prior to our entering into this partnership.”
“Cole Haught! Sometimes I swear you will drive me to the pest house! Must you always be so deferential and obtuse?”

“Do you want the plain truth of it, Waverly? Do you really?” his voice was growing steadily louder.

“Please, Cole…” she pleaded, softly.

“First, you must promise not to hold it against me, should I shock or offend you in any way.”

“I promise.”

“Also that there will be no talk of dissolving our partnership.”

“Oh my, this sounds serious…perhaps I don’t want to know after all. No, this has gone on long enough…I must know.”

“Waverly Haught, I swear, woman! For a person of above average intellect, sometimes you can be so oblivious! Do you really have so little clue of…has it never occurred to you that the reason I hesitate to help you with your bloody corset…the reason that my hands shake and my breathing gets labored…the thing that makes my face pale or flush at the mention of it…is that being so close to you in that state…with so much of your alabaster flesh on display…right there in front of my eyes…under my hands…the inviting milky white plane of your back…oh and your…and other parts of your lovely anatomy which propriety forbids me referencing by name…not to mention the sounds you make when I tug just that little bit harder…oh, those maddening sounds…Did it never cross that beautiful mind of yours once…that the reason behind all of those things is that I am so overcome with desire for you, that I cannot even make a fist? It takes every ounce of determination in me…every bit of honor and decorum…Hell, every iota of everything I have in me…to keep myself from touching you…touching you as a husband should touch his wife…from seizing you in my arms and kissing you senseless!” his breath was coming in great pants now and his face as pink as a piglet.

“Oh…”

“Are you happy now?” Cole fairly shouted.

Waverly smiled at her beleaguered husband and shrugged her pretty shoulders, “Sometimes a lady just likes to hear it.”

Cole was silent for a good half hour. So flabbergasted by her wife’s behavior and the vast implications thereof, that she literally could not form syllables, let alone words.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

part two of chapter 44...sorry it's been so long in coming...some comedy, some heavy stuff...some stuff you've been waiting for me to get on with. enjoy

Chapter Notes

The Characters of Gus McCrae, Clara and Newt are borrowed from Larry McMurtry's Lonesome Dove as homage no copyright infringement intended and cuz I thought Gus and Clara deserved a happy ending.

"How much further is this place?" Waverly asked some time later, finally putting the awkward silence out of its misery.

“It’s still quite a ways off, I’m afraid. If you’ll keep your eyes on the westward horizon, you’ll be able to spot it soon enough.”

“So, we’re getting close then?"

“Well, close to the turn off anyway.”

“Long driveway?”

“The longest…longer than you could ever imagine.”

“I don’t know about that, I have a pretty good imagination.”

“It’s literally miles long, Waves. You can see the place a full hour before you get there.”

“Well, that’s just plain silly. Do you think he’s compensating for something?”

“Naaaaa, he’s just from Texas.”

“So…lunch?”


Pulling various items from the picnic hamper, the couple ate as they rode. Somehow it seemed like nearly as soon as they’d begun, the food was gone.

“Is that it? I guess I was hungrier than I thought.”

“I guess we both were. I could have sworn I’d packed more. Still, it has been quite a while since breakfast.”
“It’s so easy to lose track of time when you’re just sitting watching the world go by. In a way, it
reminds me of when I was on my way to you, although it certainly smells better.”

“Hey, Waves…you know what?”

“What?”

“Look over there,” the redhead pointed to a spot on the western horizon.

“Oh my…you said it would be big, but I never expected it to be BIG!”

“That’s rather part and parcel when it comes to ranching. Livestock is just mouths on the hoof,
takes a lot of land to feed them all.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“You see that fence about a furlong yonder? That’s the beginning of the driveway.”

“Texans,” Waverly chuckled, shaking head.

“You know,” the brunette commented, a good while later, “If he was going to make people travel
up this ridiculous driveway, the least he could have done was put in a little landscaping to break up
the monotony, planted a few trees, perhaps. Nope. Nothing but fencing and it’s not even decorative
fencing,” she sighed mightily, “Bored now.”

Several minutes later, the blase beauty was roused from her stupor by a great rumbling.

“Do you hear that, Cole? Storm coming?”

“Nope, no storm. Pay attention and listen carefully.”

“Hoofbeats.”

“Yup.”

“Please tell me it’s not cows. I spent enough time waiting on cattle on my way out here, to last me
a lifetime.”

“No cows.”

“Buffalo?” she asked excitedly.

“I wish. I’ve been out here nearly a year and I still haven’t seen one.”

Just then a herd of mustangs came thundering over the ridge.

“Horses! This is a horse ranch?”

“Very observant, Mrs. Haught.”

“What kind of business do you have at a horse ranch?”

“Seeing a man about a horse, of course.”

“What use could you possibly have for another horse? You only have one backside.”

“I thought it might be nice if you had one of your own. Then you wouldn’t be confined to the
homestead all the time. You could go and visit Polly or Delia, range further in your hunts or even just go for a ride if you were feeling the need for a change of scenery.”

“Cole Haught…you wonderful man!” Waverly fairly squealed.

“I just want you to be content here.”

“So sweet…wait, can we even afford another horse?”

“I don’t mean to boast, but business is booming. We could easily buy Jane and Champ their own horses too and still have plenty left for custom made, tiny riding outfits. I’ve already paid the man, horse, saddle and tack. This is just a pickup.”

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, dear…but I would have preferred to pick out my own.”

“Which is why I only took care of the financing. You’ll have your pick from a selection of horses and saddles. The relationship between a rider and mount is a very personal thing. Given your special affinity with animals, I wouldn’t dream of presuming to choose for you.”

“How do you know me so well, after so little time together?”

The redhead smiled and shrugged.

“I know I’ve said it before, recently even, but you truly are a wonderful man, Mister Haught.”

“Well, I don’t know that I’d go that far, but I do enjoy making you happy. It means that I get to see that beautiful smile of yours.”

“Yup…no way with women at all,” she leaned over, kissing his cheek, “Thank you for this, husband dear. You can’t know how much this means to me.”

“You really don’t need to thank me, Waves. When we got married I swore I’d do my best to make you happy. I’m just doing my job.”

The petite beauty bounced in her seat, “How much further?”

Cole laughed, “I swear, you’re like a giddy little kid. Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

“Oh, you!” she slapped at him playfully.

As the couple pulled up in front of the ranch house, a tall, striking woman, with long, lustrous hair, stepped out onto the porch and headed toward the wagon.

“Hey there, Mrs. McCrae,” Cole called out, genially.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Red? Call me Clara.”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the woman arched an eyebrow in his direction, “I mean Clara. This is my bride, Waverly.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ma’am,” she spoke up, “You have a lovely place here.”

“Thank you, Waverly, but I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like we’re old friends, you must call me Clara.”
“Oh really? All good I hope.”

“No worries on that account, girl. You’ve got this one roped in good and tight, he’s not going anywhere. If he was any more smitten with you, it’d be positively embarrassing.”

“Is your husband around here someplace?” Cole interrupted, before Mrs. McCrae could expose her any further.

“Nope. Gus and a few of the boys are out riding fenceline. He’ll be sorry he missed meeting this pretty little thing, but you’ll find Newt in the stables just over there. He knows all about your arrangement, he’ll take care of you real good.”

“Thanks, Clara.”

“You make sure you come and have a drink with me before you leave, now.”

Inside the stables, they found a good looking young blonde fellow, playing with a riata.

“Y’all must be the Haughts. Pleased to meet ya.”

“And you must be Newt. Mrs. McCrae said you could introduce me to the horses.”

“I don’t know that a formal introduction is required, but I could sure show you where they are.” the young man twitched his head in the direction of a row of stalls, “A word of advice, if I may, Mrs. Haught. Don’t let her catch you calling her Mrs. McCrae, she don’t cotton to that. It’s Clara.”

“Why thank you, Newt…She doesn’t strike me as the kind of lady you want to cross.”

The blonde chuckled, “You got that right, Ma’am. Now let’s see if you’re as good a judge of horse flesh as you are of character.”

Casting her eye down the row of stalls, Waverly saw that there were four horses to choose from, a palomino mare, who was a beautiful specimen to be sure, but a bit aloof for her taste. Next in line was a pinto, who she found a tad too nervous, dancing around in her stall. There was a bay gelding, a fine piece of horse flesh, but there was no fire in his eyes, she liked a mount with spirit to match her own. In the final stall was a gorgeous jet black young lady with a star shaped white blaze between her eyes. She liked her the best of the lot, but the connection she was looking for wasn’t there. Still, she supposed she’d settle for her if she had no other choice.

Then she turned around to say something to Newt and that’s when she spotted her. A dazzling chestnut mare, with gentle eyes and a wild mane the same color as Cole’s hair.

“Oh…What about that one, is she for sale?”

“You don’t want no part o’ that one Missus,” Newt warned, “I swear that horse come from Hell itself, pardon my French.”

Sure enough, he took a step toward the mare and she started pawing at the floor, swinging her head about threateningly and making all manner of rude noises.

“Don’t be silly,” Waverly scoffed, walking right over to the stall and patting the horse, who promptly laid it’s head on her shoulder, “That’s nonsense, isn’t it girl? She’s gentle as a lamb.”

“You must be magic,” Newt drawled, in awe.
“What can I say, I seem to have a special affinity with redheads,” she turned toward her husband and winked.

“I don’t know as I’d feel right letting you take that demon, Ma’am. It’s not just me, none of the hands can get anywhere near her. Only one she’ll hold still for is Mrs. McCrae.”

“You better not let her hear you call her that,” Waverly teased.

Thinking of the commanding woman, something occurred to her, “Cole, could you step over here for a minute?”

“Whatsoever you say, my dear.”

As the redhead ambled in her wife’s direction, the firey mare began the same aggressive display she’d shown Newt.

“You can go back where you were now, husband. Thank you.”

Before anyone had a chance to stop her, Waverly opened the gate and entered the stall, closing it behind her.

“Oh, Ma’am no…I wouldn’t recommend that. She’ll kick ya, sure as I’m standing here,” the ranch hand warned.

“Really now,” she discounted him, stroking the horse’s flank, then walking clear around her, checking her confirmation. When she had come around to the front again, the mare was nuzzling her and even giving her little horse kisses. The menfolk were positively agog.

“You see, boys, it really is very simple,” she explained, “She doesn’t care for men, either that or those big silly hats, you all insist on wearing.”

“Do you really think so, Waves? I wouldn’t want to risk anything happening to you.”

“That’s always a risk, no matter the horse, Cole. Nope, this is the one. I won’t have any other. You wouldn’t want to have to explain to Mister McCrae how he has to give back all that money, because you won’t sell me the horse that I want, now would you Newt?”

“No Ma’am…but I won’t take no responsibility if you get hurt.”

“Trust me on this one, Newt,” Cole spoke up, “No creature ever born is a match for my wife. There’s a Ponderosa Rattler hanging on the barn back home, who’ll attest to that. Take my word, once she digs her heels in, it’s best to just cut your losses and let her have her way.”

Waverly folded her arms across her beautiful bosom for emphasis.

“Well, I guess she’s yours then,” Newt finally gave in, shaking his head, “Now all’s left is picking out a saddle for her.”

Barely glancing at the merchandise, Waverly made her selection, “I’ll have that one, the tea colored one on the end, with the morning glories tooled on the fender.”

“The lady certainly knows her mind,” Newt commented.

“You have no idea, brother,” Cole teased, “Well, my good man, now that we’ve taken care of that, the Missus and I have been commanded to have a drink with Clara. If you’ll put the saddle and tack in the back of my wagon, we’ll come back for this pretty girl when we’re ready to leave. It’s awful
hot out and she’s got a long walk home, let’s leave her in the shade as long as we can.”

After passing a pleasant hour, sipping whiskey and swapping stories with Clara, the young couple bid their host goodbye and got ready to be on their way, not wanting to risk being too late and losing daylight before reaching their destination.

Waverley’s new friend was tied securely to the back of the wagon and Cole sat waiting on the jump seat, while his wife hugged the lady of the house goodbye. Just she was about the climb onto the wagon herself, a huge clap of thunder boomed off the nearby mountain, spooking the team, who tried to bolt.

Another loud crack followed and the young newlywed watched in horror, as the front of the wagon plummeted to the ground and her husband was thrown through the air, landing on hands and knees in the gravel.

“Well, shit!” the redhead exclaimed.

His young wife ran to his side, all adither, “Cole!” she fussed about, patting him down in a search for broken bones and blood, “Talk to me!”

“I’m fine, Waves,” he reassured, laying a hand on her cheek and looking her in the eyes, “I’m fine…which is more than I can say for this tongue,” he kicked the offending item, as he rose to his feet, “Damned horses split it near in half. Now I know why Dolls favors oxen.”

“Oh…Is it very bad? Can you repair it?”

“Not at all…it’s nothing to fix. Clara, you wouldn’t happen to have any good strong lumber hanging about, would you?”

“I’m afraid not, Red. Used the last of what you brought patching up the barn, but you’re welcome to any of our trees.”

“Well, that complicates matters a bit, but if I can borrow an axe and one of your men, I can take care of it. Of course, by the time I’ve finished it’ll be too late to head home. Looks like we’ll be staying the night, Mrs. Haught. If that’s okay with you, Clara.”

“You’d be most welcome. We don’t get much company this far out. Waverly can tell me all the news from back east, while you and Newt are working. There’ll be a warm meal waiting for ya, when you’re done. Gus oughta be back by then.”

“Thanks, Clara,” Waverly smiled, “You’re a peach.”

“Newt, show the man where we keep our axe.”

Once the boys had gotten the wagon squared away, they all sat down to a meal of tacos and frijoles, which the young wife was quite excited to encounter again. Afterward, the two couples played several hands of poker and drank many glasses of whiskey. As Clara had predicted, Gus was smitten and a little more flirtatious with the petite beauty than either she or Cole would have liked. The real shocker, however, was that when the evening was over and the counting done, Waverly had cleaned out each and every one of them at the card table.

“No one else in my family was ever any good at cards. I guess it must be an Earp thing,” she shrugged.
“I met a fella name of Wyatt Earp, working with the railroad in Wyoming Territory a couple years back. He was a helluva card player too,” Gus said, “You any relation?”

“Never heard of him,” Waverly replied with a yawn.

Once the newlyweds had paid a visit to the privy and checked in on the horses, they found their way to the room which had been designated theirs for the night. Perhaps it was the drink, but until the moment they opened the door, it had never occurred to either of them, that as a married couple they would be expected to sleep in one bed.

“Oh, crap,” Waverly exclaimed, “I guess this would be that thing that was niggling at me that I couldn’t quite place.”

“Don’t worry about it, Waves. I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Like Hell you will…You and Newt worked very hard to get that wagon fixed up so fast, I won’t have you sleeping on some cold hard floor.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. Normally, we don’t even share a room, let alone a bed.”

“And what if there were a fire or an indian attack during the night and they came to warn us and found you sleeping on the floor? Both our reputations would be ruined.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“We will share the bed, Mister Haught and that’s all there is to it.”

“Aye aye Captain.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m getting ready for bed, The McCraes keep some strong whiskey.”

“But you don’t have any night things…”

“Clara offered me a nightie, but as tall as she is, I would have been able to use it as a hammock, so I said I’d just sleep in my shimmy. You may sleep in your underthings too, it won’t bother me a bit.”

“Do you want me to step outside while you undress?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re my husband. Plus I need you to untie my corset for me. Just turn your back.”

Having performed the dread task of unknotted her wife’s corset string, anxious and flustered by the thought of Waverly undressing so close to her, Cole made conversation to distract herself, “Have you given any thought to what you’re going to call your horse?”

“Actually, I have…there was a girl back home by the name of Maeve, she was a healer and midwife, she wouldn’t speak to men and spent all her time locked up in her cabin writing in her journal and studying. Seems to me like a good fit for my new man-hating friend.”

“Is there any situation you don’t have a story for, my dear?”

“Not so far…maybe after tonight,” she teased.

When she turned around, Cole was seated on the side of the bed, with his back turned to her.
“Are you sure about this, Waves?”

“I thought I made that clear, now get under the covers.”

The redhead did as she’d been told, but hung on to the edge of the bed, her back still turned toward the other girl.

“Do you always sleep like that, Cole?”

“I don’t want to crowd you.”

“Would you stop that…some of the best sleep I’ve ever gotten was on the way home after we were married and I used your lap as a pillow. You’re not going to get any decent rest if you spend all night worrying that you might inadvertently touch me. Now, get in bed proper and come give me a kiss goodnight, before you blow the lamp out.”

The redhead rolled over and gave her wife the customary kiss on the cheek, “Night, Waves.”

“Night, Cole. Sweet dreams.”

Despite her bravado, once they were in the dark, Waverly couldn’t seem to relax enough to get to sleep. Something was still eating at her and she knew that unless it was settled she wouldn’t get any rest.

“Cole? You awake?”

“Yeah, Waves…what is it?”

“About before…”

“It’s been a long day…when before?”

“On the way here… 20 questions…”

“What about it?”

“You’re not angry at me are you?”

“No, Waves.”

“Are you sure?”

“I said so didn’t I?”

“It’s just that you sounded so awfully upset…”

“I am not vexed at you, Mrs. Haught.”

“If you insist, then I believe you, but in my experience other emotions rarely cause voices to grow quite so loud.”

“I’m sorry if I frightened you, my dear.”

“I wasn’t frightened,” perhaps it was the liquor, but Waverly decided she’d spent long enough hiding her feelings, Cole had revealed his truth to her and she was determined to do the same, “Except maybe of losing you.”
“Waverly Haught, what could you ever possibly do to make that happen?”

“I don’t know, it’s just that when you were yelling at me…”

“I wasn’t yelling at you, Waves. I was… I was just yelling.”

“Why would you yell if you weren’t angry?”

“Let me see if I can explain this…” and in her halting way, Cole tried the best she could, “You know when you put a lid on a pot so that the water will boil faster… and that lid starts in rattling… then it starts to pop… then if you can’t get to it fast enough what happens? It boils over. Because all that steam and heat have been building up inside… it just has to go somewhere… it’s gotten so powerful that the lid can’t hold it in anymore. It’s kind of like that. Those feelings have been building up in me slowly ever since the first time I laid eyes on you at that train station… probably since I read your first letter, to hear Dolls tell it… I’ve tried so hard to hide them, to hold them back… because, well… that’s not what either of us signed on for… but the more we’ve come to know each other… living together these past two months… the stronger those feelings have become… and with you teasing me today… when tensions had already been running high… it was like you kept turning up the heat, until…”

“You boiled over…”

“I boiled over.”

“I’m sorry… if I’d known, I wouldn’t have pushed you like that.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Waves. You know, this doesn’t mean anything has to change between us.”

“Mister Haught…”

“I know you’re grieving…”

“Mister Haught…”

“Yes, Waves?”

“I think we both know that things have already changed between us.”

“I suppose so.”

“I never…”

“Waves… you listen to me… I don’t want you to go getting any crazy ideas about giving in to my desires, because as my wife, you think it is your legal obligation… I would never want to force anything on you that you didn’t want… I wouldn’t… couldn’t do that to you.”

“Cole…”

“You were very clear when I sent you that misbegotten letter…”

“Cole!”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Would you please be quiet and let me speak?”
“Sorry.”

“As I was saying,” wrapping herself in the safe cloak of darkness, Waverly let loose all she’d been holding back, “Entering into this, I never expected to feel this way. I was certain we would just be bosom companions, which is no small thing….but if I’m honest and I think we both know that neither of us is any good at being otherwise… I have found myself developing certain feelings for you. Feelings I truly thought my heart was no longer capable of… frankly, it’s got me at all sixes and sevens.”

“I know exactly what you mean, my dear. I never imagined I could feel this way again either.”

“It’s certainly been a surprise.”

“A nice surprise though, right?”

“Yes, Cole… a very nice surprise,” she reached for his hand then, threading their fingers together.

“So, what do we do about this, Waves?”

“I honestly don’t know what to tell you.”

“Just because I, doesn’t mean that you have to…”

“Cole.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s hard to figure how to say this without it coming out sounding all wrong.”

“I understand, Waves… you don’t want to lead me on…”

“Mister Haught!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop trying to put words in my mouth… and for God’s sake, stop apologizing…”

“I’m sor… ooops… I’ll just be quiet then, shall I?”

“Thank you… I don’t quite know how to put this, so I’ll kind of have to work it out while I’m saying it… just listen, OK… do you think you can do that for me?”

“Yeah, Waves,” he smiled, even though she couldn’t see him, she could hear it in his voice, “I can do that.”

“The thing is, lately I’ve been trying to open myself up to what’s been happening between us, to allow myself to look at our relationship from a different perspective. Something that, frankly, I have been actively avoiding doing for some time now. Then, more than one person pointed out to me, what had apparently been obvious to everyone but me. That you and I weren’t fooling anyone by insisting this was merely a marriage of convenience, except perhaps ourselves.”

“Yeah, I’ve been getting the same from Dolls for quite a while now. I swear if it were possible to
tease a man to death, he’d be a stone cold killer.”

“So…I’ve had to admit to myself that my feelings for you have been far from platonic for a while now…the thing is that admitting that makes me feel…well, I guess the most accurate term would be horrible.”

“Gee thanks, Waves…”

“Oh no, Cole…see I told you this was going to to come out all wrong,” she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his cheek, then lay back down on her side against his, “Please, let me explain…”

“By all means, my dear…continue…”

“You see, it hasn’t been all that long since…”

“Since you lost your…”

“Yes…since I lost my…and admitting to myself that I have feelings for someone else…feelings for you…feels like a betrayal…it makes me feel like a terrible person.”

“I can understand that…”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean I can empathize…I wasn’t suggesting that you…”

“Relax, husband…I know what you meant…it’s just that…well…I don’t want you thinking that my feelings are different to yours…and less somehow…and that I can’t love you…”

“You love me?”

“Shhhhh, Cole…what I mean is…until I can come to a place where I can have those feelings without…that is to say…until they can be just be the wonderful, happy feelings they ought to be…without the bad feelings…without me hating myself for them in some way…I just…”

“You can’t…”

“Yeah.”

“I understand, Waves."  

“I’m not saying never, Cole…just…”

“Not now.”

“Not yet…”

“I understand…and, Waves?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want you to worry or feel bad because you are burdened with the knowledge of what I want…I absolutely do not want to complicate things for you any further…it’s clear that you already have a lot on your mind. I promise you, I will keep my distance until you are absolutely comfortable.”
“Thank you, Cole. You really are the sweetest man, but I didn’t mean…”

“Waverly, I must insist upon complete certainty that any change in our relationship comes only when you are one hundred percent ready for it. I couldn’t live with myself otherwise. You will have to make the first move.”

“I understand…you truly are a gentleman, Cole Haught.”

“I promised I would treat you right.”

“And you do…but…I’m not saying…I didn’t mean…”

“What?” the redhead asked in a fragile, near whisper.

“Please, Cole,” she urged, snuggling closer and laying her head on his chest, “Don’t keep your distance, as you said…don’t pull away from me…I couldn’t stand it if you did.”

“I promise.”

“I think things have been going on quite nicely between us up to now.”

“Me too, dear one.”

“Can’t we just…I don’t know…let things continue to happen naturally? I only need to go a bit slow, is all.”

“Of course, Waves...we’ll take it slow.”

Raising their joined hands, the redhead opened her larger one to reveal her wife’s and placed a gentle kiss upon the tender skin.

“Thank you, Cole,” she murmured in response, getting up on one elbow to place a soft kiss upon his lips.

Waverly yawned then, and rolling onto her left side, reached back for her husband’s hand.

“Hold me?”

Cole snuggled in behind her, so that his front was pressed against her back, his arm around her waist.

Taking his hand in hers, Waverly pulled it up between her breasts, squeezing it tightly. Catching the hint, he held her more snugly, pressing closer against her body.

The brunette released a quiet moan of pleasure, “G’night Cole.”

“Night, Waves,” he kissed her temple.

Lying there in the dark, listening as her wife’s breathing slowed into the rhythm of sleep, Cole couldn’t help remembering another time, not so very long ago, when she’d held another girl from Appalachia in the exact same position. At the time, it had felt like the sweetest of dreams, but holding Polly amounted to nothing alongside this. Holding her wife, whom she loved with all her heart, in her arms and knowing that maybe, just maybe she loved her back, Cole didn’t permit so much as a single bit of worry to enter her mind. So long as the two of them truly being a couple one day was somewhere on the horizon of the petite beauty’s heart, Cole would gladly give her all the time in the world.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Dolls has some good news and Cole and Waves go to his place for a celebration

There are some sensitive subjects in this one. There are references to slavery, lynching and racial issues correct to the historical period in Delia and Waverly's conversation. I have tried my best to handle them delicately. I do not wish to offend anyone and if I should please know that it is unintentional and I am deeply sorry.

A few weeks later, the lady of the house was in the corral, putting Maeve through her paces, when Champ starting yowling like he’d sat down on a porcupine, then promptly fallen into a puddle of vinegar. Giving the mare a soft nudge with her heel, Waverly sped in the general direction of the cacophony. As she rounded the front of the house, the cause of all the ruckus became apparent, there was a wagon coming up the lane.

“Good boy, Champ! We’ll make a watch dog out of you yet.”

Once the wagon had drawn nearer, she saw the familiar green paint on the side rails.

“Hmmm, what do you think, boy…what’s Daddy doing home at this hour?”

At the mention of the D word, Champ began to frolic about like he’d been sampling from the special jug.

As Cole turned up the drive, the brunette slid down off of Maeve, hitching her to the handrail by the front door.

Before the lumber wagon had even come to a stop, Dolls leapt down from the driver’s seat, leaving the redhead to fumble for the reins.

“Miss Waverly! Miss Waverly!” he hollered excitedly, “It is so good to see you,” he threw his great big arms around her, lifting her up and spinning in a circle, so that her feet flew out, her legs nearly parallel to the ground.

“Put the lady down, Dolls…before you scare her half to death!” Cole teased, “You’ll have to forgive him, my dear. He is in extraordinarily high spirits this morning."

Coming back to his senses, Dolls placed his partner’s wife back on terra firma, with exaggerated gentleness, and mumbled a shamed apology.

“Oh, Miss Waverly…I am so sorry! I got a little carried away there, can you ever forgive me?” he asked, averting his eyes.

“Oh tosh, friend Dolls,” she scoffed, “Far be it from me to fault a man for his happiness. Pray, tell me, what has got you in such a state of exhilaration?”

Striking a pose, Dolls asked, “Tell me, Missus Haught, do I look any different to you?”
“Now let me see,” she made a great show of scrutinizing him, stroking her chin and peering at him like a scientist observing an exemplary specimen, “You know, I do believe you do. Something about the eyes maybe…no…that’s not it…Has Delia given you a new haircut? No…but it’s definitely out of the ordinary…I’ve got it…you’re smiling!”

“Miss Waverly…you are looking at a land owner,” he puffed up like a strutting cock.

“Oh, Dolls! You finally made enough to buy out your tenancy? I am so happy for you…”

“Better than that,” he replied, smugly.

“Don’t hold back my friend, give me details…I want details.”

“Well,…I was in town this morning, on my usual run, picking up at few things at the train station, when I overheard a conversation between the station master and one of them sad men. You know the ones I mean, sitting on the platform, with all his belongings, waiting for the train back east.”

“That poor man.”

“His wife and kids had already gone and he’d stayed as long as he could. It seems he’d actually managed to make his homestead into a successful farm, the trouble was his wife couldn’t cut it, simply hated Montana and told him he’d have to choose, his family or the frontier.”

“Oh, what a horrid woman.”

“They can’t all be gems like you, my dear,” Cole teased.

Grinning at her husband, she prompted the big man, “Go on, Mister Dolls.”

“He had to go and was planning to try and sell his claim from back east or failing that, flat out abandon it. That’s when I introduced myself. At first, he didn’t believe that a man who looked like me could possibly have the funds for such a purchase, but then Cole vouched for me, assuring the man that I was indeed his business partner and we all went to the bank together.”

Dolls pulled the deed from his inside coat pocket, holding it up so that Waverly could see, “Paid in full,” he grinned, “It’s all ours. There’s even a house on it.”

“That’s wonderful, Dolls. Have you told the wife yet?”

“That’s my next stop. Just came by to drop off Big Red, here.”

“Well, get going, man. Delia will be beside herself with joy.”

“On my way.” he answered, remounting the wagon,”But first, I am officially inviting you and Cole for a celebration party, this Sunday, right after church.”

“Why, thank you, Dolls. We’ll be there bright and early. I am so looking forward to finally meeting your family.”

“It’s well past time we got together. I suspect Delia will be a lot more sociable, now that we got a home she can be proud of, you know?”

“Do you think that they’ll like their gifts?” the young woman asked her husband, as they approached the Dolls’ homestead.
“Of course they will, Waves,” the redhead answered, “Although, perhaps not quite so much as that peddler liked you.”

“He only comes around twice a year, Cole. I wanted to take advantage while I had the chance.”

“I’m not convinced you were the one who took advantage.”

“I don’t hear you complaining about the books I bought you or the new hat.”

“About that hat…”

“I think you looked cute in it.”

“A bowler? I don’t know. The Stetson and I, we’re old friends. I feel like she’s a part of me now.”

“She? Never mind, I don’t want to know. Anyway, there are times when a white felt hat just wouldn’t be practical, you can wear it then.”

“If you insist, my dear.”

“I do. I’m not a rube, you know, Cole. I know the value of a coin as much as the next girl. What’s the point of having a nest egg if I can’t spend a little money on people I care for now and then, hmmm?”

“You are a generous soul, my dear. I’ll give you that.”

“Just humor me, OK? I didn’t receive many gifts growing up. Allow me to live vicariously through the smiles of others.”

“I’m sorry, Waves.”

“You don’t need to apologize, you’re not my Pa.”

“I thought you loved your father. You seemed so excited that we shared a profession.”

“My father and my Pa are two entirely different people. I never met my real father, but by all accounts, he was a decent, kind man, very much like you,” she leaned over, kissing the redhead’s cheek, “Pa, on the other hand was a sonofabitch.”

“I’m sorry, my dear.”

“No need for apologies now, I’m in a better place, with a better man. I don’t intend to let my unsavory past ruin my happiness.”

“You’re happy?”

“As close to it as I’ve ever been and a good deal closer than I ever thought I’d be…And that is all your doing, my dear Mister Haught.”

“In that case, I am glad to be of service.”

“Funny, you’d think I’d recall being serviced,” she teased.

“You are indeed a wicked woman, Waverly Haught,” the redhead laughed, “Mind you behave yourself in front of the children, now.”
As they made progress up the driveway, Waverly could see Dolls and the boys kicking a ball around in the field, while his wife and baby daughter played on a blanket in the side yard.

Spotting them, he left the boys to their game and came striding up to the wagon, “Welcome, my friends! Welcome to the Dolls estate!” the big man crowed.

“Delia,” he shouted, “Come and meet our guests!”

As it turned out, Delia was nothing at all like Waverly had imagined.

Based upon her friend’s praise of his wife’s great beauty, the young bride had pictured a tall, willowy, elegant woman. Yet, Mrs. Dolls was in actuality, short and quite solid, all muscle and sinew, with the fluid grace of a large predator. Her eyes were almond shaped and slightly slanted, as pale and green as lichen. She had sharp, angular cheekbones and skin the color of burnished copper. Without question she was a stunning figure of a woman, so much so that Waverly began to question her own preconceptions of what was beautiful.

“Cole, you already know, my dear,” Mrs. Dolls smiled and nodded at the redhead, “And this is Miss Waverly.”

“Hello,” the woman responded, quietly.

“Miss Waverly,” he gestured with a sweeping hand, “My wife, Delia. You’ll have to pardon if she doesn’t have much to say at first, she’s a bit shy when it comes to strangers.”

“Oh, but I feel like we already know each other,” the younger woman smiled sweetly, “It is so good to finally meet you Mrs. Dolls. Let me tell you, your recipes have been an absolute godsend. It pleases me so to finally have a chance to repay your kindness in some small measure.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary, Miss Waverly,” she ducked her head, “That was just by way of a welcome, I never expected nothing in return.”

“Please, there is no need to be as formal as that old-fashioned husband of yours. You must call me Waverly.”

“Call me Delia, if you would. I don’t know no Mrs. Dolls.”

“Well then, Delia,” the brunette went around to the back of the wagon pulling out a large basket, “Where I come from, a family moving into a new home calls for much in the way of tradition. So, we’ve brought you a few things…”

“You didn’t have to do that…”

“Humor her,” Cole advised, “She has very particular ideas about this sort of thing. You’ll have more luck talking a trout into climbing a tree, than you’ll have changing my wife’s mind when she’s got it set on something.”

Waverly slapped his arm, “You cad!”

“As I was saying…for your new home, a bundle of sage, fresh from our back pasture, that your life may always have flavor. Bread, that you may never know hunger…”

“Oooooh…is that Polly’s bread?” she asked excitedly.
“Yes, Delia,” the redhead answered, “I made you five loaves since you love it so and don’t even think of asking me for the recipe. You’ll only be wasting your breath.”

“Oh you…” she shook her finger at him, “One of these days, Red…”

“Don’t feel bad, Delia…he won’t even tell me and I’m his wife.”

“Mark my words, between the two of us, we’ll wear you down one of these days, Haught.”

“I suspect you’re right,” Waverly agreed, “But since that day is not today…let’s see, where were we? Oh yes…honey, that your life may always be sweet and a horseshoe, that this house may always be full of luck. Congratulations on your good fortune.”

“Thank you, Miss Waverly,” Dolls replied.

“The pleasure was all mine.”

“The peddler’s too, I suspect…the brought gifts for everyone,” Cole joked, “I suspect I’ll need your help carrying it all.”

“Help the man, Aloysius.”

“Aloysius?” the redhead was flabbergasted, “Your name is Aloysius? No wonder you go by Dolls!”

“That’s awful big talk coming from a man with a name like Cole Haught,” the big man teased, “Don’t make me beat you, Boss Man.”

“There’ll be none of that, Mister Dolls,” his wife scolded.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied, meekly and started unloading the wagon.

Delia leaned over and whispered in her ear, “You gotta train ‘em right or they give you nothing but trouble.”

Now this was the Delia the brunette had been expecting.

Hoisting Peony a little higher on her hip, she looped her arm through Waverly’s, “Come with me, dear. Let’s have a ramble round and gossip about the menfolk.”

“By all means.”

Heading east, the two women wended their way around the left side of the house, “Over here is where my flower beds will be and in the back I’ll have my sunflowers.”

“Oh, I just love sunflowers,” Waverly exclaimed, “Such bright, cheerful things…always…”

“Lifting up their faces to the Lord’s sweet light,” Delia finished, “I feel the exact same way. You know what, I think you and I are gonna get along just fine.”

“I hope so, I’ve been wanting to meet you ever since I got here. Just about the first thing your husband told me was how wonderful you were. Once he was finished teasing Cole, that is…”

“Yes, that is rather a habit of his. Quite a pair of odd ducks, those two.”

“It’s plain that they love one another like brothers,” Waverly said, “But they seem to spend most of
their time devising the most outlandish ways of insulting one another. I suppose it must be a man thing.”

“Oh yeah…no matter how old they get, they’re still boys, don’t let anyone try to tell you different. They are awful nice to look at though.”

“Thankfully, we managed to get ourselves two of the good ones.”

“We did indeed. Now, over here we have the vegetable garden. Mister Andrews already had that planted when we bought the place. Aloysius says it’s a good thing too, because if all the planting was left up to me, we’d have nothing to eat but pansies.”

“Dolls did tell me you had a fondness for flowers.”

“Oh yes, although Sweet William isn’t too pleased with his name now that he’s getting older. Flowers are so simple, you know and so beautiful, from the rarest orchid to the common butterweed. They don’t want nothin’ but to grow…and oh, but they can bloom…even in the most dark and horrible of places. Manys the time they were the only thing that kept me from despairing in the time before.”

“You mean…”

“Yes, I mean…before the war, shall we say…I’d see the flowers and it was a reminder that God loved me, that he was there watching over me. I made a promise to the Lord then, that if I ever got out of there, I would devote my life to planting flowers, to spreading the beauty of that love over as much of the world as I could.”

“That’s lovely, Delia. Cole tells me that you and Dolls…” she hesitated, trying to come up with the most tactful way she could of saying it, “Grew up together?”

“That we did.”

“Did you always know?”

“Did I always know what, child?”

Child? It was only then that Waverly took a good close look Delia and realized she was older than she’d originally thought, probably even older than Dolls.

“Did you always know that he was the one?”

“Oh, that…don’t tell Aloysius I said so, but yeah, I did. Now don’t mistake me, he wasn’t half a pain in the butt when he was a teenager, all cocky and full of himself. They’re such fragile creatures, aren’t they? Always strutting like little bantam roosters.”

“I’ve noticed they do have that tendency.”

“I gave him a good hard time though, made him work to get me, couldn’t let him go getting ideas that he was the one in charge.”

Waverly laughed.

“You’re still a newlywed, take some advice from an old married lady, always give ‘em a hard time.”

“Oh, need to worry there, Delia…I always do.”
“They may moan and groan about it, but secretly they love it.”

“Cole told me he’d rather have a woman of spirit, than some empty-headed ninny who just does needlepoint and speaks only when spoken to directly.”

“Good thing too, considering who he married.”

“Hey! Well, here we are, back where we started.”

“Let’s go inside and have a cool drink, Miss Peony needs to go down for her nap.”

“Looks like she’s way ahead of you,” Waverly whispered. The baby was fast asleep, with her head on her mother’s shoulder.

While Delia put Peony down, Waverly had a good look around the house. Despite the windows being small and few, there was a sunny, cheerful feel about the place. Yellow curtains, dried herbs and flowers hanging from the rafters and small watercolors of sunflowers, hung all over one side of the room.

“I see you’ve discovered my wall garden,” she said, handing her a glass of cool water, fresh from the pump.

“Are these all yours?”

“I don’t know who else’s they’d be.”

“I mean, did you paint them?”

“Sure did,” Delia said proudly, “Used to teach the family’s daughters their art and sewing. Mistress said I had a real talent for it, so she gave me my own paint box. I made sure I took it from the house before I left.”

“You have a great eye, these are gorgeous. I never had any talent with either a brush or a needle, no matter how many times they tried to teach me. I was a tomboy through and through, a lot happier roughhousing with the boys.”

Delia gave her an appraising look, then nodding her head slightly, smiled like she had a juicy secret.

“Haven’t done any in a while, though. My paints are down to just stained pans with little bits at the edge. I’ve looked, but paint and paper are hard to come by out here, even now that we can afford it.”

“You know, my sister and her husband own a large mercantile, back east. The next time I write I’ll see if she can’t get some in for you.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Of course, we’re friends aren’t we?”

“Aloysius was right about you, you’re a peach.”

“I’m pretty fond of him too. Why, if it weren’t for Dolls, Cole and I might never have gotten together. I feel like I owe him.”
Delia hung her head, humbly, “Actually, I’ve been wanting to thank you. Aloysius is too proud to say anything to Cole, but we are so beholden to you both. There’s not many a white man would take on a former slave as his business partner. I don’t know where that husband of yours came from, but I suspect he was sent by the good Lord himself.”

“You know, I’ve often had that same thought myself. Seriously, Delia…Cole only did what he thought was right. Dolls does half the work, he ought to be a partner in the business.”

“Well, I don’t know where you two came from but it sure as heckfire ain’t Mississippi, I know that much. You and your mister are a whole different breed from the white folks I’m used to, that’s for sure.”

“I tell you, Delia…Cole is the most decent, kind, honorable man I have ever known. He considers every creature on God’s green earth his equal, man or beast…even women. As for me, I was raised by a preacher and while I may have more than a few issues with the church because of it, the one thing that stuck with me was “Do Unto Others”. It just seems to me a pretty sensible way to go through life.”

“Amen to that.”

“Anyway, I hate to think where either of us would be, if Dolls hadn’t dumped Cole in that horse trough and shook some sense back into him.”

“To hear Aloysius tell it, he smelled like a polecat eating rotten eggs.”

Once Waverly had stopped laughing and was wiping tears from her cheeks, she said, “You are so easy to talk to, I feel like I’ve known you for years.”

“I knew we’d be great friends as soon as Aloysius told me about you.”

“You know, he told me people think you’re a mystic.”

“That nonsense? I don’t really have the sight, you know, I just pay attention. For instance, I couldn’t help noticing that look you get on your face every time you talk about Cole, just like a lovesick heifer. Are you really going to sit there and try to convince me you two are nothing more than friends?”

“Yeah, well…”

“I thought so. Red has been ass over teakettle for you since he got your first letter. Now, don’t you dare tell me you don’t love him. You’re drawn to that boy just the same as my flowers turn toward the sun.”

“No…I may not be what you’d call a woman of the world, but I know better than to try to get anything past the likes of you. I love Cole. I do, even if I’m not quite ready to tell him yet. It’s just…complicated.”

“I know, child…Aloysius told me about your loss. That’s a hard thing to get over. There are so many young widows around these days.”

“Oh, no…it wasn’t the war and I’m no widow. We weren’t married, not even engaged to be married…I guess you could say we…we had an understanding. We knew one another from the time we were kids. It was never explicitly spoken, it was more like we just knew, that one day, when we were older, it would be the two of us.”
“Soulmates.”

“Uh-huh. I don’t even know what happened, really. My love went on a trip and never arrived at the destination. I got a letter. Missing. Presumed a victim of foul play. That was it. This huge part of my life, just…gone.”

“Come here, girl,” Delia held out her arms, embracing the crying girl, “I know all about that. It’s part of why we came west. Back home, someone would get caught on a road alone or God forbid, out after dark and that was it. No one ever saw or heard from them again. There’s a lot of people got resentments, they don’t care much for us being free.”

“That’s horrible. My trouble’s are so trivial by comparison.”

“Don’t be silly, child. A life is a life. The reason why it ends don’t make one ending more tragic than another. You got a right to your grief, I’m just saying I understand, how the not knowing makes it that much harder.”

“Thank you. I can’t talk to Cole about any of this. It feels so good to be able to tell someone.”

“That’s what friends are for, Waverly.”

The brunette sat back in her chair, taking a good swig of her water and trying to compose herself, “I’m so glad we’re friends.”

“Well then, friend…you were about to tell me why you and that tall, firey-headed hunk of handsome out there are still sleeping in separate bedrooms, despite the fact that a blind man could see from a mile away that you two are in love.”

“Oh, Delia…I don’t know what to do. It’s only been recently that I’ve even let myself feel it, that I’ve admitted to myself that I love Cole, never mind telling him. The thing is, it hasn’t been so long since I lost…”

“Your beloved.”

“Exactly and I can’t help feeling like I must be a horrible person for having feelings for someone else. This wasn’t supposed to happen. We’d always talked about seeing the frontier together, but now I’m here without…and it’s all a mess…I’m a mess.”

“I shouldn’t wonder, seems to me you got your own war going on inside you.”

“I suppose I do.”

“May I ask you something, Waverly?”

“Of course.”

“You say you and your…paramour…you knew each other a long time. Would you say that after all those years you knew each other so well that you could finish each other’s sentences, like you knew each others minds?”

“Oh, yes,” Waverly sighed sadly, remembering Nikki.

“Then tell me something, do you really think that poor child would want you to be alone and in misery, pining away after what was lost, for the rest of your life or would they want you to be happy and loved and taken care of by a good man who treats you better than I ever heard of any
Before she could answer, the baby started crying.

“I’d better see to that. Why don’t you sit there a minute and think about what I’ve said.”

A few minutes later, Delia came back out with the baby in her arms.

“You know, I bet dinner is just about ready. Could you do me a favor and watch Miss Peony while I go and check on the pig? She won’t be no trouble.”

“Of course, Delia.”

“You know, Miss Peony,” Waverly said, bouncing the baby on her knee, after Delia had left, “Your Mama really is a very wise woman. I feel like we’re old friends, even though we’ve only just met. In a funny way, she reminds me of my Aunt Gus….who would just wuv you,” she slid into baby talk, chucking the baby under the chin until she dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“Well, if you two aren’t just getting on like a house afire. You look good with a baby in your arms, Waverly. Maybe you ought to carry her outside and let that husband get a look at you, while I get the rest of the side dishes.”

“Gladly…then I can give Miss Peony the present I brought her. Won’t that be nice, Miss P?”

Walking toward the menfolk, with the baby in her arms, even Waverly couldn’t miss the way Cole was gazing at her, like Cupid had just shot him in the ass with a whole quiver full of arrows.

Approaching the men she affected a baby voice, saying, “Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, Waves.”

“Mister Haught! That was Peony, talking to Dolls!”

Cole, stumbled over his words, finally giving up on trying to speak at all, his face as red as his hair.

Handing the baby to Dolls, Waverly turned to her husband, “How about you show me where you put that box of presents. I want to give Miss Peony hers before she’s too tired to enjoy it.”

“Sure, Waves,” he said, threading his fingers through hers, “It’s right over here. So, you and Delia were gone quite a while. I take it you’re getting along.”

“Oh yes, I feel like I’ve known her for years.”

“She often has that effect on people. She always seems to know just what to say to put a person at ease.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m so glad you like her. You know, I worry about you being lonely out here. Now you have both Delia and Polly that you can visit.”

“I could never get so lonely that I’d want to leave you, Mister Haught, don’t you worry,” she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.
“You know me, Waves… sometimes I look for things to worry about even when there’s nothing there.”

“I suppose when expectations and results are so far removed from one another, a person can be allowed time to adjust.”

“Thanks.”

“Delia says dinner’s just about ready. I don’t know about you but I’m starved.”

“You’re in for a treat, my dear.”

When Waverly took her first bite, she moaned in a way that made Dolls check to see if both Cole’s hands were on the table.

“Oh my God, Delia…this pork…I’ve never had anything so succulent…how did you cook this?”

The older woman turned to her husband, saying sotto voce, “You mean to tell me this child has never had barbecue?”

Dolls just shook his head and sighed sadly, “Another Yankee.”

“Then Cole didn’t just lead a deprived childhood?”

“Tragic, isn’t it?”

“You know, they said the Blues fought the war to preserve the Union and to set us free. Now I’m beginning to wonder if maybe they weren’t just looking for recipes.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Not terribly long but a nice romantic chapter with lots of lovely dialogue and other nice things you've been awaiting

warning: contains Shakespeare

“So, that went well,” Waverly commented, as she and Cole made their way home.

“Definitely…Delia just adored you and they all loved their presents.”

“Do you really think so, Mister Haught?”

“Oh yes, when we were getting ready to go, Narcissus had Sweet William pulling him around the yard in his new wagon, playing Lumber Delivery.”

“That’s adorable.”

“And I don’t think I need to tell you how much Miss Peony loved the toy you made her. She didn’t put that elephant down once, from the moment you gave it to her.”

Crossing her arms over her bosom and fixing her eyes on the road ahead, the brunette went silent.

Once Cole felt enough time had passed for there to be minimal risk of immediate reprisal, she spoke up.

“Waves?”

“Hmmm?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Waves…”

“I’m fine.”

“I know you better than that, Waverly Haught. If you want me to stop pestering you, you’re gonna have to tell me what’s wrong.”

The petite beauty grumbled something that Cole couldn’t make out.

“What was that, my dear? I didn’t quite catch it.”

“I said…It wasn’t an elephant!”

“Oh…”
“It was a horse.”

“I see…”

“I had one just like it growing up… well, maybe not just like it, my sister always was better with a needle than me. Like every other little girl in the world, I wanted my own horse when I was a kid, but being a mean sonofabitch, Pa wouldn’t even consider it. So, my sister, kind soul that she is, made me my own patchwork pony. I named her Trixie.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“For years, I never went anywhere without her. Oh, we had so many wonderful adventures together, Trixie and I. Even when I came to the age when I’d outgrown such things, I still slept with her when there were storms. I don’t know what I would have done without her to cling to, after we lost Mama.”

“Oh, Waves…” the redhead reached over and took her hand.

“I know what it’s like being the youngest, it can be lonely, especially with Peony being the only girl. I thought she might benefit from a friend she can pretend with, you know? Older brothers can be quite cruel at times, a lively fantasy life makes for a convenient escape.”

“And here I was thinking it was just an ordinary rag doll. That’s a beautiful story, my dear. You ought to let Delia know, so she can tell Miss Peony when she’s old enough to understand.”

“Remind me next time we see her.”

“You know…you are one helluva woman, Waverly Haught. Your generosity of spirit and open heart never cease to amaze me.”

“I don’t see any reason to make a fuss about it. I’m just being myself. I wouldn’t know any other way to be.”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, I am damned glad of it. I honestly couldn’t have picked a better wife, if I’d had every woman in the world from which to choose.”

“Flatterer,” the brunette joked, trying to draw attention away from her blush.

“Look at me, Waverly,” Cole commanded, bringing the wagon to a standstill.

When the brunette had complied with the request, the driver placed her palm upon the smaller woman’s cheek, looking her directly in the eye.

“I am perfectly sincere in my admiration of you, my dear. Don’t you ever doubt that, even for a second.”

“If you say so,” though she could see the absolute truth of it in those deep brown eyes, she went for the jest, purely out of habit.

“Waverly…”

“Yes, Mister Haught?”

“I mean it.”

“I know,” she admittedly softly, closing the small distance between them and placing a soft kiss
upon the redhead’s impossibly soft lips.

“We’d better be going, husband or we won’t make it home before sunset.”

“If we make it in time, perhaps we could sit in the gazebo and watch it go down together?”

“I’d like that very much.”

“So would I, Waves…so would I.”

As they drove through the countryside, the brunette looped her arm through her husband’s, laying her head on his shoulder. She stayed like that all the way home.

As the pair sat in the gazebo, watching the sky paint itself in shades of pink, then orange, then finally purple, in much the same position as they’d ridden home, Cole hummed a happy, lyrical tune.

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“The song.”

“I don’t know, is it anything?”

“It’s nice…soothing.”

A few more minutes passed, unremarked upon, enjoying each others company and the beauty of their homestead.

“Cole?”

“Hmmm?”

“You hungry?”

“I could eat. Nothing heavy though.”

“We had a good batch of eggs this morning. Omelets and maybe some tea and toast?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Good. I had an idea that perhaps after supper we could try something new…maybe do a bit of reading together?”

“I’m game…what did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking Master Shakespeare.”

“Sonnets?”

“Actually, I thought one of the comedies. Much Ado About Nothing, maybe. It seems to me Beatrice and Benedick would be a good fit for us.”

“True…Very true. I don’t know if I have the fortitude for a whole play tonight, though. It’s been a
long day.”

“Oh no, I was thinking just their big scenes…it could be fun.”

“Eggs, Shakespeare, then a good night’s sleep. Sounds like a capital plan to me.”

Cole made the omelets, while Waverly toasted the bread over the fire.

After pushing their usual chairs together, to facilitate reading from the same text, they settled in and enjoyed their meager repast while staring silently into the flames.

“That was just what the doctor ordered. My husband the chef,” she teased.

“Are you ready for Master Will or would you like to give dinner some time to settle?”

“I’m game if you are. I thought we’d start with Act I, Scene 1.”

“Proceed.”

“I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick, nobody marks you.”

“So, you’re doing the accent then?” Waverly shot him a look, “My wife, the serious actress.”

Schooling his features, Cole cleared his throat, adopting a dialect of his own.

“What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?”

“Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.”

“Then is courtesy a turncoat. For it is certain I am lov’d of all ladies, only you excepted.” Cole winked at her wife, “And I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for truly I love none.”

“A dear happiness to women, they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humor for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.”

“God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratch’d face.”

“Scratching could not make it worse, and ‘twere such a face as yours were.”

“Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.”

“A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.”

“I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so a good continuer. But keep your way a’ God’s name, I have done.”

“You always end with a jade’s trick, I know you of old.”

Waverly ended, with for all appearances, a look of genuine hurt in her eye and just the right tone of voice.
“Brava, my dear! You are really quite good, you know.”

“Thank you, husband.”

“Were you of that ilk, I think you might have made a go of it on the stage.”

“What would my Pa have thought of that, I wonder. Acting being tantamount to harlotry, in the eyes of the church. Young ladies of breeding do not go upon the stage, it simply isn’t done.”

“I didn’t say you should join the demimonde of the theater, just that if you were of a mind to, you might make a go of it.”

“Who knows, I may yet. Perhaps you will die young, and I’ll finally have my chance.”

“I do believe Beatrice is rubbing off on you.”

They went through it all, Act II, Scene 1 at the party, Act IV, Scene 1, then select parts of Act V, Scene 2, reading only such portions as Waverly had specially selected.

“Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I call’d thee?”

“Yea, Signior, and depart when you bid me.”

“O’ stay but till then!”

“Then” is spoken; fare you well now. And yet ere I go with that I came, which is, with knowing what hath pass’d between you and Claudio.”

“Only foul words - and thereupon I will kiss thee.”

Waverly held out her hand, stopping his mouth, “Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome; therefore I will depart unkiss’d.”

“Thou hast frighted the word out of his right sense, so forcible is thy wit……………And I pray thee now tell me, for which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?” Cole adopted a saucy manner.

“For them all together, which maintain’d so politic a state of evil that they will not admit any good part to intermingle with them. But for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?”

“Suffer love! A good epithite! I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will.” Cole whispered, “Not really, Waves.”

The brunette raised an eyebrow at his cheek in interrupting The Master.

“In spite of your heart, I think. Alas, poor heart, if you spite it for my sake, I will spite it for yours, for I will never love that which my friend hates.”

“Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.”
“Truer words were never spoken, don’t you think, Mister Haught?”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far, but it hits pretty close to the mark. This is fun. Are you having fun, Waves?”

“At times I have felt quite transported,” she sighed, “I’m not in the mood for all of that “Kill Claudio” business, no disrespect intended to Master Will, of course. Let us skip ahead…here, Act V, Scene 4…”

“Soft and fair, friar. Which is Beatrice?”

Waverly pantomimed removing a mask, “I answer to that name. What is your will?”

From there on, it was difficult to discern just how much was acting and how much truth.

“Do not you love me?” Benedick/Cole queried.

“Why, no, no more than reason.”

“Why then your uncle and the Prince and Claudio have been deceived. They swore you did.”

“Do you not love me?”

“Troth, no, no more than reason.”

“Why then my cousin, Margaret, and Ursula are much deceived, for they did swear you did.”

“They swore that you were almost sick for me.”

“They swore that you were well-nigh dead for me,” Beatrice/Waverly bantered.

“Tis no such matter. Then you do not love me?”

“No, truly, but in friendly recompense.”

The redhead’s lower lip slid into a healthy pout.

“Don’t be sad, husband, it’s just the play.”

Waverly read through Leonato, Claudio and Hero’s parts in double time. Reciting the halting lines of love the two characters had written to one another.

“Cole…”

“Huh?”

“It’s your line, Benedick…”

“Oh…oops,” the redhead picked up her British accent where she’d dropped it and continued.

“A miracle! Here’s our own hands against our hearts. Come, I will have thee, but by this light, I take thee for pity.”
“I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.”

“Peace, I will stop your mouth.”

The redhead stood, stretching. “This was fun, we should do it again some time.”

“Cole…”

“I really ought to take Champ out one last time before bed, so he doesn’t leave you any surprises on the floor.”

“Cole!”

“What?”

“Sit…”

“Waves, it’s late…”

“Sit!”

“OK…what’s wrong?”

“You didn’t finish the scene.”

“I read the last line.”

“You’re supposed to kiss me…”

“Where does it say that? There’s no stage direction.”

“What did you think “Peace, I will stop your mouth” meant?”

“I never really thought about it. A nice way of telling her to be quiet?”

“We have to finish the scene, husband. I won’t disrespect Master Shakespeare like that!”

Cole just stared at her, bemused.

“Fine,” Waverly declared, “If you won’t do it, I will!”

Taking the redhead’s face in her hands, the keyed up girl kissed her husband’s lush lips. She didn’t feel so much as a trace of a moustache, leaving her to wonder once more if he had lied about his age.

One thing she had no doubt of, however, as Cole moaned low in his throat, this was no more acting for him, than it was for her.

Waverly could feel his hands trembling as they came to rest on her hips. She felt rather overcome herself, but not enough to warrant stopping.

God.

She had never imagined kissing a man could feel this good.
Neither of them was timing how long it lasted, but it was certainly far longer than any stage manager would have deemed appropriate, no matter the century.

When Waverly finally pulled away, breathing heavily, Cole was staring at her entranced.

She didn’t think he could have looked more stunned if she’d hit him with a shovel.

When he finally did utter a sound, it was not anything she might have expected.

“Dog…”

“Cole?”

He jumped to his feet, like his chair was on fire, “Out…Champ…here boy!”

Waverly was still sitting there in front of the fire, her mouth hanging open, when the two of them ran out the back door.
Chapter Summary

That same night from Cole's POV, starting with the kiss.

****

The angst train is pulling into the station people, please have your tickets ready.

Warning: this ends on a cliffhanger. So mentally prepare yourselves now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Fine,” Waverly declared, “If you won’t do it, I will.”

Before the redhead could think up a good way of stopping her, the smaller woman did the one thing that Cole had been both dreaming of and dreading, since the first time she had laid eyes on her, on that train platform.

No sooner did she feel the coolness of her wife’s hands on her flushed cheeks, than the brunette’s lips met hers.

Waverly is kissing me.

Really kissing me.

Full on the mouth kissing me.

This is no stage kiss.

Too much heat behind it for that.

She really means it.

Unable to stop herself, Cole let loose a carnal moan, deep and low in her throat and returned Waverly’s kiss with the full force of her feelings behind it. Every bit of her pent up desire and emotion, funneled into the spot where the soft flesh of her wife’s plush lips pressed against hers.

The redhead’s trembling hands seemed to travel to the smaller woman’s hips with a will of their own, pulling her more fully into her own body.

Oh God.

No matter how many times Cole had imagined this, and there had been many, she had never conceived of just how sublime the experience of it would be, it felt more like the magical tough of some celestial being, than that of a mere creature of Earth.

She never wanted it to end.

Waverly’s kiss was at once soft and demanding, leaving no room for misinterpretation.
She wants me.
No.
She wants Cole.
Shit.
You have to stop.
Cole, stop!
You can’t do this.
Cole!
You can’t!
She thinks you’re a man!
Oh…this would be so simple if I was a man…
I would sweep her up in my arms, our lips never parting for an instant, and carry her into the bedroom, then…
Cole!
Stop!
You have to stop!
You can’t do this!
Waverly doesn’t know the truth!
This is so…
So wonderful…
NO!
SO WRONG!
STOP THIS RIGHT NOW!
NICOLE!
The redhead eased up and Waverly pulled away, softly gasping for breath, gazing into her husband’s eyes, then resting her head upon his shoulder, like her legs had gone all wobbly and could no longer support the weight of her own body.
Cole knew exactly how she felt.
Her wife’s kisses left her with the sensation that she had drunk far too much cider, just before being kicked by a mule.
She couldn’t move, couldn’t think, paralyzed by the hormones surging through her overheated
body and a heart fit to burst with love, joy, abject fear and disgust that she had allowed things to go this far.

COLE!

WAKE UP!

DO SOMETHING!

SAY SOMETHING!

YOU HAVE TO GET AWAY BEFORE IT HAPPENS AGAIN!

“Dog…”

“Cole?”

Jumping to her feet, like the chair was on fire, the redhead called out for the dog.

“Out…Champ! Here boy!”

In the blink of an eye, she was out the back door, Champ trailing at her heels.

“Let’s take a walk around the place, boy. Daddy’s got some serious thinking to do.”

“I’m not prepared for this, boy. I knew this day was bound to come eventually, but I never imagined it would be so soon. I’m not ready to let your Mama go.”

Champ sat down at Cole’s feet and looked up at his master, whining.

“I know, boy…I know;” she bent down and scratched his ears, “We are in one Hell of a pickle.”

“If it were up to me, I’d be with your Mama until the day I die. I love her with all my heart and apparently she loves me too.”

“No…that’s not right…she loves Cole.”

“I see what you did there. If I were you I’d be tilting my head too. Yes, it’s true that I am Cole, but Waverly thinks Cole’s a man. That’s the problem.”

“I have to tell her, boy. Going on like this, with her not knowing who I really am, it's a bit too much like what that bad man did to me. She can’t really consent without all the relevant facts.”

“So that’s that…I have to tell her…and when I do…”

“Well, I suppose there’s a few things that could happen. First, if she truly is the amazing, wonderful woman that I fell in love with, then she’ll understand. I’ll have to tell her my story of course, the reasons why I became Cole. I’m not much looking forward to reliving that, but it has to be and then maybe she’ll take pity on my poor, broken soul and we’ll stay together, strictly as friends, of course.”

Cole stared up at the stars for a few minutes, thinking, “But how likely is that? She’s been duped, Champ, made a fool of…She came all the way out here and married me under false pretenses…I just don’t see your Mama reacting favorably to that information.”
“She may well be so angry that she’ll pack up her things and leave on the first train she can catch. You and I will never see or hear from her again. It’ll be just the same as if she was dead…as dead to me as Michelle…but I’ll always know that she’s somewhere…just out of reach…going on with her life…and me…banished from the warmth of her love forever. She’ll have kept my secret though…out of the sheer kindness of her beautiful heart…having amassed enough affection for me these past few months to empathize with my predicament…even if she cannot see her way clear to continuing to take part in it.”

Champ sped off after a noise in some nearby bushes.

“That better not be a polecat!”

“Then we have option number three,” Cole continued talking to herself, “She’s so angry that she goes and tells the Sheriff and everyone else in town. Then an angry mob does with me what it will, before leaving me dancing at the end of a rope.”

“I know, boy. It’s a big ole shit sandwich, but that’s the way it’s gotta be. I love your Mama way too much to go on deceiving her like this. Lying to her is hurting her, even if she doesn’t know about it.”

“Damn Dolls for ever convincing me that I needed a wife and damn me for listening to him!”

“If I’d never placed that fool ad, none of this would be happening. I never would have met your Mama, so I never could have hurt her. That’s the last thing I ever wanted to do, Champ…but that’s exactly what I am doing as long as I continue to hide who I really am.”

“You know, I once thought I would die happy if I could just kiss Waverly one time. Well, that day may be coming, after all. Next time I’ll be more careful what I wish for, I’ll tell you what...still, I’d rather die than go on hurting her.”

“Oh…if I could only sleep with her in my arms tonight…”

“Be strong, man...you’re not a little girl any more,” Cole laughed ironically, “You’ll tell her tomorrow and it’ll all be over one way or another. Perhaps I’ll tell her over dinner, she’ll be calmer with a plate of food in front of her…I can just see it now, Champ…”

“Mrs. Haught, I realize our relationship has been progressing along certain lines and I get the feeling lately, that you’ve been thinking you might want to become acquainted with the contents of my trousers…are you at all familiar with the expression, a pig in a poke?”

“No, perhaps poke is an unfortunate choice of words in this situation…perhaps something a bit more subtle…”

“I realize you’ve been feeling like you might want to become acquainted with my intimate bits…well, the things is, they’re aren’t quite the bits you’ll be expecting…”

“Waverly, I can never give you children…”

“My dear, I love you with all my heart, but when it comes to loving you with any other parts, you are plum out of luck…”

“Oh Hell, boy…I don’t know how I’m gonna tell her, but I will…I’ll tell her…tomorrow.”

“So let’s take a good long walk tonight. It may just be the last one we ever take together.”
By the time Cole and Champ went back inside, the door to Waverly’s room was shut and there was no light coming from beneath it. The redhead let loose a sigh which was at once relieved and resigned and headed for her room, anticipating a long, undoubtedly sleepless night.

When Waverly came out of her room the next morning, she was disappointed to find that her husband had already left for the day.

“What did you two talk about for all that time last night…huh, Champ?”

The dog gave no answer, but simply whined and stared needily at her breakfast plate.

“Oh, you might as well go ahead,” she huffed, putting it on the floor for him, “I’ve got no stomach for it this morning,” taking another sip of her coffee, “I’ll tell you one thing, boy. Whatever you and your precious Daddy discussed, he and I will be having a talk tonight. Oh, yes we will.”

When Cole was working, she thought about work.

She’d always been very good that way.

Trees were capricious things and a man who didn’t respect them could get hurt.

Lose a few fingers

A hand.

His life.

To all appearances, today was no different than any other day.

Cole was laboring in the woods, just like she did every other day.

She was skidding the trunk of a giant Ponderosa Pine, through the forest, on its way to the lumber wagon, just like she did every day.

Her eye was on the ox, plodding on ahead of her, just like every other day.

She could feel the weight of the tree tugging at the heavy leather strap, where it wrapped around her shoulder and the pull at the other end where it was lashed to the great beast’s yoke.

Dolls was singing to himself, while he stripped the branches off another downed tree, just like every other day.

But today, unlike all those other days, Cole’s mind wasn’t on her work.

Today, all she could think about was her Waverly and the possibility that tonight might be the last time that she ever saw her.

Momentarily, pulled out of her reverie by the sound of something crashing through the underbrush up ahead, the redhead came back to the present.
The wild cat’s roar was the last thing she heard.

For the second time in a little over a week, Waverly was pulled away from her work by the sound of Champ yowling like a banshee caught in a bear trap.

Running to the front of the house, to see what all the fuss was about, she spotted the familiar green railed wagon speeding toward the homestead.

Soon she was able to see that Dolls was driving and waving his arm at her like a man trying to flag down a carriage, but there was no sign of her husband.

How curious.

As he drew closer, she could hear that he was yelling.

Yelling her name.

At the top of his lungs.

When he was nearer still, she was able to see the panic etched on the big man’s face.

As soon the wagon turned into the driveway, she started running to meet it.

“Miss Waverly! Miss Waverly!” Dolls shouted, “Help! Quick!”

The lumber wagon came to a skidding stop.

That’s when she saw Cole.

He was laid out in the back of the wagon, moaning and writhing in pain, his face and clothes covered in blood and sawdust.

She fainted on the spot.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to post the next chapter as soon as I can. I wouldn't want to torture you any longer than absolutely necessary.
Waverly tends to Cole's injuries while Dolls goes to fetch the doctor.

The unconscious woman was awakened by a splash of ice cold water to the face and the terrified voice of her husband’s business partner.

“Goddamn it, Miss Waverly! Wake up!”

Sputtering and scandalized, she gasped, “Pardon me, Mister Dolls!”

“Damn it, woman! Your husband may be bleeding to death, I need you to be strong and help me! I’ll apologize for my breach of etiquette later!”

“Cole!” Coming back to herself, the brunette jumped to her feet, “You carry him into the bedroom, I’ll fetch my first aid kit.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Hearing Cole’s agonized groans, as Dolls lifted his battered body and carried him into the house, Waverly had to pinch herself to keep from fainting again.

“I honestly don’t know what’s gotten in to me,” she wondered aloud, “I saw a lot more blood than that during the war.”

Entering her husband’s bedroom backside first, dragging a medium sized trunk with both hands, Waverly started barking orders like a trail boss.

“Dolls, get me a pitcher of clean water, fill the kettle and put it on to boil. Once you’ve got that done, strip the linens from my bed and tear them into long strips, about four inches wide, then bring them back here to roll. I want you close by in case I need help.”

“Jesus, Miss Waverly, you didn’t have to bring the whole trunk…I’m sure Cole wouldn’t have died in the two minutes it took you to dig your medical kit out of there.”

“This is my medical kit, Dolls. I wasn’t about to be caught unprepared on the frontier. It’s a good thing I’m a planner.”

“Whatever you say, Miss Waverly.”

“Don’t presume to patronize me, Sir. I was a nurse in the casualty hospital the last two years of the war and I also assisted the local healer. I assure you, I know what I am doing. Now, please do as I said.”

“Cole?” she leaned in close, “Can you hear me?”
The redhead groaned pitifully.

“It’s Waverly. Don’t be frightened, you’re home and safe. I’m going to take good care of you, I promise.”

Cole settled down a bit then.

“I need you to drink some of this, dearest. Can you do that for me? It’s laudunum. That shoulder is dislocated and it’s going to hurt like hell when we pop it back in place.” She held the bottle to his lips and he took a good swallow, “Ah ah, not too much now. I still need to assess your injuries and I need you awake for that.”

Dolls returned then, carrying all she had requested.

“Thank you Dolls, could you pour the hot water into the wash bowl, please and pour the clean water into this bowl by the bed. After that you can roll those bandages.”

“Right away. Um…Miss Waverly, Ma’am, I’d like to apologize for swearing at you before…”

“Please, Dolls…that’s the least of my worries right now. If you’ll go and look in the cabinet above the stove, you’ll find a bottle of whiskey, bring it to me please.”

Taking a large hunk of gauze and dipping it in the water, Waverly began slowly cleaning the gore off her husband’s face and head, trying to determine the source of the copious amount of blood.

“I don’t want you to be alarmed by all this, dear. Scalp wounds bleed like a stuck pig, it may not be nearly as bad as it seems. Let’s see, shall we?”

Having washed Cole’s face, neck and chest, it was apparent that the lion’s share of the blood on his befouled shirt had indeed come from his scalp. Once she had rinsed as much from the surrounding area as she could, Waverly applied a pressure dressing, padding the wound with gauze, then wrapping his head securely with the torn linen, praying that it would serve to staunch the flow of blood, while she assessed the rest of the redhead’s injuries.

“Dolls, I’m going to need your help.”

“Yes, Miss Waverly,” he replied, jiggling the whisky bottle, “How much of this did you want me to give him?”

“Oh, that’s not for him,” she took the bottle from his big hand and took a good slug before passing it back to him, “We’re going to have to pop that shoulder in, you might want to take a slug yourself, if you’ve got a weak stomach, then leave it on the dresser, I’ll be needing it later.”

Dolls took a small sip, then another and set the whiskey on the bureau.

“I need you to come over here and hold him up for me so I can cut these clothes off of him.”

The large man gingerly levered his friend into a semi-reclining position, sitting behind him for support. Using her large shears, Waverly carefully bisected the sleeves and back of the sanguine shirt before gently removing it.

“Oh good, aside from the cuts on his arms, there’s very little blood on his undershirt, so all of that came from the head wound. There’s no need to take it off. He’ll be cold from the shock, so let’s just…” She cut a slit in each sleeve and tore them off above the elbow.
“Could you carefully take off his boots and socks, please?” she asked the big man, as she cut through her husband’s pants, “Those arms will definitely need a few stitches. There are a few tears in his long johns, but no significant blood and no swelling, thank God, so I doubt anything is broken.”

“OK Mister Dolls, you can lay him back down now and please pull that blanket over him.”

He didn’t move, but stood staring at her like she’d grown another head.

“What?”

“You really do know what you’re doing.”

“Told you I did, didn’t I?”

“What’d you do with the other Miss Waverly? The one who fainted outside?”

“Shock, I suppose. I know how to handle myself in a crisis, don’t you worry, Friend Dolls.”

“Mmm-hmmm, I get it now…”

“What?”

“What Cole sees in you.”

“I’m sure I’m flattered. Now, would you please go and fetch me some clean ash from the fire place? We’ll need it if the bleeding won’t stop on its own.”

Alone with her husband, who had mercifully fallen asleep, Waverly checked him for other injuries. Feeling along his collarbone on the same side as the dislocated shoulder, she noticed a definite grinding sensation when she pressed at it, Cole’s loud moan confirming that it was broken. Moving down his torso, she palpated his ribs and a similar but stronger reaction to the touch made plain that a few were in a similar state. Laying her ear against his chest, she was relieved to hear no sounds of distress, just the normal deep breath of sleep. She sighed with relief, feeling sure that nothing was so badly broken as to have injured his lungs. Looking over the rest of his body there were thankfully no other major injuries, just the cuts on his arms and some bruising on his legs.

“There you are, Dolls. Good news. Except for a broken collar bone, some broken ribs, that dislocated shoulder and the gash on his head, he seems to have come through it with only a few cuts and bruises.”

“Thank the Lord.”

“So long as he doesn’t have a head injury and I clean his wounds carefully, he ought to be fine in time.”

“Praise Jesus.”

“No offense to your beliefs, my friend, but if you keep talking that way, you’re gonna give me flashbacks of my childhood and I need to keep my mind on my patient,” she teased.

“Sorry, Miss Waverly.”

“Now really, Dolls. Both of us are covered in my husband’s blood, don’t you think that makes us well enough acquainted for you to call me just Waverly?”
“Sure…What do you need me to do next?”

“I suppose we ought to get those ribs wrapped before we pop his shoulder in, we don’t want him twisting with the pain and injuring them worse. Come hold him in a sitting position for me and bring those bandages with you, please.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You just can’t help it, can you?”

“Waverly.”

“That’s better. I think I’ll do the wrap right over his undershirt. There’s hardly any blood on it and I don’t want to jostle him any more than necessary. While I’m binding his ribs, why don’t you tell me what happened.”

“Well, we were doing pretty much the same thing we do every day. I was stripping the branches off this big Ponderosa we’d just felled and Cole was skidding the ones that were finished out to the wagon. I was going along, singing my head off, getting into a good rhythm with the adze, when I heard a wild cat snarling, followed by the most bloodcurdling scream I’ve ever heard.” Waverly paled visibly, “Oh no, don’t you go out on me again…I wasn’t talking about Cole, it was Beau, my ox.”

“Hold him still now, Dolls. I need to get these nice and tight.”

“I took off in the direction of the noise, probably not the smartest thing I ever done, but thank the Lord that demon cat was gone by then. First thing I saw was Beau…his whole side was torn open. Had to put him out of his misery.”

“So that was the shot I heard earlier.”

“I expect so.”

“Go on, then. I just need to tie this off, then we can see to that shoulder.”

“Well, after I’d seen to Beau, I followed along the skid strap. It was woven in and out of several trees, I imagine that’s how Red got so banged up, poor beast musta bounced him all over running from that cat. Then I found Cole, lying in a patch of tall ferns, trapped between that trunk he’d been skidding and another tree. That big log was right across his belly and I knew I had to get it off him. I’ll tell you, I must have had the angels with me, I picked up that big ole trunk just like it was a twig and carried him to safety. Thank God the wagon wasn’t too far away.”

“Thank God that cat got Beau instead of Cole. No offense to your beast of burden.”

“None taken, I’m glad it wasn’t the other way round too.”

“Well, I suppose we’ve put it off as long as we can, we’d better take care of that shoulder. This is going to be very painful, especially with a broken collar bone. Are you ready or would you like another drink?”

“I can take it if you can. It’s Cole concerns me, although he seems to be taking a nap.”

She lifted an eyelid to be sure that was all it was, “Yup, just sleeping. I expect this will wake him up, but all the better if it doesn’t.”
“Your mouth to God’s ear.”

“Are you ready?” Dolls nodded, “I need you to lift his arm out to the side, I’ll guide the socket from here,” she scooted in behind her husband’s back, “Now slowly lift up and when I say now, bring his hand up behind his head, you should feel some resistance.”

Cole woke up screaming a moment later, necessitating the fast method, “Now!”

“There, there, my dear,” she kissed his forehead, “The worst part is over, rest easy now. If you’ll just help me ease his arm into the sling, Mister Dolls,” she tied the large triangle of cloth behind the redhead’s neck, “Sorry about the flowers, Cole. The only piece of cloth I had that was big enough was for the new curtains.”

“Thank you, Dolls. You may lay him back down now. Here, lets have another pillow for support. Between the collarbone, the ribs and that shoulder, we need him to be as immobile as possible. All that’s left now is the stitching. I don’t need your help with that, so you may go now and fetch the doctor. I may be able to patch a man up, but I’m afraid head injuries are a bit outside my skill set. We need to get him looked at by a professional.”

“But Waverly, how am I…”

“Oh, I forgot, you’re down an ox aren’t you? Take Bobo, he knows you well enough, I imagine he’ll let you ride him. I’d offer you my horse, but she doesn’t care for men.”

“I’ll ride like the wind, Miss Waverly, I promise. Do you need anything else before I go?”

“Yes, call me Waverly and pass me that razor on the wash stand, will you?”

“What are you doin’ with a razor? Ma Gardner’s got more beard than Cole.”

“I think it came with the brush set. I need to shave around the wound before I can stitch it. I’m sure going to miss that firey mop of his.”

“It’ll grow back.”

“Yup, it will. Now you’d better get going.”

Once Dolls had gone, Waverly squatted over her trunk, scanning the square jars, each nested in its own dedicated spot, until she found the one she was searching for, then removing it from the trunk along with the needle, thread, some matches and a small pipe.

“It’s just you and I now, my love,” she said in a soothing voice, stroking his brow, “I daren’t give you any more laudunum, until Doc can check you out for a head injury, but this ought to be enough to keep you calm while I stitch you up. It’s your old friend cannibis, you told me the doctor on the train gave you some, when you had Altitude Sickness. I doubt you could manage a cup of tea right now, so you’ll have to inhale some smoke.”

Opening the tin, she packed a bit of the ground up weed into the pipe and lit it, taking a good pull of the smoke, she slowly blew it in Cole’s face.

“I better be careful not to inhale any of this, I need to stay alert and watch over you,” she took another mouthful of smoke and shared it with her husband, “Anyway, I have a hard enough time keeping stitches straight when I’m sober.”
Before she could even set the pipe down on the table, the redhead was snoring away, soft as a puppy with a bellyful of milk.

Placing the needles and several lengths of good, strong thread in a small basin, Waverly poured whiskey over them.

“Seems like a waste of good whiskey, but if it keeps you from getting infection, it’s worth the sacrifice.”

Having cleaned and stitched all of the smaller lacerations that needed it, the brunette gave each a light coating of honey to prevent putrefaction. Granny Mueller, the old folk healer, back home, always said ‘honey don’t spoil so can’t nothing go green underneath it’.

Having finished all of that and subsequently dressed Cole’s forearms, to protect the stitches, Waverly began to carefully unwind the bandage on his head.

“Thank God, the bleeding’s slowed down to almost nothing, but we’re not out of the woods yet, you should pardon the expression. I still need to clean and stitch the wound and that is bound to start it up again. Here’s hoping you have peaceful dreams and don’t wake up while I’m in the middle of it.”

Taking her small sewing scissors in hand, the ersatz nurse began the laborious process of gently trimming the hair around the redhead’s wound, both to make it short enough to shave the area and to reveal the full extent of the injury.

In the end, the laceration turned out to be much larger than she’d anticipated, forming a jagged J shape that covered a good third of her husband’s head. Thankfully it was only a flesh wound, albeit a severe one. Cole’s scalp had been torn back in a roughly oval shape, attached on only one end, so that it looked like top of an inexpertly opened tin can. Still, it appeared to be shallow, with no damage to the muscle and she could feel no large clots of blood beneath it when she felt around the surrounding area with her fingertips.

Once she’d ascertained the scope of the wound, Waverly decided she might as well shave the whole head. Cole would look a lot funnier with half his hair gone than all of it.

“It figures, I finally get to run my fingers through this glorious head of hair and it’s when I’m cutting it all off. Don’t you worry, my dear, it’ll grow back in time. Although, I suspect you’re gonna have one heck of a funny cowlick.”

After a good amount of time spent first trimming, then shaving Cole’s hair and cleaning it off the bed, Waverly spent another half hour or so alternately trickling warm water over the wound and dabbing at it with clean gauze, in an effort to remove the dried on blood. Not wanting her husband to experience any more pain than was necessary, she hit him with another puff of smoke and then took a swig of whiskey to steel her nerves.

Holding the ragged edges together with one hand, while she stitched with the other, the brunette did her best to suture evenly, so that there would be no gaps or puckers. The scar was going to be sizeable enough without her less than stellar sewing skills making the healing process any more difficult.

“You know, this would be a lot easier if I could use a few pins to hold this in place, but since it’s your head and not the hem of a dress, I shall have to make do as it is.”

Once the task was accomplished, Waverly applied a light coating of honey to the wound, followed
by a gauze dressing, before wrapping Cole’s head in the rest of the torn bed sheets.

Once she’d washed her hands, she went to her own room to retrieve a set of clean clothes and a couple of her bonus blankets, to keep the patient warm, should he start to shiver. Her own clothes and the quilt beneath Cole were liberally stained with blood. When Dolls returned, if the doctor said it was safe, she would have him put the redhead in her room while she changed the bedding, but she’d have to put linens on her bed first, she now realized.

By reflex, Waverly found herself headed to her own room to retrieve the modesty screen, so that she might change out of her soiled things without her husband watching. Then she glanced at the man in question and realized how silly she was being. Cole was out like a light and not likely to wake up any time soon.

So, she stripped down, right there in the middle of her husband’s bedroom, naked as the day she was born as she moved to the wash stand and cleansed her skin of the remainder of her beloved’s blood. Shivering at the realization, not because the water in the bowl had long since cooled.

Having dressed in a fresh set of clothes, including a skirt and loosely laced corset, unfortunately her work clothes were not proper for company and the doctor was on his way, she carried the fouled water and her bloodied clothes into the other room, tossing them out the back door. Next, she made herself some coffee, the arduous process of tending to Cole’s wounds, paired with emotional stress of the situation, had taken its toll and she felt like a rung out dishrag. She’d need to stay awake and watchful until the doctor arrived, in case the redhead took a sudden turn for the worse.

Coffee in hand, she dragged her reading chair into the bedroom, with Champ at her heels and took up vigil beside Cole’s bed. After some initial nervous pacing, the dog laid down at her feet and before much time had passed, Calamity Jane jumped into her lap.

“You guys are worried about your Daddy too, huh? Not to worry, children, I think he’s gonna be OK…eventually. Mister Dolls got him here in time. Unfortunately, all we can do right now is wait,” Champ looked up at her and sighed, like he understood, “I know, boy, that’s the hardest part. I’ll tell you what, I don’t know if critters pray, but if you can, now would be a good time to start.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

The doctor arrives and Nurse Waverly continues to care for her patient

Chapter 50

Waverly was awakened by Champ sounding the alarm, that someone was approaching the homestead.

“Shit,” she cast a worried glance in her husband’s direction, finding him snoring softly, “I hope I wasn’t out too long.”

Kissing Cole’s forehead, to check for fever, she told herself, she whispered, “I’ll be right back, Mister Haught.”

Opening the front door, she spied Dolls and the doctor riding up the driveway, “Oh, thank God.”

“I got him here quick as I could, Miss Waverly…sorry I took so long.”

“You did fine, Dolls,” she assured the big man, patting his back as he passed.

“Mister Dolls tells me you are quite the accomplished practitioner, extraordinary in one so young,” the old man said, assessing her with a dubious glance, “So, tell me, how is the patient doing?”

“Dolls!” Waverly blushed, “I don’t know as I’d go that far Doctor,” she demurred humbly, “As of about five minutes ago, he’s resting comfortably, no sign of fever. His wounds have all been sutured, the dislocated shoulder reset, I’ve put his arm in a sling to immobilize the fractured clavicle and bound his broken ribs.”

“You weren’t kidding about this one, were you Mister Dolls?” the doctor raised both eyebrows, impressed with the small woman’s thoroughness.

“Didn’t I tell ya?”

Moving to Cole’s bedside, the old man carefully unwrapped his bandages, giving all of Waverly’s needlework a good once over, “You’ve done a fine job, Mrs. Haught, particularly on the scalp.”

Once he’d re-bandaged the redhead’s wounds, the doctor examined his other injuries, “I don’t see anything that you’ve missed, young lady. Frankly, I doubt I could have done a better job myself. These old hands can’t ply a needle the way they used to, don’t you know.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ve had a good deal more practice, patching up young men, than I’d like.”

“Haven’t we all?” he sighed tiredly, “So, why am I here, exactly? You seem to have done just fine all by yourself.”

“I’m not so bad at the practical skills, but I’m afraid assessing a head injury is a bit outside my bailiwick. I wouldn’t even know how to begin.”
“I see…that scalp wound is pretty nasty. Did anyone witness the actual trauma?” Dolls shook his head, “Well then, I suppose it’s a good thing you sent for me.”

Placing a hand on the slumbering man’s uninjured shoulder, the doctor gently attempted to rouse him.

“Cole? Wake up, Cole. Are you still with us, Mister Haught?”

Slowly, the patient opened his eyes, groaning in misery and using his good arm to shield them from the light.

“Yes,” the physician commiserated, “I imagine you’ve got one hell of a headache, friend. I’m Doctor Crosley, can you tell me where you are and perhaps your name, if you can recall?”

“Home,” the redhead mumbled, “Bedroom…name’s Haught…Cole Haught.”

“Very good, Cole. Can you tell me who this lovely young lady is, perchance?”

“Waverly,” he smiled, “My wife.”

“I don’t suppose you recall who the president is these days?”

“General Grant.”

“Got it in one.”

Lighting the candle on the bedside table, the doctor held it up in front of his patient’s face, causing Cole to groan, “I know the light is hard for you, but this won’t take any longer than a flea’s whisker, then you may go back to sleep, I promise. Could you follow the flame with your eyes, please?”

Waverly watched as her husband’s soulful brown eyes followed the candle left and right, up and down, then in a semi-circle.

“Excellent,” Doctor Crosley exclaimed, blowing out the candle, “You may close your eyes now, son.”

“Well…” Waverly prompted.

“Well, indeed.”

“How is he, Doctor?” She asked, anxiously.

“I’d say he’s very lucky, Mrs. Haught. Far as I can tell there’s no brain damage, I’d venture the scalp wound is a tear injury, without any sort of hard impact. His reflexes are normal, the pulses in his extremities are strong and steady. I’d say all that needed seeing to was already taken care of when I got here. Yes, he is a very lucky man, indeed. He’s got a wife who’s not only pretty as a sunrise, but a damned fine nurse, as well. You saved that boy’s life, girl…no doubt about it.”

“Thank you, Doctor. What would you recommend going forward, treatment-wise?”

“Keep the wounds clean and dry. Change his dressings regularly. I’ll leave you some bandages, so as you don’t have to sacrifice your good linens. Most of all, try and keep him as calm as possible. Those fractures need rest and stillness to heal properly, plus we don’t want him tearing out his stitches. Feel free to give him something for the pain, although I’d skip the laudunum. There’ll be a good deal of pain to be sure, but not enough to warrant that. Try to get him to drink plenty of
water and to eat when he feels like he can, although I don’t imagine he’ll have much of an appetite. Bone broth to start, I’d say. He needs to build his strength up, if he wants to get out of that bed any time soon. If he develops fever or any other symptoms that seem untoward, send for me. Other than that, it’s simply a matter of time and rest.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor. I cannot tell you how relieved I am to hear it.”

“I don’t know why you keep thanking me, you’re more responsible for his condition than I am, Missus. It’s down to you and Mister Dolls here, for seeing to his injuries so expeditiously. If he’d had to wait for me, things might have been very different, indeed.”

“I never thought I’d see the day when I was thankful for the war.”

“Amen to that.”

“Can I offer you some pie and coffee before you go, Doctor Crosley?”

“Thank you, ma’am, but it’ll be getting dark soon enough and the wife will be expecting me…and Mrs. Haught?”

“Hmmm?”

“If you ever want work as a nurse, you be sure and contact me, you hear?”

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll keep that in mind.’

Once the old man had gone, Dolls said’ “I ought to be heading home, myself. Anything else you need my help with before I go?”

“Do you think you could carry him into my room and keep an eye on him while I change this bloody bedding? It won’t take but five minutes.”

“Of course, Miss Waverly.”

“Dolls…”

“Pardon me…Waverly…”

“And Dolls?”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll be as gentle as if he was a new born babe, kinda looks like one without his hair.”

Once Cole was safely ensconced in his own bed and sleeping soundly, Waverly got a start on the broth and poured herself a stiff shot of whiskey. Dragging a chair to a spot where she had a good view of both Cole and the pot on the stove, she sat down to rest her weary bones, finally having the chance to breathe and think again.

From the moment Dolls had thrown that icy water in her face, she’d been running on instinct and muscle memory. Now, as she allowed herself to let the reality of the day’s events seep in, Waverly began to cry and soon broke down into ragged sobs. Thinking about just how close she had come to losing Cole was like a hard slap to the face. If he had died before she’d had a chance to tell him how she truly felt about him…it was just too horrible to think about. The way forward suddenly became vividly clear. Waverly was determined that as soon as the opportunity presented itself, she
would lay bare the contents of her heart. She had thought she had all the time in the world, to get the concept of loving her husband to fit more comfortably in her heart, but now she saw the stark reality of it all. If that damned cat had run toward him first, she could have lost him, in the blink of an eye. It wasn’t just true today, but any day, for either of them. When it came right down to it, “all the time in the world” was no more than an illusion.

Unable to stand the thought of the man she loved, alone and in pain, Waverly left the broth at a slow simmer for the night and took the mattress from her bed, dragging it into Cole’s room. Laying it down alongside his bunk, she drifted into an exhausted sleep, lulled by the sound of his snoring and Calamity Jane’s purrs as she and Champ curled up beside her.

Apparently, Waverly wasn’t the only one who was too bone tired to do anything but sleep. Injuries notwithstanding, Cole miraculously slept through the night, but not long after sunrise, she was awakened by the sound of his agitated moaning.

“Cole?” she leapt to his side, “Are you in pain? Tell me where it hurts.”

“Waves?” he mumbled, slowly opening bleary eyes.

“Yes, darling…it’s me,” she soothed, stroking his furrowed brow.

“Hurts…” he groaned, “Hurts so bad…”

“Where?”

“Everywhere…”

“I’ve got you darling,” she reassured him, taking up the pipe and matches, “Breathe this in,” she took a puff, blowing the smoke in his face. After a few more hits of the stuff, the redhead relaxed back into his pillows.

“Better?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How’s your head this morning?”

“Still attached, so I suppose it could be worse.”

“Doc was right about one thing to be sure. No brain damage. You’re still the same man I married. Far too impressed with your own wit, as always,” she teased.

“Ah, you know you love me.”

“Whatever you wish to believe, Mister Haught,” she replied with a wink.

“What happened, Waves?” His voice was hoarse and uneven.

“You don’t know?” she asked, concerned.

“The last thing I remember was hearing a wild cat.”

“You got lucky, he went after Beau first.”
“Oh, Beau…” he sighed sadly, “Is Dolls…”

“Mister Dolls is fine. He brought you home to me, thank the Lord.”

“My Waverly, bringing the almighty into it? Damn, I must be dying.”

“No…you’ll be fine, in time…you just scared the hell out of me, Cole Haught,” she scolded, “I’d be awfully peevish, if I wasn’t so happy that you survived.”

“I’m sorry, Waves.”

“Don’t apologize, just get better.”

“You know, I am feeling a bit more comfortable. The smoke is a good deal less unpleasant than that horrid tea.”

“How’s your head feeling?”

“About the same as that one Christmas when I was twelve and drank a whole pitcher of egg nog, not knowing Granny had put brandy in it. You think you might close those curtains?”

“Of course, my dear. Are you thirsty? Doc Crosley said I should make sure you drink plenty of water.”

“Now that you mention it I am a bit parched.”

Waverly sat down on the side of the bed, holding a cup of water to his lips, “I know it’s a bit awkward this way, but you really do need to keep still for your injuries to heal properly. I’ll do my best not to spill any on you.”

“About that…how bad are my injuries?”

“The doctor said you’ll be just fine with enough time and rest.”

“That’s comforting, but it’s not what I asked…” he started coughing, the water having gone down wrong, clutching at his ribs and crying out.

“Careful! Try to be still, now. You’ve got a broken collarbone and a few fractured ribs, you don’t want to make them worse thrashing about.”

“Yeah…not really anxious to feel that knife in my side again,” he took a sharp breath in, “Is that all?”

“I wish it was, but no…you also dislocated your shoulder and got a whole lots of cuts and bruises.”

“And my head?”

“No fracture, thankfully…but you just missed getting scalped. Thank God I was able to stop the bleeding and stitch you up.”

“You stitched me up?” he asked, his tone tinged with worry, “You have trouble darning socks.”

“There’s a big difference between old socks and someone I…”

“Someone you…”
“You were in good hands, don’t worry. I was a nurse during the war, you know.”

“Really?”

“Are you so surprised? There was a lot of fighting in Pennsylvania.”

“I know…”

“Anyway, you should be glad of it, otherwise you might have bled to death before the doctor arrived.”

“I didn’t doubt you, Waves…I’m just…”

“What, Cole?” she snapped.

“Just when I think I can’t admire you more, you always have some other bit of astonishing information up your sleeve.”

“Yeah, well…I told you I was a good catch.”

“Indeed you are, my dear. This is hardly the way I would have chosen to learn more about your past, but thank you for telling me.”

“I couldn’t let the doctor take credit for all my hard work, now could I?” she teased.

“I suppose not…”

“I’m sorry I bit your head off, I’m not angry at you, just this day.”

“Waves?”

“Yes, Cole?”

“There’s something we need to talk…” he let loose a powerful yawn.

“Uh-uh…we’ll talk later. You need to rest,” she tucked him in, giving him a peck on the lips, “Now go to sleep, husband. I’ll be right here, should you need anything.”

“Mmmkay…” he was snoring before she could say another word.

Waverly leaned down, kissing him gently on the forehead, “Sleep well, my love.”

Later that morning, after she’d tended to the animals, seen to the garden and had some breakfast, the worried brunette went to check on her husband. Peeking around the door jamb, she found him wide awake with a large ginger furball in his lap, which he was stroking with his free hand.

“You’re awake,” she seemed astonished.

“Apparently, Calamity Jane couldn’t resist my considerable charms for another moment.”

“You naughty thing, Daddy needs his rest and you could have hurt him jumping on him like that.”

“Let her be, Waves. It’s only been about ten minutes and she’s not hurting me at all, it’s fine.”

“If you insist, but I’m only humoring you because you’re injured. How are you feeling?”
“Like I’ve been run over by a stagecoach, but my head isn’t hurting quite so bad. It itches like hell though.”

“Dried blood most likely, let’s change that dressing, shall we?”

“Yes, nurse…”

“Don’t you start…”

Cole was encouraged by the fact that her head didn’t hurt quite so much and Waverly was teasing, that meant things couldn’t be all that bad, but when she leaned in close to unwrap the bandages and her wife’s bosom came very close to her face, close enough to kiss, the older girl couldn’t hold back a moan. That’s when she knew she’d be fine.

“Oh! I’m sorry, my dear…did I hurt you?” Waverly pulled back, “I’ll try to be more gentle, I promise. This really was a lot easier when you were unconscious.”

“Gee, thanks…God, it itches everywhere!” Cole reached up, to run her fingers through her hair and touched only skin.

“Don’t scratch,” Waverly batted at his hand, “You’ll set it bleeding again.”

“Waves…”

“Begging will do you no good.”

“Waverly…”

“Hush now, this is delicate work,” she dabbed at the dried blood with a damp cloth.

“Waverly!” Cole shouted, her voice laced with panic.

The brunette froze in place, “Did I hurt you?”

“Waverly…”

“Yes, what is it?”

“My hair…where’s my hair?”

“I had to shave it before I could stitch you up. The wound was so big, there didn’t seem to be…”

Tears began to leak from Cole’s eyes, then before long progressed into full on sobs.

“Cole, what is it? Are you in pain?”

“My hair…”

“It’s not that bad, it will grow back, I promise,” she took him gently in her arms, wondering why he was making such a fuss, shock perhaps?

“How…” the redhead sobbed, for there was a little red stubble visible, so the appellation was still technically true.

“Cole, I don’t understand. Talk to me.”

“How can you even…how can you stand to look at me? I must be ugly as a…”
‘And they say women are vain.’

Waverly pulled back a bit, so that she could look her husband in the face, still cradling him gently in her arms, but Cole refused to meet her eye.

“You listen to me, Mister Haught…it’s only hair…in a couple of weeks it won’t be any shorter than it was when we met…you’re still the prettiest man I’ve ever met and it’s gonna take more than being bald for a little while to change that.”

The redhead cast her gaze down to the coverlet.

“Look at me, Cole.”

He shook his head.

“Please, look at me, husband,” she plead softly.

Shyly, the redhead raised her eyes.

“I nearly lost you yesterday,” she said a little too loudly and with great emphasis, “Dolls brought you to me battered, broken and covered in blood. When I first laid eyes on you, I passed out cold.”

“What?”

“Yes, really…when I came to, I knew one thing and one thing only. I had to do everything in my power to save you…because in that one moment, that moment of absolute clarity, I knew for certain that losing you was the one thing in this life, that I could not survive,” she was practically yelling now.

“Waves?”

“Don’t interrupt me…I need to say this and you better listen…Cole Haught…you are alive…I didn’t lose you….that’s all that matters…you are the man I love and you are here…a bit battered and broken, sure…but alive,darn it…you could have antlers growing out of your forehead and you would still be the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen,” her voice diminished to a gravely whisper, tears running down her face, as she stroked the backs of her trembling fingers over his pale cheek.

“You…” he coughed and she gave him another bit of water.

“Thanks…Waves?”

“Hmmm?”

“You love me?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yes…”

“That’s new…”

“No…not really…”

“But you said…”

“I was a fool…a coward…allowing guilt to keep me from letting myself be happy…When I saw you in the back of that wagon…”
“Waves…”

“Yes, my love?”

“I have to tell you…” sweat was beading on his brow and she knew he must be suffering.

“I know, my darling…I know. You can tell me later, OK? I’ve let you exert yourself too much already. I’m going to wrap this back up and you, my good man are going to rest. Nurses orders.”

“But, Waves…”

“Don’t you try to argue with me, Mister. I don’t know about any other day, but I’m pretty sure I could take you in a fight right now, so you’d better mind me,” she teased, “There, you’re all bandaged up, now go to sleep.”

“Waves…”

“Cole…”

“Say it again…”

“Go to sleep,” she teased.

“Please…”

“I love you, Cole Haught,” she leaned in, pressing a brief kiss to his lips.

“I love you too, Waves.”

“I know…but will you go to sleep?”

“Nope.”

She put her hand on her hip, “What is it now?”

“I…uh…I need to tell…”

“You don’t have to be shy, Cole. Just tell me.”

“Waverly, I…”

“Yes, my love?”

“I need to use the chamber pot.”

“Do you need my help?”

Cole turned beet red, “No! I mean I can do it on my own, just get it out from under the bed for me, will you?”

“You know, husband…in light of recent developments, I will be seeing you without your pants eventually…”

“Not like this…please, Waves…” he pleaded.

“Oh, all right,” she sighed, “Holler if you need anything.”
“I’ve been doing this on my own since I was a little more than two, I’m pretty sure I can manage.”

“I suppose a sponge bath is out of the question, then…”

“Waves!”

“I’m going… I’m going…”
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Nurse Waverly continues to care for her patient.

This one is long and intense. I would advise not starting it unless you have time to finish it. Enjoy.

“And how are you feeling this morning, my darling?”

“I’m more concerned about you, Waves. Sleeping on that floor can’t be doing your back any good.”

“I admit, it was a little harder getting up off the milking stool this morning, but I’d feel a lot more awful if you took a turn for the worse during the night and I wasn’t here beside you.”

“Waves…”

“You don’t have to worry about me, dear. I’m a mountain girl, we’re hearty stock.”

“But I do…”

“What?”

“Worry about you, Waves. I know you haven’t had a proper night’s rest since this happened. You’re doing all the chores on your own, plus looking after me.”

“I’ll survive. Believe me, I’d be a lot worse off if we rushed your recovery and I lost you somehow. The only thing you need to worry about, Mister Haught, is getting better.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. Speaking of promises, I seem to recall someone saying they’d try to get something down besides water this morning. Do you think you could manage a bit of bone broth?”

“It doesn’t sound very appetizing, but if it’ll ease your mind, I’ll do my best.”

“I’d be willing to bet I have the best husband in five hundred square miles.”

“I wasn’t aware you were so well acquainted with the men of the territory.”

“The horse helps a lot,” she teased, leaning in to plump his pillows and give him a kiss on the forehead, “You’re a little warm this morning, you’re not feeling any worse are you?”

“Nope. You probably just got a little carried away stoking the stove last night. Then again it might be the company,” he teased.

“Flirting, Mister Haught? You are feeling better. I’ll go and fetch you a nice bowl of broth then… wouldn’t want to stay too close if that’s the effect I have on your temperature.”
“Waves?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Could, I have a cup of tea, please?”

“Since you asked so nicely, of course, my dear.”

Cole watched the back pockets of her wife’s work Levi’s swing as she walked out of the room. It wasn’t the first time she’d done it, but now that they’d admitted their feelings to one another, she felt a lot less guilty about it. Honestly, she didn’t know why more women didn’t wear pants, it was certainly a better view than a skirt with a bunch of petticoats.

Before she’d even had time to work up a good fantasy, Waverly came in with a bowl of soup and a cup of tea.

“You’ve got a little pink in your cheeks, I guess you must be improving.”

Cole nodded with a slight smile, relieved that she hadn’t noticed it was a blush.

“I’m sorry there’s no toast to go with your tea, we’re all out of bread. We will be for the foreseeable future, unless of course, you’d like to give me the recipe.”

“Nice try, Mrs. Haught.”

“So, how’s your breakfast?”

“This skeleton juice is good.”

“Bone broth.”

“My apologies, bone broth. I’ll have my strength back in no time.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Well, I hope it’s a successful one, I’m already bored to tears being stuck in this bed and it’s only been a few days.”

“Then you’ll be happy to know there is indeed, some excitement on the horizon. I was thinking, since you did so well with the chamber pot last night, we might try a bath today.”

“Really, Waves?” he replied, uncomfortably.

“Yes, really…I love you, Cole, but frankly you’re getting a bit ripe.”

“I have never been so insulted!” the redhead teased.

“Don’t get out much, huh?”

“Remind me again, why I married you?”

“My sparkling wit, ethereal beauty and breathtaking intelligence, wasn’t it? Are you finished with that?”

“Ah yes, now I remember,” he laughed, then clutched at his side in pain, “Stop making me laugh…it’s hurts, and in answer to your question, I couldn’t eat another bite.”
“Good, let me get rid of these dishes, then we’ll take off your dressings…and that nasty shirt.”

“Waves…” he whined.

“Give it up, Stinky. You know how I am when I’ve got my mind set on something.”

“I’m doomed.”

Returning from the kitchen, Waverly set about removing her husband’s bandages.

“You arms are healing up nicely, another couple of days and we won’t have to re-wrap them.”

“What about my head?”

“Patience, my love. I haven’t even got the bandage off yet.”

“You know what they say…patience is a virtue…”

“You do not possess…I know,” she chuckled, “Oh my God!”

“Waves…what is it?” he panicked.

“It’s all red!”

“Oh no, is there an infection?”

“Red hair!”

“Hair?” he sounded excited, “Do you have a mirror?”

“Just the full length and that’s not exactly portable. Let me run and get my compact.”

Cole bounced her legs while she waited on her wife’s return, impatient but also a little frightened at seeing herself, for the first time, without her thick, luxurious hair. Even when it was short, it was beautiful and sin though it might be, she’d always been quite proud of it.

“Here you go, husband. I’m sorry I don’t have a larger one that’s portable.”

Cole held up the compact in front of her face, moving it around to try and get a proper angle where she could catch a glimpse and then she saw it. It wasn’t much longer than the fuzz on a peach, but it was the same bright red it had been when she was a girl.

“Feel better now?” Waverly asked.

“Oh, yes.”

“Incidentally, the stitches seem to be healing quite well, if you’re interest is motivated by anything other than vanity.”

“It’s not that, Waves.”

“What then?”

“I’ve only just managed to win your heart, I don’t want to lose it again because you no longer find me attractive.”

“Cole Haught! Do you really imagine I am that superficial?”
“I didn’t mean…”

“For your information, you vain thing, I didn’t fall in love with your looks, pretty as you are. It was your active mind and your sweet, kind, loving soul. You could have looked like Hollins, the undertaker and I still would have fallen in love with you. Although, I imagine it would have taken a while longer and I would have insisted on regular baths.”

Suddenly, Champ started raising a ruckus in the yard.

“Oh, what is that crazy dog of yours on about now? I swear he is going to drive me positively insane with his howling and barking, one of these days.”

“Why don’t you go and see and then we’ll both know.”

“I believe I will…then like it or not, you are having a bath, mister.”

A few minutes later, Dolls walked into the bedroom, “Are you feeling up to a visitor, Boss?”

“Dolls, I’m so happy to see you…”

“It’s good to see you too, my friend. You look so much better without all the blood. Is that a bit of red stubble I see?”

“You must help me, Dolls…”

“Anything…”

“She’s trying to give me a bath!”

The large man waved his hand in front of his nose, “Frankly, Cole, I can’t say as I blame her.”

“May I speak with Mister Dolls alone for a moment, my dear? Perhaps, if I explain my objection to him, he can help you to understand.”

“My Lord, such drama…can I get you anything from the kitchen, Aloysius?”

“No thank you, Waverly.”

The brunette left them to it, shaking her head as she pondered the peculiarity of the male of the species.

“Waverly? Aloysius? Did I miss something while I was unconscious?”

“Your Missus allows that since we’ve both been covered in your blood, we are fellow travelers and of a right, ought to be on a first name basis.”

“I suppose there’s a certain logic to that.”

“So, what’s all the fuss about? It’s just a bath…you’re behaving like Narcissus and he’s four years old. Please, enlighten me.”

“Well, the thing is…”

Waverly took advantage of the break, to make a much needed trip to the privy and when she returned, she found Dolls standing in her kitchen.
“Well…”

“I guess you could say it’s male pride, Ma’am. Not that I expect a lady to really understand what that means. It’s just that given the recent change in your relationship…congratulations on that, by the way.”

“Thank you, Aloysius.”

“I’m certain my Delia will have an ‘I told you so’ all ready for you, the next time that you happen to meet.”

“Her and a lot of others. You were saying?”

“He doesn’t want the first time you see him, as the good Lord made him, to be when you’re taking care of him like a sick child. A man wants his lady love to see him as strong and virile, not weak and helpless.”

“Men!” she sighed, dramatically, shaking her head, “But he stinks, Dolls!”

“Oh, I know. Run into it like a brick wall, as soon as you walk into the room.”

“You don’t have to tell me…something has to be done and frankly, if it’s a contest between his pride and my nose…”

“About that, we discussed it and Cole reckons he wouldn’t mind so much if I helped him clean up, so long as I don’t take him out and throw him in the trough again.”

“You’d do that?”

“I’ve seen naked men before,” Waverly blushed, “Sorry, Ma’am. Anyway, don’t you know I’d do just about anything for that man?”

“Fine then, you go tell him he’s been granted a reprieve and I’ll bring you some hot water. Try not to get his stitches wet and don’t move that arm any more than you absolutely have to, alright?”

“Whatever you say, Waverly.”

The brunette poured the steaming water into the washbowl and laid out a washcloth and towel, as well as a fresh undershirt.

“Thank you, my dear. I believe Mister Dolls and I can manage from here.”

“Silly boys.”

“Thank you for being so understanding, Waves.”

“Women, am I right?” Cole said to his tall chum, once she’d left the room.

“She was spot on about one thing, my friend. You reek like a mule after a long day’s plowing.”

“Gee, thanks…you know, I really don’t see any reason why we both need to be embarrassed. I’m using the chamber pot on my own now, if you could just help me out of this sling and dirty shirt, I’m certain I can manage a wash rag on my own. Then you can help me on with the clean one and Waverly will be none the wiser.”
“Cole…”

“I know, my friend, she’s pretty scary…but come on, leave a fella a little dignity.”

“Fine…I won’t tell her if you don’t. Easy now, keep still,” Dolls said as he untied the sling, “Stay there just a minute.”

Leaning his head out of the doorway, he called out, “Miss Waverly? It seems to me this shirt is pretty much a total loss. Mind if I cut it off?”

“That’s fine, Aloysius…do you need my scissors?”

“Got it covered,” he replied, slipping a jack knife from his pocket.

Making a small notch, where the shirt’s buttons stopped, Dolls used his big, meaty hands to tear it right down the center, taking it off like a coat.

“What’s up with the bandages?”

“Oh, Waverly decided she could wrap them tighter if they were against the skin,” the redhead lied, “Bring me that washbowl and a cloth, if you would and while I get cleaned up, you can fill me in on the business.”

“Whatsoever you say, Boss.”

“What have I told you about calling me that?”

“That you hate it, Boss.”

“Dolls…”

“Thinking about punching me, will give you something to look forward to, Boss. Anyway, you don’t need to worry yourself about the business. Orders are rolling in same as always. Ma and Pa send their best wishes for a speedy recovery, by the way.”

“Thank them for me, next time you go into town, will ya?”

“Absolutely. Got me a new ox, from Hanson down to the livery stable. He’s a little green, but with time and experience, he’ll be just as good as Beau. Poor old fella…he deserved a better end.”

“Amen to that…I’m sorry about your ox, my friend.”

”Thank you, Cole…Work was going awful slow with just me doing the labor and the hauling, so I hired on Polly’s husband. I didn’t think you’d mind. He’s a dab hand with an axe and bucksaw.”

“He’s certainly got the build for it.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m sure if the axe broke, he could pull the trees up by the roots.”

Cole forgot himself and laughed, drawing in a sharp breath. Laughing without the ribs wrapped. Bad idea.

“You OK, my friend?”

“Just forgot myself for a minute, laughing hurts like a bitch.”
“I’ll try not to be quite so charming,” Dolls chuckled, highly amused with himself, “Frau Schwan sends her best wishes. She also sent you some bread. Polly was afraid you might get desperate and let her recipe slip, in your weakened state.”

“What a woman…”

“Careful how loud you say it. That Waverly of yours is one helluva spitfire. If you could have seen the way she took control when you were hurt. WooWee! I definitely get the attraction.”

“Hey, that’s my wife, you’re talking about,” Dolls ducked, as the damp washrag came flying at his head.

“You throw like a girl, Haught.”

“Yeah…yeah…I’m ready if you want to help me get this shirt back on, friend.”

“I’m gonna slide the sleeve over your bad arm, real careful…don’t you move a muscle…good, now raise the other one and I’ll hold the neck open so it doesn’t catch your stitches…there we go…do you want the buttons done up?”

“I can do it myself,” he said, fastening the first two, “Thank you for the help, Dolls and please don’t forget what I asked.”

“It’s fine, my friend. I understand about pride and I’ll take care of that right now.”

“You can go in now, Waverly,” he called out as he left the room.

Dolls returned a minute later carrying her bed, “Red asked me to bring this in so you don’t have to sleep on the floor. Where you want it?”

“Over there by the window is good, thank you, Aloysius.”

The brunette gave her husband a quick peck, “Such a thoughtful man and so handsome too. You look and smell much better.”

“Waves,” he blushed, “Not in front of Dolls.”

“Can I interest you in some lunch, Aloysius?”

“Thank you, Waverly, but I gotta get going. Got two deliveries to make before sunset.”

“Another time then…thank you for all your help and please say thank you to Polly for me. We’ll see if I can’t tempt him with some toast.”

“There you go…Delia always says the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

“That’s true, but only if you twist the knife and pull up.”

“See, I told you she was scary.”

“Just making sure you menfolk know who’s really in charge.”

“No chance of us mistaking that, my love.”

Waverly blushed at the term of endearment.
“You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about Ma’am. It’s about time the two of you woke up and realized what the rest of us have seen from the beginning.”

“Give Delia and the flowers my best,” Waverly changed the subject gracelessly, “And please let anyone who’s interested know that he’s on the mend.”

“Aloysius is a good man and a good friend,” Waverly told her husband, once Dolls had left.

“He certainly is that.”

“Now, I believe you’ve had quite enough excitement for one morning. Let’s get you wrapped back up and then you are getting some rest.”

“Whatsoever you say, Nurse Waverly.”

“You’re lucky you’re injured or I might have to tickle you for that.”

“You wouldn’t dare…”

“Just you wait, Cole Haught. Just you wait. You won’t be convalescing forever.”

Once she’d finished re-bandaging her husband’s arms, head and ribs and putting his floral sling back in place, Waverly kissed his forehead, just like she was putting a baby down for a nap.

“Hmmm…”

“What is it, Waves?”

“You’re feeling a little warm and you can’t put it down to the same excuse as this morning, the stove is practically down to embers and unless you and Dolls are a lot closer than I thought…”

“Thank you for putting that picture in my head. I’ve said it before and no doubt will say it again and often…you are a wicked woman.”

“Just the same, I’m going to make you some Willow Bark tea. There’s no such thing as playing it too safe when it comes to fever.”

“Yuck…Willow Bark tea is nasty.”

“Do all men turn into children, when they are ailing?”

“Hey!”

A couple of hours later, Waverly came in to check back on Cole. He was still sound asleep. Gently touching her lips to his forehead, she found that he was warmer still. Not wanting to interrupt his much needed rest, she soaked a clean cloth in icy cold well water and gently laid it upon his forehead.

By the time he woke up again, she’d changed the compress several times, but it still didn’t seem to be doing the trick.

“Waves…” he groaned, “I don’t feel so very good.”

“Drink this.”
“Blech,” he spat, “That’s disgusting.”

“I used twice as much bark, we’ve got to kick this fever out on it’s ear…drink it.”

“Ugh…God, that’s awful. Can I at least have something to get the taste out of my mouth?”

She came back a minute later with something that looked like a jigger of whiskey.

“Bourbon?”

“Maple syrup,” she said handing it over to him.

“Damn, that burns almost as bad as whiskey, if you drink it straight.”

“Now, drink this water. We don’t want you getting dehydrated.”

“I’m so tired, Waves.”

“I know, my love,” she stroked his forehead, “Sleep now, I’ll watch over you.”

Once it became obvious that the willow bark wasn’t helping, Waverly piled every blanket and quilt
in the house, including the one Champ slept on by the fire, on top of her husband, in an effort to
sweat it out of him.

He woke again a while later, fighting desperately to throw the covers off of himself.

“Stop Cole! Stop! Don’t thrash about like that. You’ll only hurt yourself worse.”

“But Waves, I’m so hot…so hot! Please, take them off! Please, Waves?”

“I’ll get you some nice cool water and a cold compress.”

“I’m sooooooo hot, Waves!” Cole moaned.

“I know, my love,” she tenderly kissed his head, “I know…but we have to get this fever to break
and the willow bark isn’t working.”

“I can’t bear it…please…”

“Cole, listen to my voice…I need you to stay with me,” dipping a cloth in cool water, she carefully
wiped it over his head and dripped it on his lips, over and over again. Trying to soothe him, she
began to sing, softly.

‘Abide with me…fast falls the eventide…the darkness deepens…Lord, with me abide…when
other helpers fail and comforts flee…Help of the helpless…Oh, abide with me.’

Before she’d even finished the first verse, Cole was fast asleep.

Leaving him with a fresh cool cloth on his head, she went to the wood box. If the blankets alone
weren’t doing the trick, she’d need to stoke the fire. As she poked at the embers, trying to get the
fresh kindling and some good Box Elder and Buckthorn to light, knowing they’d burn long and hot,
the young wife whispered to herself.

“Don’t get me wrong…your Mister Dolls is a good friend, but couldn’t he have come to visit
tomorrow morning instead? You need the doctor and I can’t leave you alone to go get him. There’s not another neighbor for twenty miles and now that Aloysius has come by, I doubt he’ll be back for at least another couple of days,” she grumbled.

Stripping down to her shimmy, which was already damp with sweat from her prolonged proximity to the fire, Waverly checked Cole’s temperature once again. If anything, his fever was worse.

It made no sense.

Lying down on her own bed, she ran her actions over and over in her head, trying to ascertain where she had gone wrong. Then she did something she’d sworn she would never do again.

“It’s me, Lord…your humble servant, Waverly. I know we haven’t spoken in a while, but that’s down to me. Please take pity on my husband. Cole is a good man. A truly kind, decent man with an open, loving heart, who lives his life by the golden rule. I beg of you, don’t punish him for my failings. Holy Father, I pray...you already have my Nikki with you, please don’t take the only man I have ever loved. I am on my knees, Lord…I beg for your mercy and grace…I promise you, I will never take your name in vain again. Any children we might have I will raise to be good God-fearing folk. I’ll even try to forgive Pa, just please, give Cole back to me. In Jesus name. Amen.”

Then she cried herself to sleep, but she didn’t get much rest.

The dream seemed to go on forever, changing over and over, but never ending. No matter how she tried, she could neither escape it or wake herself up.

One moment she was in her bed and the next she was standing in a church yard. Looking down she saw her mother’s headstone at her feet, beside it was Will’s, even though she knew there was no body beneath it. Next in line was a brand new stone, the fresh letters of Nikki’s name still in sharp relief, she cried out at the sight of it. Then she heard Cole’s voice calling her name. She turned around and there she saw an open grave, he was inside it, scrambling to climb out, reaching out to her and screaming for her to save him. Then the grave filled with water and she found herself on the pond back home, lying on the ice, holding onto Cole, where he’d fallen through. She tried so hard to pull him out, but his fingers turned to ash and slipped from her grasp. Finally, Waverly found herself back on the ward at the Army hospital, before her was a long row of beds, all filled with wounded men. At the very end of the row was a lone bed with the sheet pulled all the way over it. There was blood at the head and before she even put her hand on the cloth, she knew who would be under it. Pulling the sheet away, she saw Cole’s dead eyes staring back at her accusingly, half of his skull blown off…then he started screaming…

“Mama! Mama! Please! Mama, save me! I’m burning! I’m burning up! Put it out! Put the fire out!”

but it was actually Cole screaming, Waverly leapt from her bed, rushing to his side.

“Shit…he’s delirious!”

“Cole…” she said softly, kissing his forehead, he was hotter than she’d even thought possible.

“God, you are burning up. Help me, Cole…what did I do wrong?”

“Mama? Is that you, Mama?”

“It’s Waverly, my love…hush now…I know it’s hot…but if you keep thrashing you’ll hurt yourself…Oh, Cole…”

“Waverly?” he seemed almost lucid and then as is the way of those in delerium, he spoke again, with no care for propriety, “Waverly…I can see right through your dress…I can see all of you…”
“If it’ll keep you calm, darling, you go right ahead and look all you want.”

“Pretty boobies…just like in my dream. ‘Cept in my dream you didn’t have a dress on…nope…you were naked as a jaybird…” he giggled, “You were standing right over there…washing yourself…you had blood all over you…you were…you were breathtaking…the most beautiful thing I ever saw…like an angel…an angel with really pretty boobies…can I touch ‘em?”

Waverly jumped away from her task of unwrapping bandages, when she felt Cole reach inside her shimmy and grab her breast.

“Lookee no touchee, Cole…I’m trying to figure out what’s wrong with you, OK? There’s no one else coming…I have to solve this on my own…so let’s stop trying to undress Waverly for now, alright buddy? I promise, when you’re better I’ll let you undress me all you like…but you’re not gonna get better unless I solve this puzzle.”

The redhead pouted, “Sorry, Mama…please don’t be mad, Mama.”

“Shit! There he goes again. One minute he’s trying to undress me and the next he’s a little boy again. Oh my God…Cole…You’re a genius!” she kissed him and he tried to pull her down to the bed, “Not now, Cole…we need to get you out of these clothes…there’s an infection hidden somewhere under there and we need to find it…I missed something…there’s just no other explanation.”

As quickly as she could, Waverly started unwrapping his ribs, so that she could get the shirt off of him.

Cole moaned in pain, “I’m sorry, my love, I’ll try to be more careful, but I’m trying to save your life, here…we don’t really have time for gentle.”

“Sorry…Waverl…” he trailed off, as he slipped into unconsciousness.

“Goddamn it!” grabbing her scissors, she split his shirt up the back and tore it off him.

That’s when she spotted the binder.

“What the hell is this?”

Not wanting to take the risk of using a sharp object, so close to the flesh of someone who might suddenly start to thrash about, she carefully unwound the large bandage, rather than just cutting through it.

Unable to believe her eyes, Waverly closed them and shook her head, trying to clear it and make sure this wasn’t yet another bizarre dream. When she opened them again, the vision hadn’t changed.

“Nope, Waverly…You’re not dreaming…Cole has tits…really nice tits…well, sonofabitch!” oddly enough, she broke out laughing, “Ha! I knew I wasn’t attracted to men!”

Unable to resist, she reached out tentatively and brushed her fingertips over the pale flesh of Cole’s breast.

So soft…
Soft and hot...
So hot...
Shit!
Focus, Waverly!
Pay attention, damn it!
This is the man you…
No.
The woman you love.
Get off your ass and save her!
“I know the kind of man you are, Cole…ooops…sorry…I know you have a good explanation for this…but you better believe me…you and I are gonna have one hell of a talk when you wake up.”
If you wake up…
No.
When you wake up.
If is not an option.
Bending Cole forward she checked her back for wounds.
Nothing.
The front was unblemished as well.
Unblemished?
It’s damned near flawless.
“That only leaves one thing…As much as I am loathe to further intrude on your privacy, milady…I fear I must remove your pants…Damn, Haught…you really do need to get some sleep.”

Pushing the huge pile of blankets onto the floor, Waverly was hit in the face with an acrid stench and the sight of a large yellow stain, on the lower leg of Cole’s longjohns.

Letting out a sigh of relief, that she’d at last found the culprit, she reached for the scissors.
As she started cutting away the sticky cloth, Waverly glanced up at her beloved.
“Well, Cole may be prettier than me…but at least I have nicer tits.”

Once she’d peeled away the sticky bit, she tore the cloth apart and was met with an angry, red sore, oozing pus.
“There’s no blood…what on God’s green earth…”

“Are you with me, Haught? You listen to me….I need you to fight…don’t you dare go giving up on
me…I’m not angry at you…just confused…but I promise you…I swear on my mother’s grave…I am not going to leave you…like I told you before…it wasn’t your body I fell in love with…I need you to be strong, Cole…I’m not gonna lie to you…this is gonna be bad…God, I hope I can do this…no..I have to do this…there’s no one else…it’s just you and me, darling…this is gonna hurt more than anything you’ve ever felt…so I need you to be tough for me…Can you do that, Cole? You damned well better…I didn’t ride that blasted train, all the way to the Montana Territory, to be a widow…so you better be in this scrap…fighting right beside me…from now until your last day…which is gonna be a long time from now if I have any say in the matter…so you better fight…do you hear me, Haught? I said fight, you bitch!”

Reaching for her sharpest knife, Waverly held it over the flame for a minute, then she began to cut.
Cleansing the area of sticky secretions, Waverly palpated the inflamed flesh of Cole’s calf, detecting a hard, thin lump of about five or six inches in length.

“That’s one helluva sliver.”

Taking her sharpest knife from the medical kit, she held it in the flames for a minute, to cleanse it, before wiping the soot off on a clean cloth.

Uttering a hasty prayer, that Cole would not awaken while she was at her work, the ad hoc surgeon sliced through the outer layers of skin around the perimeter of the shrapnel. Thankfully, the patient was at present still unconscious, but that did little to calm her nerves or still the shaking of her hands. While her beloved might not be able to feel the knife slicing open her vital flesh now, Waverly knew that she would feel all the pain of it later, and the thought of intentionally causing Cole pain, even if it meant saving her life, filled the brunette with the urge to retch.

“Come on, Haught…pull yourself together…this is the most important thing you’ve ever done…try not to think about whose leg it is…just focus on fixing it.”

Pulling in a good lungful of air, she took tweezers in hand and delicately pulled back the dissected skin, rinsing away the blood and pus that came to the surface, with a steady stream of warm water, until a sliver of wood, about five or so inches in length and an eighth of an inch wide came into view.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned. How the hell did I miss that? It’s a good thing it didn’t go any deeper or we’d be dealing with blood poisoning.”

Taking hold of the blunt end of the sliver with her tweezers, she gently reversed it out, along the same path upon which it had gone in, thankfully the wood was mostly smooth and didn’t cling to the surrounding tissues. Once the projectile had been freed, Waverly rinsed the wound copiously with warm, salted water, until she could see no more pus or debris.

“It seems strange to say it right now, since you’re unconscious with fever and your leg is flayed open, but you don’t know just how lucky you are, my dear. There really isn’t much more damage than there would be from any normal, every day sliver. I suppose you were just unfortunate enough to catch a particularly dirty bit of wood or perhaps, one from a type of tree with caustic properties, either way, since we can’t risk leaving any of this infection behind…”

Gritting her teeth at the stomach churning nature of the act she was about to perform, Waverly dried out the wound with some clean gauze, then cracked open a shotgun shell. Taking a good pinch of the black powder between her thumb and forefinger, she sprinkled it into the wound, before setting it alight. The scent of charred flesh made her retch, bringing back sickening memories of burnt soldiers, she’d had to hold down, while the surgeon cleaned their wounds, holding her breath to keep from vomiting.
Once the smoke had cleared, she thoroughly cleansed the wound of residue, with a piece of damp gauze, before applying a light coating of honey, then a liberal wrapping of gauze bandages for protection. She didn’t envy Cole the pain she would experience upon waking.

After stuffing the soiled bandages and ruined clothing into the stove, the exhausted woman treated herself to a good wash. As she stood naked, by the heat of the fire, the realization that her husband…no…wife?…oh hell, whichever had seen her the last time, that she’d done this, danced across her mind.

Waverly chuckled, “Well, at least I know he…um, she…enjoyed the view. I suppose pronouns are just one of the many things we’ll need to discuss, aren’t they, my love?”

Before retiring to her bed for some much needed rest, the brunette wrapped the binder once more around her beloved’s chest and dressed her in a clean shirt identical to the one Doll’s had put her in earlier, before bandaging her ribs and slipping her bad arm back into its sling. Thankful that she’d only removed the section of cloth, where the wound was located, rather than removing Cole’s longjohns entirely, Waverly trimmed the cloth’s ragged edge, just below the knee.

The last thing her patient needed, while trying to bounce back from a traumatic injury and catastrophic fever, was to awaken to the shock of having been found out. Once Cole was all squared away, Waverly got herself ready for bed. Not wanting to leave her beloved’s side, after all they had been through in the last twelve hours or so, she pushed her bed to within inches of the other one. Lying down at its edge, she took hold of her darling’s pale hand and kissed it. It was a matter of mere moments, before the nurse was as dead to the world as her patient, their hands still securely clasped in one another’s.

Some hours later, there was no way of telling how many, but the sun was shining through the oilcloth window, the brunette was awakened by the sound of coughing, right beside her, followed by a pained groan. Having forgotten the previous night’s excursion into the exciting world of furniture rearranging, Waverly was quite surprised, when she opened her eyes to see Cole’s soulful brown ones staring back at her.

“Waves?”

“Cole…”

“Why am I all wet?”

The thrilled nurse quickly got to her knees, placing her lips upon the considerably cooler flesh of her patient’s forehead.

“Cole! Your fever’s broken…oh my God, your fever’s broken!”

She kissed the startled redhead full on the mouth.

“I love you too, Waves, but…”

“I did it!” she exclaimed, leaping out of bed and doing a little dance, “I did it! Thank you, Jesus!”

“Waves…what’s going on?”

“I almost lost you, Cole…I was sure I had…You spiked a fever and no matter what I tried I couldn’t get it to come down…but I fought for you…I fought like Jacob wrestling that angel…I found a five inch shard of wood, lodged in your calf and festering…I had to perform impromptu surgery on you…Thank God you were unconscious,” she began crying happy tears, “But I got you
back, my love…I got you back!”

“No wonder my leg feels like I’ve been bitten by a rabid demon, straight from the pits of Hell.”

“Yeah, unfortunately that’s a side effect of cutting into live flesh with a penknife and no anaesthetic, then burning out the infection with black powder…Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize for saving my life, Waves.”

“I hate that I had to hurt you to do it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous…this is the second time in less than a week that you’ve snatched me from the yawning jaws of Death. You are one helluva woman, Waverly Haught. Honestly, I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay you.”

For a moment, Waverly considered saying ‘you can start by telling the truth’ but then thought better of it, the last thing Cole’s system needed right now was another big shock. Also, she’d begun to feel guilty about discovering the older girl’s secret in such an invasive manner, even if it had been eventuated by necessity. She’d think about all of that later, all she was certain of in the moment was that it was terrain which must be trod upon lightly.

“You don’t have to repay me, Cole. I did it out of love, because now that we’ve found each other, I couldn’t bear to lose you. All you have to do to repay me, is get better. Deal?”

“Deal. Shall we shake on it?”

“I think we can do better than that,” she kissed the redhead in a manner that was a little less than passionate, but certainly a good deal past chaste.

“Now that’s the last I want to hear of it. You scared the hell out of me last night and I really prefer not to revisit it.”

“I scared you?”

“You were burning up with fever, you lost consciousness, you were even delirious for a while there.”

“How awful for you…”

“I don’t imagine it was much fun for you either. The important thing, is how are you feeling now?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m feeling a bit peckish.”

“Really? Oh, Cole…that’s wonderful…how does some tea and toast sound?”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll be right back…don’t go anywhere,” she laughed.

While Waverly tended to breakfast, Cole pondered what an amazing woman she’d married and just how much that woman deserved to know the truth of who she’d married. The trouble with that was, that if she told her now and her bride reacted poorly, the redhead was in no position to effect a timely escape. As much as she hated the idea of continuing to lie to her darling girl, logic dictated that her confession would have to wait.

“Here we go,” her bride singsonged, “Tea and toast, I even brought a little of Mrs. Nedley’s apple
butter to tempt you….tuck in, now…don’t wait for me, I’m too happy to eat.”

“Um…Waves?”

“Yes, love?” She was grinning like a briar eating jackass, so pleased that the danger had passed.

“I…uh…that is…I…I hope that I didn’t do or say anything untoward while I was delirious.”

“Now that you mention it…as it turns out, delirious Cole is quite a naughty boy.”

The redhead buried her face in her hands, blushing furiously.

“Not to mention quite handsy,” she teased.

“Oh, Waves…I am so sorry.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty head about it. It was a small island of levity in an otherwise desperate situation. Although I must confess, I didn’t care much for you calling me Mama.”

“Oh dear, please tell me I didn’t say anything else to distress you,” she hedged, petrified that she might have revealed certain delicate information.

“Nope. You passed out not long after that.”

As the pair finished, what seemed to be the most delicious tea and toast ever prepared, they whiled away the next hour with the changing of dressings and their customary banter, just as though nothing had happened. A much relieved Waverly, coming to the conclusion that despite what might be hidden underneath her spouse’s clothes, this was the same Cole she’d chosen to marry, the same Cole she’d fallen in love with, in the months that followed.

Given that she’d always preferred the company of women, the brunette decided that, as long as the redhead was amenable to the idea, nothing really needed to change between them. As for that all-important talk, it could wait until Cole was well enough that it wouldn’t jeopardize her health. Waverly couldn’t risk spooking her with the revelation and the older girl running off before they had a chance to discuss it, perhaps endangering her recovery, as well. For now she would take care to behave as normally as possible, in order to avoid suspicion, perhaps dropping certain subtle clues, in the hopes that Cole would take the hint and do the right thing.

Since both women were anxious that the other shouldn’t notice any suspicious change in their behavior, things progressed very much as they would have, had Waverly never made her discovery and indeed, had Cole never had a secret at all. Terms of endearment and affectionate touches, soon became the norm. Since the invalid was still confined to her bed and bored to death, Waverly took to spending all of her time in Cole’s room, unless there were chores that needed doing.

It had been about a week since that horrid night and there had been no further complications. Business had been so good that Dolls had only been by to visit once, but Polly and Delia had both come by to help out with chores and in doing so, give Waverly some much needed rest. Of course, the blonde had brought another batch of loaves, as well as a cane that Herr Schwan had hand-carved for Cole. It was truly a work of art, covered with incised patterns, animals and vistas of the scenery around the homestead.

The redhead was overjoyed at the gift. This meant that with time, practice and her wife’s help, she would be able to make it into the other room and perhaps even the privy. She was so sick and tired of the chamber pot. She couldn’t think of anything less romantic than her wife having to empty her bedpan. Not to mention, the older girl was afraid that, now that she was no longer doing the work
of two men, her monthly might return and how in hell would she explain that to Waverly?

As they sipped their tea after dinner one night, the brunette said, “You know, I’ve been thinking, husband…”

“I was wondering what that burning smell was…”

“You’re nearly well enough to beat, you know.”

“I take it back…I take it back! You were saying?”

“Well, for one thing, I never should have put you back on solid food, you’re getting far too sassy… but to get back to my original point…I was thinking that now that your headaches have gone, we might go back to reading together. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure I could hold a book for long.”

“I could hold it for both of us. Of course, since you’re in bed, I’d have to snuggle in beside you, so that you could see.”

“Oh, that is too bad,” the redhead teased, “I imagine that will make for awfully close quarters, the two of us in one bed.”

“We could always push the beds together. It’s only a matter of inches, after all.”

“That wouldn’t bother you?”

“Not a bit, but if it offends your delicate sensibilities, I suppose we could always push them apart again at night.”

“That all sounds terribly inconvenient. I suppose we could leave them that way, if you really don’t mind. I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“Oh, of course not, I would be amenable to the idea if it’s fine with you. Strictly for the sake of convenience, of course.”

“Oh yes, strictly,” the brunette dissolved into a fit of giggles, no longer able to keep up the jape.

The older girl knew that she ought to have put up a stronger resistance about the bed, things being as they were, but Waverly was being so sweet and affectionate with her of late, she had even taken to calling the redhead ‘my love’ more often than not. So, Cole found herself being a bit self-indulgent, when it came to boundaries. She wasn’t made of iron, after all. It was so much harder to push the girl away, now that each knew the depth of the other’s feelings.

There was no denying the fact that having had to wrestle Death for the possession of her husband’s soul, had instilled in Waverly, a desire to keep Cole close. Despite knowing that the redhead was, in fact, a woman and had been lying to her all along, nearly losing her had opened the brunette’s eyes to just how much she truly did love her and how unwilling she was to let her go.

The following evening, they indeed pushed the beds against one another and resumed their old habit of reading together. For their first session, Waverly had chosen selections from Leaves of Grass, focusing on Song of Myself, in particular. To make it more interesting, they decided to search out those passages which really ought to have tipped them off about the authors sexuality, had they been paying attention.
“Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore, 
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly; 
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, 
It ran from their long hair, 
Little streams pass’d all over their bodies.”

“Seriously, how did you miss that?” Cole shrugged.

“Listen to this one, Waves…”

“His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his hip-band, 
His glance is calm and commanding, 
he tosses the slouch of his hat away from his forehead, 
The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, 
falls on the black of his polish’d and perfect limbs.”

“Sounds to me like maybe Dolls might be his type.”

“You are indeed, a wicked one,” Cole teased, “Oh God, how did I miss this?”

“The young fellow who drives the express wagon (I love him though I do not know him.)”

“My God, Waves…how did I read Song of Myself all those times with no clue what he was actually talking about? I must be utterly dense.”

“Nonsense,” the brunette protested, “You are anything but dense, my love. It’s just not a subject that people ever talk about, so it’s not a place the mind readily goes on its own.”

“Why do think that is, my dear?”

“I don’t think its quite so unnatural as some would have us believe, especially if you look at it philosophically.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, aside from propagation of the species, it really makes more sense. Men and women are so different, so foreign to one another, especially emotionally, we practically speak two different languages. It seems to me that it makes perfect sense for like to turn to like, as it were. They’d have so much more in common, to start with, and having the same parts, there’d be none of that pesky undiscovered country business. Not to mention, you’d double your wardrobe.”

“You know, I think you’re on to something there, Waves. Yup, there’s no doubt about it, I married a brilliant woman.”

“I thought that was why you married me.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t do it for the wardrobe, corsets aren’t really my thing.”

“Mine either,” Waverly laughed, “Frankly, your clothes are a lot more comfortable.”

“So, I don’t need to worry about you running off with another woman, then?”

“Not as long as you treat me good.”
"Wicked. Absolutely wicked."

"So, Red…you think you’ve got another walk in ya, tonight?"

"Oh, I don’t know, Waves. I’m pretty beat, I think we overdid it this morning."

"Then you don’t want to visit the privy before bed? Just let me get the pot out for you."

"Give me that cane!"

"OK, easy, my love…” she sat down alongside Cole so that she might put her arm around her waist for support, “On the count of three we stand. One…two…three…”

The redhead let out a loud groan.

"Do you need to sit back down, darling?"

"No…no…give me a minute."

"Let me know when you’re ready…"

"All right…here we go…left foot first…"

"Good, Cole…good…slow and steady…let me get the door…are you strong enough?"

"Feeling a little wobbly, but I can make it."

"You sure you don’t want me to come in with you? I promise I’ll close my eyes."

"Oh no, I couldn’t…not in front of you…even if you were just listening…"

"I had a cousin like that…"

"Waves…be good…"

"I promise I won’t tell Dolls if you need to go sitting down…"

"Thanks, Waves…"

"I’ll be waiting right here outside the door when you’re done. Just give a knock when you’re decent."

"You’re a peach."

"Go on…it’s not exactly balmy out here."

"Yes, Waves…not to worry, I’ve been looking forward to this."

"You could have spoken up sooner."

"I meant not having to use the…oh, never mind…see you in a minute,” she closed the door.

There was a knock on the wall and the door opened.

"Woooo, I’d forgotten how cold that seat gets at night."

"It’s good for you, gets the circulation going.”
“Yes, Nurse Waverly.”

“Let’s get you back in bed and then I’ll go get ready, myself.”

“Can you take Champ out with you? I don’t want to step into a puddle in the morning.”

“Sure, come on, boy.”

About five minutes later, a streak of white nightgown came charging into the room and disappeared beneath the covers.

“Damn, it’s cold out there! Warm me up, warm me up!” she insisted burrowing into her beloved’s good side, “If I’d known sharing a bed was so much warmer, I would have gotten married much sooner.”

“Waverly…”

“What?”

“Your feet…”

“What about them?”

“They’re ice cold.”

“I know…”

“Get them off me!”
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary


Warning: contains Shakespeare

As much as Waverly felt like she ought to have been livid with her husband, for deceiving her in such a monumental fashion, somehow she just couldn’t seem to work up the enthusiasm for a proper hissy fit.

Admittedly, discovering that the man she loved was in fact a woman, had been more than a little jarring. Still, it was hardly the most disturbing thing she’d experienced, that long, long dreadful night.

Panic.

Desperation.

Recrimination.

Self-loathing.

They’d all had their wicked way with her in those endless, pitch black hours before the sun had finally shown its face, the proof of her redemption in its shining wake…but almost losing Cole…That had felt like the iron grip of an icy hand around her throat.

Never had Waverly known such fear. Not once, in all the numerous trials and tragedies of her short, but remarkably eventful life.

This was not, as one might assume, the fear that she’d be left alone, a young widow on the frontier, with no means of supporting herself. Nor was it the nauseating prospect of boarding that woeful eastbound train, her spirit broken, tail set firmly between her legs, and a lifetime of I-told-you-sos stretching out before her, as endless as the railroad tracks.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t even the fear that someone, the doctor or perhaps the undertaker, would examine Cole’s corpse and upon discovering the truth, refuse to believe that she hadn’t known all along. After which, the meager candle of the young bride’s life, would likely be snuffed out at the hands of an angry mob. Never mind the horrors, which would undoubtedly be visited upon a sweet young thing like her, before they got around to the actual lynching.

Nope.

It wasn’t any of those things, although each and every one certainly would have inspired bowel-evacuating terror in the heart of any sane person.

The plain truth of it was that Waverly had come to love the lanky redhead so entirely, that she simply would not know how to go on breathing, in a world without her in it.
Between that harrowing night and this morning, the girl had consumed more hours than she cared to count, in rigorous analysis of her predicament. She’d looked at the problem every which way and no matter how she approached it, her conclusion was unfailingly the same. A complete inability to believe, that anything about her beloved, save her purported gender, could possibly be false.

From the first time she’d read the older girl’s advertisement in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, to the conversation they’d had over last night’s victuals, Cole had never written nor spoken a single word to her, that struck her as disingenuous. Her wit, her intelligence, her kindness, had never wavered, not for an instant. The brunette doubted even the world’s most accomplished confidence woman was capable of a feat such as that.

Furthermore, the redhead had managed to make Waverly fall in love with her, despite her laboring under the mistaken belief that she was a man. There was simply no way that the woman possibly could have known, that her mark preferred the company of her own sex and thus made the adjustments, to the script of her elaborate flim-flam, necessary to accomplish her task. The biggest fly in the ointment, however, lie in Cole’s motivation.

What could she possibly stand to gain, in targeting the brunette in the first place? She’d been entirely ignorant of Waverly’s sizeable nest-egg, until after they’d already married and the wildly successful lumber business, she and Dolls had built was certainly no illusion.

Then there was the one factor which, as far as she was concerned, incontrovertibly proved Cole’s innocence.

Champ.

When it came to matters of character, there was simply no fooling a dog. Everybody knew that and there was no denying that the little heathen was utterly besotted with his Daddy.

No matter how you sliced it, logic dictated that this was the self-same soul whose plea for company and offer of adventure had so intrigued the brunette, that she just couldn’t manage to put it out of her mind. Here was the same Friend Haught whose letters had so beguiled her, that she’d left everything she’d ever known behind and traveled to the untamed frontier, to begin their life together, with no guarantee of success or even thriving. It had been an enormous risk, but it had paid off, without question. Quite against her own will and everything she believed within the realm of possibility and despite thinking her a man, she had, in time, fallen head over heels in love with Cole, just the same.

Waverly had never in her life encountered another soul so honorable, so kind, so sweet or fair-minded as Cole Haught. There was simply no way that any part of that wonderful creature, aside from her outward appearance, could be a prevarication. Whatever had prompted the redhead to assume her false identity, her bride knew in her heart, had been for one helluva damned good reason.

Regardless of whomever her husband might actually turn out to be, Waverly could not deny the basic truth, which was that she loved that person with the entirety of her heart and soul and nothing so inconsequential as what was between Cole’s legs was going to change that.

Having decided that she still unquestionably desired a romantic and indeed, physical relationship with the redheaded charmer and with the most arduous portion of the recovery process behind them, Waverly then focused the bulk of her considerable will upon devising a means of speeding
the situation to the conclusion she so ardently desired.

The petite beauty had already squandered far too many years, imagining what the illicit touch and torrid kiss of a woman would feel like. Now that she’d experienced a small sample, at the hand of one she truly loved, even if it had been in the haze of her delirium, the necessity of waiting even one more hour to feel that delicious touch again, had begun to prick at her like a burr under her saddle.

It had been a while now since Cole had begun taking meals at the table, needing only the assistance of Herr Schwan’s cane and not her wife, to get around. The myriad of casual touches, which had so become a part of their routine, had fallen by the wayside, one after another. The redhead was now spending several hours a day in her comfy chair by the fire, rather than being strictly confined to bed and had become so frustrated with the boredom of idleness, that the nurse in Waverly knew, the older girl had crossed that halfway point of her recovery, into being more well than ill.

The time had come to set her plan into action.

Now that Cole was on the mend, along with a marked increase in flirtatiousness and physical contact, the brunette’s selections for their nightly reading session had begun to follow a certain less than subtle theme.

Firstly, had been more of the off-color Whitman, followed by Twelfth Night and then The Merchant of Venice. For tonight she’d earmarked As You Like It, the very last weapon in her arsenal of cross-dressing plays. If that failed to produce the desired effect, she would hit the redhead with some of the Bard’s more passionate sonnets. As brilliant as she knew Cole to be, she was beginning to think that the girl couldn’t catch a hint with a fishing net.

“If she doesn’t kiss me tonight, I shall be forced to go ahead with Plan B,” Waverly sighed, dramatically, “However risky it may be, I shall have to make the first move. Heaven help us both, if that goes the wrong way.”

“Plain cook or not, you sure do make one helluva fine rabbit stew, Waves,” Cole grinned, rubbing her belly contentedly.

“Thank you, my love,” she replied, as she stood and stretched, being sure to let out a small pained gasp. Ever the consummate actress, that one.

“Are you quite all right, my sweet?”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. Not to worry. I just took a little tumble over a log, while I was out hunting. My back’s a bit sore is all.”

“I’m sorry, dear. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Would you mind terribly if we did our reading in bed tonight? Lying down will take some of the stress off the muscle.”

“Of course not, my dear. Anything for you. So, what have you got up your sleeve for me tonight?”

“Cole Haught! You make it sound like I am about to initiate some nefarious plan.”
The redhead grinned rather naughtily at her wife.

“Oh, you…”

“I was merely asking what you had in mind to read, dear.”

“I was thinking As You Like It.”

On the outside, Cole smiled agreeably, but inside things were a bit different.

‘Oh shit…oh shit! Another cross-dressing play! Does she know? How could she possibly know? No…no…my Waverly is nothing if not direct, she doesn’t have an ambiguous bone in her lovely body. I can’t imagine her holding her tongue for this long if she knew. I’m just at sixes and sevens because I haven’t told her yet. She’s just in the mood for a good comedy, that’s all. You damned well better pray that’s all, Haught. I really don’t think the ribs and collarbone are fit enough yet for horseback.’

“I don’t know that I have a play in me tonight, Mrs. Haught…”

“Hmmmmmm,” she clucked her tongue, disappointedly, “How about a few of Will’s sonnets?”

“Will? This from the purist who thought I was blaspheming by not kissing her at the end of Much Ado? Feeling informal tonight, are we?”

“We’ve just read so much of his oeuvre lately, I feel like we’re good chums.”

“Ah, I see…by virtue of your bosom friendship, why don’t you go first?”

“I believe I will,” she smiled, “Incidentally, it does my heart good that you’ve got some of your old sass back.”

“Some?”

“Perhaps more than I thought…let’s begin, shall we? Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare.”

“When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth)
Sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That I scorn to change my state with kings.”

“Awwwww, Waves…”
“Your turn, husband.”

“Hmmmmm, let’s see…how about…eighteen, I think…”

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

“Flatterer,” the brunette giggled, then cleared her throat like a serious orator, “Sonnet 73.”

“That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by.
This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.”

“A bit maudlin…undoubtedly true…but maudlin just the same…let’s see…130…yup…that’s the one…”

“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much…”

“Lady? Excuse me?” Cole was beginning to sweat.

“A turn of phrase, my darling…nothing more…I think next…yes…number 138…”

“When my love swears that she is made of truth,”

“Uh, Waves?” Cole interrupted, “You know, as it turns out, I’m not so much in the mood for reading tonight.”

“Have you got some other form of entertainment in mind?”

“No, I can’t say that I do…not really.”

“Oh, I’d wager I could come up with some amusing diversion for the bored gentleman,” the brunette bantered, somewhat suggestively, setting the book on the nightstand.

Turning back toward Cole, she lay on her side, snuggling in closer to the long body. Running her fingers through the thick, now nearly half inch long auburn hair, Waverly teased, “Your new cowlick sure is adorable. Isn’t it funny how it grew back a shade darker?”

“I look like a pinecone…”

The brunette then leaned in, kissing her beloved’s impossibly soft lips, settling more firmly against her lithe body, as she moaned into her mouth.

Cole was hardly in a position to fight off her advances, certainly not physically and frankly it had become awfully hard to resist her on moral grounds, since her sincere profession of love, especially when she was exhibiting such passion.

‘Fine, then…if that’s what you want…’ she kissed her back with equal fervor, ‘But I am absolutely not letting it go any further.’

Waverly was becoming more hot and bothered by the moment, thankful that she was wearing only her chemise and not her stays and layers of skirting, else she surely would have swooned. It seemed like each time she and Cole expressed their love physically like this, the tension in her body became more and more unbearable.
Determined that tonight she would not be denied, her courage bolstered by the increasing frequency of Cole’s moans and the insistent way her fingers tangled in her flaxen mane, Waverly’s trembling hands made their way to the redhead’s chest and set to work on the buttons of her shirt.

At first, Cole’s hands slid to her wife’s hips, reflexively pulling her firm body in closer, but then catching herself in the act, grabbed her libido by the reins and pulled back hard.

“Waves…” she plead, between agitated breaths.

“Mmmmmmmmmmm…Cole,” she responded, leaning in and kissing the older girls long neck on the side where nothing was broken.

“Waves…oooh….Waves…that’s so….Waves…stop!”

“Am I hurting you, darling? I’m so sorry…I promise I’ll be more gentle…” she assured, beginning a line of tiny kisses at her husband’s chiseled jawline.

“Waverly…I said stop! We can’t…”

“Don’t be silly, my love…of course we can…you’re quite well enough now…I promise I will be oh so conscientious about not hurting you…”

“Waverly…I mean…Waves, I…”

“I know, Cole…I love you too…so very much…”

Unable to keep herself from grinning, the redhead had to catch her breath, just like she did every time Waverly said those words in that special way she had been since the accident, “And I love you, but that’s not what I was trying to say…”

“I am absolutely sure about this, darling…don’t you worry…you said I would have to make the first move…well, this is me making it…” she tried once more to kiss the reluctant beauty, “Make love to me, Cole…please…”

“I can’t…”

“Allow me to set your mind at ease, darling…as a trained nurse, I can guarantee that you are healed enough that you need not be concerned about re-injuring yourself, if that’s what’s got you worried. Do you really think I would risk hurting you after all I did to keep you with me?”

“That’s not it…”

“Oh…oh! If you are still a bit tender for that much movement…don’t you worry…I talked to Polly and she assured me there is more than one way to do this…did you know? In fact, if we…”

“Waverly!”

“Don’t you pretend you’re shocked, Cole Haught…I haven’t forgotten your speech about my corset.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you, Waves…believe me…I just…I can’t…”

“Why the hell not?” frustration was edging dangerously close to emotions of a darker nature.
“It…it just wouldn’t be right…”

“I love you, Cole Haught…more than I ever thought I could love anyone…I want to express that love to you in every way possible and in the past you have expressed similar desires…we are legally married…reasonably healthy…would you mind telling me what could possibly not be right about that?”

“I’m not who you think I am, Waves.”

“And I’m not who you think I am…it was part of our marriage agreement…this is not a startling revelation…we were both born the day before we met, remember?”

“Fine…but believe me…I’m not worthy of your love…”

“No offense darling, but that’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

“I’ve done things…things I’m not proud of…things that would make you ashamed to carry my name…”

“Nothing could ever make me ashamed of that, my love…Neither of us is an innocent…did you think I didn’t know that? We both have pasts, otherwise why would we need a new start with a clean slate…but none of that matters…all that matters is now…and right now…this moment…we are Mr. And Mrs. Cole Haught and they are very much in love…I know that to be absolute truth…the only other thing I know so well, is that Cole Haught is a decent, honorable man…”

“Yes, Cole Haught is a good, honest citizen of the great Montana Territory…but I am not Cole Haught.”

“And I’m not Waverly Earp…I mean I am, but that wasn’t always what I called myself…the Waverly you fell in love with isn’t who I used to be…she’s a different girl, to be sure…she’s not a girl, to begin with…she’s a woman…she’s better than who I was…she’s so many things I could never have been without you by my side…”

“But, Waves…it’s not the same…you have no idea…I’ve done things I’ll never be able to forgive myself for…horrible things…if you knew who I really was you wouldn’t want me anywhere near you…”

“I may not know your history, but I know you,” she placed her hand over the older girl’s heart, feeling the softness of a compressed breast against the side of her thumb, now that she knew it was there, she didn’t know how she’d ever missed it.

“You really don’t…”

“I know that regardless of what you may think, you are the best person I have ever met. You have never treated me or anyone we know with anything but respect, kindness and generosity. No matter what you might have done in the past…that is who you are now…that is who I fell in love with…and that, my darling, is the only version of you I am concerned with…”

“You don’t understand…”

“Fine…if feelings won’t convince you, perhaps you’ll listen to facts…I am a horse thief…bet you weren’t expecting that…I stole a horse and a damned expensive buggy once...didn’t need to either…I was so hurt…I wanted to hurt Pa back…so I took his favorite horse and carriage…he treated them both better than he ever did me…sold ‘em when I got where I was going too…just so he’d never be able to get them back…does that shock you?”
“Well…a bit, yes…but if he hurt you…”

“Honestly, Cole…does it make you love me any less?”

“Of course not, Waves…nothing could ever do that.”

“My point exactly…now stop being silly and kiss me…” she insisted, capturing Cole’s lips in a most ardent kiss.

When she reached down to pull off her chemise, the redhead seized her hands, stilling them.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Waves…I can’t…I haven’t been genuinely honest with you…you can’t truly consent to this without all the facts…there are things you need to know…”

“What, Cole…” she was really getting impatient with all of this hemming and hawing. Obviously, she wasn’t making herself clear. She loved Cole no matter what, why couldn’t she make her understand?

“I…I can never be a real husband to you…not truly…”

“You’re already married to someone else…is that it?”

“No, Waverly…of course not…”

“If you want to stop me, “ she said once again reaching for the hem of her chemise, “You’re going to have to come out with it…no more of this vague demurring…be specific. If you hadn’t noticed,” she pressed the redhead’s hand to her rapidly beating heart, “I have already worked up a certain amount of enthusiasm, shall we say…”

“Waves…I…”

“Just tell me…I’ll still love you, no matter what…I swear…”

“I…I…oh Waves…I never meant to hurt you…that’s the last thing I ever wanted to…I never should have let myself propose…but I just…I loved you so much…I couldn’t help myself…”

“Just say it…” she crossed her arms over her partially exposed bosom.

“I can never give you children…”

“Is that all?” the brunette laughed, “I know that you silly girl…Now kiss me!”


“Yup…and I don’t give a good goddamn…now make love to me, husband…”

Moving her larger hands to her wife’s smaller ones, the redhead captured the cloth that Waverly still held tight, pulling the chemise over her head and off.

“Yes, ma’am…”
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

The one you've all been waiting for...

It may be a bit tame, but given the inexperience of both women and attitudes toward women's sexuality in the time period (they were basically considered asexual so no info was available to them except what they got from their husbands after marriage) While it had certainly been discovered by individuals over the centuries, the concept of a female orgasm was unheard of in academia, medicine and the general populace.

This chapter rated T for sexual situations

Chapter Notes

When last we left our lovely ladies...

"...I don't give a good goddamn...make love to me, husband."

……………………………….. "Yes, Ma'am."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Presented with the unabashed entirety of her wife, in all her natural glory, having since relieved her of her shimmy, Cole lay back simply gazing at her, in something very much like awe.

“Oh my God…Waves…” she gasped.

Blushing, the brunette cast a fleeting glance at her own womanly assets.

“They are quite nice, aren’t they?”

“No…I mean…yes, they’re…you’re breathtaking, my darling,” the redhead stared as if hypnotized, “But…I can’t believe…I…that birthmark…”

“I know…it looks like a piece of cinnamon toast. My sister used to tease me about it.”

“No…well, yes…but…the thing is…I’ve seen it before…”

“Ah…”

“So, that wasn’t a dream…” she mused, astonished.

“Apparently not…you did mention something about it while you were delirious, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh God…” the older woman hid her hot pink face in her hands, “I’m so sorry, Waves.”
“Please, don’t fret, darling…” the brunette smiled, “I’m just pleased that you enjoyed the view.”

Cole’s face grew steadily redder.

“You don’t have to apologize, you know…you are my husband, after all…it’s your right by law.”

“Husband,” the redhead chuckled, “That still tickles me…anyway, I at least owe you an apology for staring…it’s just plain rude.”

“Oh…I don’t know that you were actually ogling me, my dear…I think you just happened to come to while I was washing up, is all.”

“Oh…no…I was apologizing for staring just now,” the older girl lowered her eyes, bashfully.

“Really, darling…we must get past all this shyness and blushing of yours, however adorable it may be…otherwise we’ll never get anywhere,” placing her index finger beneath the shy ginger’s chin, she raised it until their eyes met, “I don’t have anything that you don’t have, you know.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far…”

“Oh please…we may not look the same, but you are quite lovely, my darling…and as far as I’m concerned, you are welcome to look at me all you like. Look…touch…taste…” she winked.

No longer able to resist her wife’s charms, in light of her wanton invitation, Cole buried her fingers deep in the nude beauty’s luxurious hair and drew her lips to her own, kissing her with a heretofore unmet degree of ardor.

It took scarcely any time for the embrace to become so heated, that the redhead felt the need to pull back once more to catch her breath, but not wanting to pull away entirely, she rested her forehead against Waverly’s, both of them fairly panting, like they’d just run to the river and back.

“See,” the brunette teased, “It’s even better when you help.”

Gazing suggestively into soulful, brown eyes, their color now mostly obscured by pupils ballooned with arousal, Waverly reached for the fastenings of her love’s shirt once more, inclining her head in inquiry.

Cole nodded her consent, grinning in much the same way her brother did when he’d had too much cider.

Her fantasies were actually coming true and she hadn’t quite convinced herself that it wasn’t just another fever dream.

Waverly loves me.

Waverly wants me.

Not Cole.

Me.

She knows and she still wants me…how did I ever get so lucky?

“Cole?” the brunette queried, tenderly, pulling the older girl out of her reverie.

“Yes, my love?”
“Where’d you go?”

“Just thinking about how lucky I am.”

“Oh…where did I find such a sweet husband?” she gave the redhead a quick kiss, “Can you try to raise your arms for me? Careful now…if it starts to hurt, I want you to stop, OK?”

Once the shirt had joined her wife’s chemise on the floor, the ginger turned shy again, embarrassed by her binder.

“Husband? Look at me, my love…please…you have no reason to be ashamed…I have seen it before, you know…it’s a part of the Cole I fell in love with…we wouldn’t be here without it,” she threaded her fingers through auburn locks, made spiky by their tussling, “Although, I would like to hear the story behind it…when you feel able to tell me, that is…”

The older girl looked up at her wonderful wife, a loving smile lighting up her face, and trailed the backs of her fingers down a flushed cheek, “Of course, Waves…I always meant to tell you…it’s just that…”

“Not right this minute, though…if that’s all right with you, darling…I’m really more in the mood for action than talk…”

“I always said you were wicked,” Cole chuckled.

“You have no idea, my love…”

Trembling, Waverly caressed the bandages, where a nipple strained against them, just as gently as she would have had they been made of butterfly’s wings.

“May I?” she asked, earnestly.

“Uh-huh…” was all the response the redhead could manage.

Slowly and with the utmost reverence, the overstimulated beauty began to peel away the last vestiges of Mister Haught from Cole’s pale torso. Feeling very much like a child on Christmas morning, who has been waiting for its arrival since Spring.

“Somehow,” she noted, hoarsely, “This is a lot more compelling than the last time I did it.”

“Excuse me…the last time?”

“You wouldn’t remember…you were in the depths of your delirium at the time,” the redhead’s countenance took on a puzzled expression, “Don’t look at me like that…I had to find the source of your fever…how did you think I knew?”

“I guess I haven’t had time to think that far…”

“No…I suppose you haven’t…”

“Did you?” Cole glanced shyly toward her lower half.

“Oh no, darling…just the top…believe me, I felt guilty enough being that intrusive…I would never…thankfully, the infection in your lower leg was obvious…so your drawers stayed on…” she assured her, “You have no reason to be shy, my love…after all, you’ve seen the whole of me…more than once, as it turns out…while I’ve only been privileged to see your lovely breasts.”
“You…think I’m lovely?”

“Oh yes…”

“Then it doesn’t bother you…that I’m…not really a man?”

Waverly chuckled, blissfully, “Oh, my love…I minded more when I thought you were a man…. I’ve always been drawn to the fairer sex…why do you think I had such difficulty allowing myself to love you, Mister Haught?” she asked, saucily.

“I thought you were still grieving for your lost love.”

“I was…I am…in some way, I suppose I always will be. She and I knew one another from the time we were schoolgirls, you see. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not, Waves…how can I begrudge you your past…especially when a ragged corner of my heart shall always belong to my girl, too?”

The brunette couldn’t hold back her laughter, “Would you just look at the two of us? This would all have been so much simpler, if we just could have been honest with each other from the beginning…then again, I don’t imagine we’d be married now if we had been.”

“No, I don’t suppose we would, at that…” the redhead joined in her wife’s giggling.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing necessity made it impossible for us to be truthful with one another,” Waverly’s expression turned suddenly serious, “But, if you EVER lie to me again, Cole Haught…I swear to God I will wear you out with a buggy whip! Do we understand each other?”

“Never again, Waves…I promise…”

“Now that we’ve got that settled…refresh my memory…was I undressing you so that we could talk?”

“Vixen…” Cole grinned, shaking her head, then pulled her wife in for a long, slow kiss.

“Mmmmmmm…that’s more like it,” the brunette purred, “May I touch you, darling?”

“Of course, Waves…I’m just as much yours by law as you are mine,” she winked, rakishly, “Although, I really wouldn’t care to have the Sheriff involved in any of this…”

“Oh, you!” she laughed, slapping the redhead’s good arm.

Holding her breath, her hands trembling, just like she was touching a holy relic, Waverly gently ran her fingertips over the soft, pale flesh of Cole’s modest bosom, raising goosebumps across the freckled skin.

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to do this…ever since the first time I saw you without…beautiful…so, so beautiful…”

She leaned in, delicately pressing her lips to the object of her desire. First kissing all around one pink nipple, then directly on top of it, marveling at just how hard such softness could become. Then, craving a more direct connection with her love, she blazed a trail of kisses along her still healing collarbone, up her graceful neck and back to the stunning ginger’s waiting lips.
Their bodies entangled, the brunette moaning against her lips, swallowing her breath, Coles’s strong hands soon sought out the firm behind she had so often admired, pulling herself up so that they were both on their knees. The redhead shivering at the sensation of her wife’s hardened peaks brushing against her own.

Waverly lightly dragged her fingernails down a well-muscled back, over firm buttocks and down the back side of her love’s thigh, raising further goosebumps. Reversing direction and moving up the inside of that same thigh, her knuckles brushed against the hard bulge between Cole’s legs. Unable to resist, she leaned forward, laying the taller woman down on her back and hovering above her on her hands and knees.

As she moved backward, the redhead chased her lips, “Waves…where are you going?”

“I am afraid, my dear Mister Haught, that just as it has so many other times in my life, curiosity has gotten the best of me…” she drawled, focusing her attention on the buttons of Cole’s longjohns, “Through all of this tangled tale of forbidden love, there is but one thing I have never been able to figure out…and you know how much I despise an unsolved puzzle.”

“Oh-huh…”

“I simply must know…” she purred as she ran her hand up a rock hard thigh, arriving at the juncture of her husband’s legs, she cupped the unyielding bulge that rested between them, “What the hell is this?”

Cole laughed out loud, hoping it would stave off the blush she could feel coming, “You would obsess over that, you wicked woman you…”

“Well?”

“Riding gloves.”

“That doesn’t sound very comfortable…”

“Yeah, it really wasn’t…however necessary…after a while I got fed up and sewed them into a soft flannel pouch, that buttoned into my drawers…it helped with the chafing…and my work…”

“OK…I can’t help myself…I’m gonna have to insist on an explanation of that last part…”

“Well, it’s a lot easier to pay attention to where you’re swinging your axe, when you’re not constantly worried about your manhood slipping down your pantleg.”

“You paint quite a picture,” she teased, “Now that we’ve got that mystery solved…”

“Oh-huh…”

The petite beauty grabbed hold of the last barrier between her and Cole’s complete nudity, unceremoniously stripping them off her lover’s long legs.

“Oh…so you are a natural redhead…”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

“Not really, I just couldn’t resist the joke…”

Sitting back on her haunches, the brunette took a long hard look, drinking in the sight of her beloved’s dazzling physique in its entirety, for the first time. Oh…so many freckles.
“Mmmmmmm, have I ever told you what all those muscles of yours do to me?”

“Judging by the look on your face I’d say I’ve got a pretty good idea…you don’t find them unflattering, now that you know that I’m a woman?”

“Just the opposite…” Waverly purred, moving to straddle a firm thigh and settling her upper body atop the redhead’s, “Let me know if I’m hurting you, darling…”

“Mmmhmmmm…” Cole murmured into a highly enthusiastic kiss.

After a good while of nothing but kisses and caresses, the brunette was craving something more. That familiar tension inside her was almost an ache now and she could feel her pulse between her legs. A new, although not entirely unpleasant sensation.

Cole was in very much the same condition, although much better acquainted with that damp, throbbing tickle, thanks to her wife’s damnable corset.

“Oh my…” Waverly’s breath came in pants, as she rested her forehead against the redhead’s.

“I know what you mean…”

“Um…Cole…”

“Yes, my love?” she pecked at her lips repeatedly, teasing.

“As wonderful as this has been so far…I’m feeling like…”

“It isn’t enough any more?” the tall ginger finished for her.

“Exactly…”

“Yup…”

“The thing is…it’s just occurred to me…I have no idea how to go about this…”

“I thought you said you’d talked to Polly.”

“Yeah…Polly’s wisdom…completely useless without a tallywag in the mix…”

“Well, shit…” Cole laughed, “If this isn’t a helluva thing…”

“Got any ideas?”

“I guess I must have picked up some of that silly male pride…I actually feel rather inadequate, admitting that I don’t…”

“Silly boy…”

“I mean…sure, I grew up with livestock…I’ve seen the bull and cows going at it once or twice…but I never saw two heifers…”

Waverly giggled, “You can always make me laugh…it’s one of the things I love most about you…”

“Aw…I love you too, Waves.”
“It may not be terribly romantic…but let’s look at this logically…we both have the same parts…so that should make things easier…”

“After a fashion…”

“Did you never…”

“Mrs. Haught! I’ll have you know I was raised Catholic!”

“OK then…it was a favorite subject of our preacher back home, too…always railing against it from the pulpit…telling the boys they’d go blind, straight to Hell, or to the pest house, but…”

“Never did say a word about us girls…”

“That’s because men think that without them to guide us, we have no interest in the sins of the flesh, as they are wont to call them.”

“Yup.”

“No offense to your assumed gender, but men are idiots.”

“None taken.”

“Still leaves us up a creek without…”

“A tallywag!” Cole doubled over laughing, “Ooh, that still smarts a bit…”

“If you need to stop…”

“Did I say that? So long as I don’t bend over I’ll be fine.”

“I can’t imagine that will be necessary…” Waverly put on her thinking face, “You know, if we just go on as we were, it is possible that a solution may naturally present itself…”

“I wouldn’t say no to that approach…” the redhead smiled.

“And if it doesn’t work out that way…” the brunette purred as she climbed atop her lover, straddling her leg, so as to keep pressure off her injury, “There’s always…kiss…the delicious prospect…kiss…of exploration…kiss…and experimentation…”

Large, calloused hands soon found their way to a firm behind, pulling her wife down on top of her, kissing her passionately.

As is the natural order of things, the two women eventually began to grind against one another, as they devoured each others mouths, but that brought no relief.

If anything, it only served to heighten their mutual frustration.

Not to mention, due to the marked difference in their heights, every time Cole let go of Waverly’s bottom, she would begin to slip away from her with the motion.

Wanting her hands free to explore the body she’d been dreaming of for so long, the redhead raised her knee, planting her foot on the bed, hoping that would remedy the problem.

As their dalliance began to grow more fervid, the ginger found that she could feel the heat off her wife’s sex against the bare skin of her leg, a most titillating sensation. Unfortunately, she could
also feel the beginnings of a cramp in her still healing calf. Not caring for the prospect of yet another interruption, she adjusted the position of her foot.

“Uuunnnngghhh…” Waverly moaned loudly, “Oh, Cole…that’s delicious…mmmmmm…do that again…”

“Do what, my love?”

“Flex your thigh…”

“Like this?” the redhead asked, a wicked smile on her face.

“Oh!…Oh God…yes…exactly like that…”

Her partner’s smile grew a good deal more wicked, pleased to have stumbled upon a way to make her bride feel such pleasure.

“Oh, Cole…you have to feel this…” she moaned, moving forward so that her own leg pressed against the older girl’s center.

“Damn! Oh Waves…ooooooooo…I see what…you…mmmmmmmm…mean…”

“Well, then…” Waverly’s expression transformed into something very close to hunger.

Some time later, they both lay on their backs, sweaty and breathing heavily, drunk on love.

“That was…” the brunette gasped for breath.

“I know…”

“I’ve never felt anything like it…”

“Right?”

“And that bit at the end…I don’t know what that was, but…”

“I want to feel that again…”

“Again and often…”

“Do I need to say it?”

“Oh…go ahead…”

“You are a wicked wicked woman, Waverly Haught.”

“And you love it…”

“And I love you…so very, very much.”

“I love you too, Cole,” she snuggled into her side, resting her head on the redhead’s chest, “You OK?”

“My leg is a bit sore…but I’m not complaining…”
“Oh…now we can’t have that…”

“But, Waves…”

“It seems to me, that now that we’ve got the general idea, we ought to be able to figure variations on the theme…”

“Smart girls are the best…” Cole grinned, lasciviously.

“As I recall, from my time as a nurse, that is…if a soldier had a throbbing ache…we’d give the area a good massage…”

Snaking her hand down her lover’s body, the brunette began to experimentally rub her fingers against the warm damp thatch, between her lover’s legs.

“Waves! Oh…oh God…yes…a little more pressure perhaps…oh yes…just…like…that…”

Chapter End Notes

I really don't know how graphic to go with the smutty bits from here on out...I want to keep it with the tone of the story enough that it doesn't take you out of it, but at the same time, I know how long you've all been waiting for some hot WayHaught lovin'

please weigh in with your opinions in the comments...use ratings if you can
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

More WayHaught loving and Cole shares her story with Waves

should probably include a Trigger Warning for safety’s sake

Some hours later, the pair lay side by side, propped up against the pillows, butt naked and eating pie directly from the tin with their bare hands.

“You’ve got a little piece of crust, just…” Waverly said, snaking out her tongue and snatching the crumb off her lover’s upper lip, “There…”

“Thank you, Missus…mmmmmmm this is just what I needed,” the redhead grinned, taking another bite, “I’m so glad you thought to can these blackberries.”

“And I’m so glad you didn’t finish the pie at dinner last night.”

“Three pieces is my limit.”

“Uh-huh…honestly, I don’t know where you put it,” she mused, pulling back the sheet, “I don’t see an ounce of fat on you and I’m looking really hard.”

“I’ll have you know, it takes a lot of fuel to build a physique like this,” Cole teased, flexing the bicep on her good arm.

“Is this the part where I’m meant to swoon?”

“You wound me, woman.”

“Hey…it’s gotten light out…have we really been at it all night?”

“I suppose we have…” the redhead answered, sheepishly.

“No need to blush, my dear…I was here too…I suppose I’d better be getting up, the animals need tending.”

“Not yet, darling…please…” she groaned, pulling the brunette more firmly against her, “I’m not quite ready to let you go.”

“I’ll be just outside, you silly thing.”

“I know, but…”

“What, my love?”

“I’m afraid if I let you out of my sight, this will all turn out to have been a dream.”

“Does this feel like a dream to you?” Waverly murmured, nibbling at that spot right behind the redhead’s ear, which she’d learned drove the older girl positively crazy, her hand traveling down
the defined muscles of her pale abdomen, with intent.

“Mmmmmmmm…” Cole moaned, “Very much so…”

When they next found themselves in a position similar to their original one, the sun was fully up
and Waverly was leaning against the headboard, Cole’s head pillowed upon her ample bosom,
while she ran her fingers repeatedly through untamed red hair, damp with perspiration.

“A girl could get used to this very easily, “ the ginger purred.

“So, pretty lady…”

“Yes, Waves?”

“I was wondering…”

“Uh-huh…”

“Since we’ve spent the last several hours becoming quite intimately acquainted…”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you might see your way clear to telling me your name?”

The party in question grinned, tipping an imaginary hat, “Cole Haught, at your service, Ma’am…”

“So, it’s going to be like that is it?”

“Like what, love?”

“Cole Haught? You and I both know that’s not your true name…although, I really hope someone
else came up with it…I’d hate to think I married someone with so little imagination.”

“You doubt my veracity, Mrs. Haught?” the older woman sighed, dramatically, “I am wounded to
the core.”

“Ass…”

“I’ll have you know, Haught is a family name…I didn’t just pull it out of the air.”

“Plausible enough…but I can’t imagine any mother naming her daughter Cole.”

“Did your mother name you Waverly?”

“As a matter of fact she did…although, I must admit I didn’t always answer to it…it’s the sort of
name you have to grow into, know what I mean?”

“Interesting…now that I think about it, I suppose you could say Cole has always been a part of
me…I was never what you’d call a girly girl, much to my mother’s chagrin.”

“Neither was I, believe it or not.”

“Really…I never would have guessed,” she teased, “Incidentally, Cole is the name I was born
with…and at least a part of it,” the redhead confessed, “As for the rest of it…well, to tell you the
truth, Waves…that girl doesn’t exist any more…I suppose you could say both she and her name
A tear ran down a freckled cheek, Waverly swiping at it with her thumb and kissing the ginger beauty on the forehead, “I’m sorry, my love…”

“If you don’t mind too terribly, I’d prefer it if you went on calling me Cole…I like the way it sounds when you say it.”

“Of course, darling…whatever you want.”

“Thanks, Waves…You’re one helluva a gal, you know?”

“I am pretty spectacular, aren’t I?” she teased, trying to lighten the mood, “So…should I start calling you my wife…now that everything is out in the open, as it were?”

“It certainly is that…” the redhead quipped, placing a kiss on the tantalizing nipple, that was so conveniently close.

“Cole…”

“Mmmmmmm…I particularly like it when you say it like that.”

“Behave yourself, you naughty thing,” the brunette chided, giggling, “You know I have to see to the livestock…if you get me going again, Tessie’s liable to explode.”

“Fine…but I want a promise that you’ll come right back to bed, as soon as you’re finished.”

“You, my dear, are incorrigible.”

“Couldn’t have you being the only wicked woman in the house.”

“Why don’t you make yourself useful while I’m outside and change the sheets…it’s getting a little funky in here.”

“Aye aye, captain…if that’s what it takes to get you back in my bed, then fresh sheets you shall have.”

“Oh, you…” the brunette gave her lover a good long kiss, “To tide you over…” before climbing out of bed and starting to dress.

The redhead groaned, dejectedly.

“I’ll be as quick as I can…I promise.”

“Maybe I’ll have a wash while you’re out…the bedding’s not the only thing that’s a little ripe.”

“Good idea…what I wouldn’t give for a real bath…” her wife sighed.

Cole grinned enigmatically.

An hour or so later, Waverly returned to find the older girl fast asleep.

“Guess I wore you out, huh?” she smiled at how innocent and carefree the ginger looked in repose, “Well, at least she changed the sheets…guess I’d better have a wash up too…I’ll be a lot more
alluring not smelling like a barnyard,” she grinned, wickedly, ’Then I guess I’d better make us something to eat…if you have your way, I’ll be needing my energy.”

Feeling mischievous, she sent the dog into the bedroom ahead of her, where he promptly woke his mistress with a single pounce.

“Champ, you little shit!” Cole blustered, fighting off a barrage of puppy kisses.

“Well, that’s one thing that hasn’t changed in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, Waves…you made breakfast…I must have the best wife in the whole territory.”

“Indeed,” the brunette teased, “After the way last night played out, I thought we might need to fortify ourselves.”

“I like the way you think, Mrs. Haught,” Cole said with a smile, “Is there tea?”

“Of all the silly questions…”

“So…” the redhead asked between bites, “How are the critters faring?”

“I think Bobo’s missing you.”

“Poor ole boy…I’ll have to pay him a visit.”

“He’s got this hangdog expression, not unlike the one you got that time I wanted to bathe you.”

“Hey! I was only thinking of your safety…”

“How’s that?”

“I didn’t think you were ready to handle all this breathtaking pulchritude.”

“So humble…”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Cole grinned, rakishly, “You’re more than welcome to bathe me any time you like.”

“You should be so lucky.”

“Oh come on, Waves,” the ginger gestured grandly, at the intoxicating length of her naked body, “You know you can’t resist all this.”

“Would you care to see me try, Mister Haught?”

“Let me think about that…NO!”

“I thought not…just let me get rid of these dishes and put another log on the fire…mornings are starting to get a bit nippy of late.”

“Or you could get rid of that dressing gown instead and I could warm you up…”

“Hold that thought…”

“Your wish is my command, my dear.”
Untying her robe, Waverly purred, “So, if I wished you would…”

“God, Waves,” Cole sighed, “You’re so beautiful…”

“Are you trying to make me blush?” the brunette asked crawling into bed.

“Seeing you like that…” she breathed, “It makes me want to kiss every inch of you.”

“Every inch?”

“Uh-huh,” the redhead nodded, initiating a path of kisses along her wife’s chiseled jawline, down her neck, in between her luscious breasts, stopping her downward progress to pepper each of them liberally with kisses, before resuming her course, across the flat plane of her stomach, over a jutting hipbone, all the way down the outside of her right leg, stopping to kiss all ten of her toes, then back up the inside of her left.

Lying between the brunette’s legs, she grinned up at her wickedly, “Hmmmmm… I wonder…”

“You wouldn’t…”

“And why not? It’s a part of you I’ve grown quite fond of, after all.”

“Is that so…”

“Yup… warm… furry… rather like a kitten… anyway, I did say every inch,” she hummed, placing a few kisses on the inside of each thigh, “And you know I’m a woman of my word… let’s see… mmmmmmmm”

“Oh… Cole!”

“Is this OK, love?”

“I’m not sure… perhaps if you tried it again…”

“So… still chilly?”

“Oh, yes…” Waverly panted, “I always sweat when I’m freezing…”

“Well, I’d say that one goes to the top of the Do It Again list…”

“You think?” the brunette, sighed weakly.

The ginger chuckled, wiping at her face, neck and chest with a damp cloth, “Although, perhaps a different position next time, so there’s less risk of drowning.”

“Oh, you…” her wife gave her a swat, pulling the older girl down beside her, “Don’t exaggerate…”

“If you don’t believe me, you’re welcome to try it yourself.”

“I fully intend to… just give me an hour or so to catch my breath,” she patted her chest, her lover resting her head on it as requested.

“Cole?”
“Huh?”

“Before we lose ourselves in each other again…”

“Yes, my love?”

“I was hoping we could talk…”

“I suppose it is about that time,” the redhead sighed, “Well past it, if we’re being honest.”

“You don’t need to apologize, darling. I can’t even imagine carrying a secret of that magnitude, let alone having to confess it. You had every right to be hesitant, for all you knew, I might have shot you on the spot.”

“Still, I should have told you sooner…but with the accident…”

“You wanted to be sure you were well enough, should you need to affect a quick getaway.”

“Sometimes I could swear you can read my mind,” the tall girl grinned, “You are an amazing woman, Waverly Haught.”

“Mmmm…I love you too,” she hummed, kissing the ginger on the forehead.

“Do you need to visit the necessary? It’s a bit of a long story and not an easy one to tell…this may take a while.”

“I’m fine…take your time, my dear…”

“I don’t even know how to start off…”

“Start at the beginning…I know this can’t be easy for you…so please don’t feel that you have to go into any more detail than you’re comfortable with…I just want to know why.”

Taking a deep breath, then letting it out slowly, Cole began shakily.

“I suppose it all started when I lost my girl…I was crazy with grief…and I do mean crazy…wouldn’t eat, didn’t sleep, wouldn’t come out of my room or let anyone in for days on end…in my weakened state, I fell into a sickness…a bad one…I was in and out of consciousness for a fortnight…delirious with fever and weak as a kitten. Once the physical illness passed, I was still hanging on by a thread…my heart was shattered…I had no will to live…that’s when the doctor suggested travel…Maman knew a chance to see the frontier was the one enticement I could not resist…I seriously doubt that anything else could have saved me…”

Waverly rubbed the redhead’s back, murmuring soothing sounds, as she recounted her tale of woe. Her heart was breaking for the unfortunate girl, but she bit her tongue to keep herself from commenting, thinking it best not to interrupt the sorrowful narrative.

“It was already dark by the time the train arrived in Silver Bow and my uncle was nowhere to be seen…the station agent told me my uncle had been killed…he offered to take me to a lady friend with an extra room…”

By the time Cole came to the end of her harrowing tale, both women were weeping, the redhead shaking with great, gasping sobs.

“Oh, my love…my poor poor darling…I’ve got you…you’re safe now…Waverly’s here…no one can hurt you…just let it out now…let it all out…there there now…I won’t let go…I promise…not
until you tell me to…hush, darling…you’ll make yourself sick…there now…I’ve got you…”

When the redhead had calmed at last, her wife soothed her with whispered endearments, stroking her hair and covering her face in baby soft kisses.

“Oh, my darling…I am so sorry…I wish I could take it all away for you…I can’t even imagine going through that…”

“I’d die before I’d let anyone hurt you like that,” the ginger said earnestly, looking like a warrior woman.

“Oh…Cole…”

The stricken woman’s lips sought her lover’s, kissing her with what felt like nothing so much as desperation, before she spoke, “Waves?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Do you hate me?” she asked, meekly.

“What reason could I ever have to hate you?”

“I’m a murderer.”

“Nonsense…self-defense isn’t murder…to tell you the truth, I’m glad you killed the bastard!”

“Waverly!”

“Well…I am…and based on what you just told me, so is every other woman in town.”

“Every woman but me…”

“You listen to me, Cole Haught…you are a hero…Lord knows how many other girls you saved from the same fate or worse…the way I see it, you performed a public service…you are worth ten of that man and I use the term man very loosely…given the choice between your life and his, I would opt for yours one hundred and one times out of a hundred…” the brunette was trembling with rage, “Hell, I’ve got half a mind to dig him up and kill him again, with my bare hands…”

“Please don’t…”

“Only if you insist…but you have got to stop hating yourself for this…please….”

“I’ll try.”

“Good.”

“Waves?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive…I thought I just made that clear.”

“I meant for deceiving you.”

“Oh, my love…I did that weeks ago…if you hadn’t deceived me, we never would have met…now
that would truly be a sin.”

“I have to agree with you there…”

“You really don’t know what an extraordinary woman you are, do you?”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is peculiar…”

“Stop that…I’m being serious here…you are the strongest woman I have ever met…and before you start flexing, I am not talking about your muscles…however attractive they may be…you are so good…so kind…I think that most people would have turned hard as flint after enduring an ordeal like that.”

“I couldn’t, Waves…if I had, then there really would have been nothing left of me but scraps…I couldn’t let him win.”

“If I’d been in your place, I’m not sure I would have survived.”

“I didn’t…the girl I was died on that forest floor…and I suppose, in a way, you could say that horrible day became my birthday…Cole’s birthday.”

“Oh, my love,” Waverly held the crying girl tightly in her arms, tears springing anew from her own eyes, “I am so sorry for what you’ve lost…but you know…she doesn’t have to be gone for good…”

“What?”

“She’s welcome here any time, if you ever need to let her run free.”

“That’s very sweet of you…but there’s nothing left of her, my dear…nothing…” she drifted off staring into the middle distance.

The brunette laid her palm along a tear-stained cheek, turning it until Cole’s chocolate brown eyes met her own.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that…I can see the ghost of a frightened little girl in your eyes right now…I bet we could resurrect her with enough love and kindness…only if you want to…”

“I don’t know, Waves…she’s so hurt…so ashamed…I think it’s best to let her rest in peace…if I ever let her out again…I’ve no doubt I’d lose my mind.”

“Whatever you need, my love…just know that if she ever wants to come back…I will welcome her with open arms…and protect her like a mama grizzly bear.”

“Thank you, my love…you can’t know how much that means…”

“I love you, Cole Haught…each and every incarnation of you…under whichever name you choose.”

“Oh, I love you too…so much…you are so good to me…I was so scared of telling you…for so long…it never once occurred to me that you might react the way that you have…you’re the best, Waves…the absolute best.”

“You’re pretty great too, you know…”

The redhead shrugged.
“You’re trembling, darling…are you warm enough? Should I put another log on the fire? Do you want me to make you some tea?”

“Don’t you worry about me Mrs. Haught…I’m a tough guy, remember? I can always get up and get one of your bonus blankets, should I feel the need.”

“Nonsense…you deserve a bit of pampering right now…you stay right there, husband…I’ve got just the thing.”

Unable to catch hold of her own repose, with all that Cole had revealed swirling around in her head, Waverly watched the redhead, as she slept fitfully, worn out by her catharsis. Without losing contact with the shaken girl, the brunette reached into the drawer of the bedside table, pulling out a pencil and paper and began to write.

Dearest Wynonna,

I put your wedding gift on our bed today.

Please don’t tell Gus or I’ll never hear the end of her gloating. I’d like to settle into this a while before I let her in on it.

I will allow you one I-told-you-so, no more.
Your Happily Married Sister,
Waverly

PS - Please find enclosed a list of items I would like you to send me as soon as may be possible. The goal being to get them here in time for Christmas. What’s the Point in having a nest egg if I can’t buy gifts for my friends and loved ones.

(I will send you something from here. It wouldn’t be very exotic to have you pick out something for yourself, now would it?)

Speaking of which, there are a few people on my list whom I have no idea what to buy for, in which cases I have included a description of each person and leave it up to your expertise as a merchant to choose a fitting gift. I trust your judgement implicitly.

Mister Dolls, Cole’s business partner and our good friend, is in particular, a conundrum. It must, however, be a special gift, as were it not for him I would now be The Widow Haught.

(I know it is unforgivable of me to say something like that without an explanation, but it is imperative I get this to you as quickly as possible, as I am told that once the snow falls, the railroad will become all but impassable. I promise I will send a long newsy letter presently.)

As for Mister Dolls, aside from his being a veritable tree of a man, he is the strong silent type, proud and handsome, with skin the color of a horse chestnut and when it comes to his wife and children, about as hard as the marshmallow in the bottom of a cup of cocoa. Both he and Cole spend most of their time outdoors and both are very broad of shoulder. I was thinking good warm coats and gloves for both of them, but I also want something personal just for Dolls. Look at me running on, I must get this out with the next post.
Goodbye for now. I love you. Give Gus and Mr. Nedley my regards.

PPS - Am I Auntie Waverly yet?
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Christmas at the Haught's

Basically just a whole lot of holiday fluff

To any German speakers out there, I am sorry in advance for butchering your language. I couldn't figure out how to do an umlaut.

Hope you all had a wonderful holiday...sorry this is so late, but it turned out loooooong!

“What in hellfire is that dog raising a ruckus about now?” Cole fussed, “Today is Christmas Eve, everyone is safe and warm at home, celebrating the holiday with their families.”

“I suspect that’ll be Aloysius and Herr Schwan delivering my Christmas gift to you.”

“Or they might be delivering your gift from me,” the redhead laughed, “Why don’t you go out and greet them while I get into my binder.”

“Oh, shit…it’s been so long since you wore it, I’d forgotten all about it…it’s a good thing one of us has her wits about her.”

“Go, run interference, before they come in on their own,” the taller girl shooed her, with a wave of her hand, “That’s one Christmas surprise none of us want.”

“Good morning, gentlemen…A merry Christmas to you both…thank you so much for doing this for us…I hate to drag you away from your families on Christmas Eve.”

“Don’t be silly, Miss Waverly…you know I’d do anything for that tall red haired drink of water…well, speak of the devil…”

“And up I jump, “ Cole drawled from the doorway, “Just let me get my coat on and I’ll give you fellas a hand.”

“No need, Herr Haught…ve could carry all of zis and you besides,” the enormous blonde man chuckled, “You stay zere, vere it’s varm.”

“Miss Waverly,” Dolls called out, “If I could speak to you alone for a moment…”

While the odd couple whispered together about logistics and the location of certain hidden accessories, Herr Schwan and the redhead had a similar conversation on the stoop.

“Well, my friends, since it seems we are delivering gifts for both of you…may I suggest, you two go and visit with the livestock, while Robert and I take care of things. One of us will come and get you when you may come back.”
And so, the Haughts found themselves taking a leisurely stroll to the corral.

“We really ought to take the horses out for a ride soon,” Waverly suggested, “They must be going stir crazy.”

“I don’t know that I’m quite in shape to go trekking, but I might be up for a gentle ride.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for later.”

“You naughty thing, you…”

“So…what did you get me?”

“I’ll never tell…”

“Is it bigger than a bread box?”

“Yes…and I’m not telling you what it is, even if you guess. I swear, you are like a child sometimes…in fact, I may start introducing you as my wife and kid.”

“You’re no fun,” the brunette pouted.

“That’s not what you said last night…”

“Oh, you…” Waverly slapped her lover on the arse and took off for the horse paddock, at a dead run.

“Hey…no fair…” Cole protested, limping after her.

“You’ll never catch her that way,” Dolls laughed, putting his arm around her, “Oh, it’s so good to see you up and about, my friend.”

“Up and about, such as it is…”

“Is the limp gonna be permanent?”

“Doc claims it’ll go in time…in the mean time it’s frustrating as all heck…I feel like an old man.”

“Based on what I saw coming around that corner, Miss Waverly sure doesn’t see you that way.”

“No, she doesn’t,” the redhead blushed, grinning like a briar eating jackass.

“Blushing? You two are just like a couple of newlyweds, aren’t you?”

“What can I say, it took us a while to get used to each other.”

“Well, I’m mighty happy for ya my friend…for a while there I thought this day might never come.”

“Me too, Dolls…me too.”

“Miss Waverly,” Dolls shouted out as they approached the barn, “You can come back now…”

As the trio walked into the house, kicking snow off of boots and removing their coats, Waverly was filled with childlike enthusiasm.
“Where’s my present? Where’s my present? Ooooh, I can’t wait!”

“Patience, little one…” the redhead teased, kissing her on the side of the head.

“As it happens, Miss Waverly, they are both in the bedroom,” Dolls said, indicating the closed door, “Now, Boss…yours was way too big to hide, so I’ll be needing you to close your eyes…”

Cole first heard the door open, then her wife’s gasp, “Oh, Aloysius, it’s gorgeous…you may open your eyes now, darling…merry Christmas!”

“Oh, Waves…a bed…a very large bed…thank you, my darling…it’s a stunner.”

“A man would have to be a shprinter to catch his wife in a bed like zat,” Herr Schwan joked.

“Dolls built it, darling…and Robert carved the head and foot boards…I even sent to my sister for a nice feather mattress…do you like it? Please, tell me you like it…”

“I love it, Waves…” the taller girl exclaimed, with a hug.

“I’m so pleased, my love…now where’s mine?”

“Have I told you lately how adorable you are?” Cole asked, beaming at her.

“Miss Waverly,” the blonde giant interrupted, “Your gift is over zere, under ze blanket.”

“I ordered it quite a ways back,” the redhead confessed, “Put it down to Providence that it happened to get here just in time for Christmas…go ahead, my dear…have a look.”

The petite brunette whipped off the blanket with a grand flourish.

“Oh, Cole…a bathtub! A real honest to goodness bathtub!” she exclaimed, with glee, running over to embrace her husband, “You are simply the best, did you know that? Thank you SO much…”

“Merry Christmas, Waves,” the redhead said with a kiss.

“Well,” Dolls cleared his throat, “We did promise the ladies that we’d be double quick…so we will leave you to it…”

“Thank you so much, Aloysius…we’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Of course…all five of us…bright and early…the boys will see to that.”

“And you, Herr Schwan…you and Polly are coming?”

“Ja…Ma’am.”

“Everyone’s coming, Waves…don’t you worry,” Cole said, holding onto her wife like the rare prize that she was, “See you tomorrow, fellas.”

“Mmmmmm…I can’t wait to get in that tub…how did you know?”

“I can’t imagine,” the redhead kissed the woman in her arms, “Do you realize how often you say ‘what I wouldn’t give for a real bath’? I do listen sometimes, you know…”

“My woman is the best husband of them all.”
“You know…it seems like an awful waste of water to take a bath when you’re not even dirty…”

“Really…”

“Uh-huh…” the redhead purred, “What do you say we try out my gift first and I get you all nice and sweaty?”

“Hmmmmmm…you know, you may just be the smartest husband I’ve ever met,” Waverly teased.

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh,” the brunette flirted, slipping her hand behind the taller woman’s neck and pulling her into a long kiss.

Without once breaking contact with the petite beauty’s lips, Cole smoothly lifted her wife and carried her to their new bed, setting her down atop the Wedding Ring quilt.

An hour or so later, the bed was a mess, pillows scattered on the floor, both women were sufficiently sweaty and Cole held her trembling bride in her arms.

“So far, this is shaping up to be the best Christmas ever…” the redhead sighed.

“Must be because it’s official now…federal holiday and all that, you know.”

“Oh yes, that must be it.”

“You know what, Cole?

“Hmmmm?”

“That tub sure looks big enough for two people.”

“Uh-huh…I wanted to be sure I’d fit.”

“In my tub? How presumptuous.”

The redhead shrugged.

“It’s solid copper…must have been expensive…not to mention hard to get.”

“Right on both counts…but don’t worry, we can afford it…business is good…all those homes we helped build need firewood to heat them through the winter…as for hard to get, it was nearly as hard to get as you…it took six months to get here.”

“Six months? When did you order it?”

“The first time you mentioned how badly you craved a real bath…must have been a week or so after you got here, as I recall.”

“At the risk of being redundant,” the brunette whispered against her lover’s lips, “You are the best husband ever…Cole?”

“Yes, Waves?”

“Would you like to have a bath with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask…”
“I’ll start boiling the water…”

“Let me help…that tub holds a lot…it’ll go a lot quicker if we take turns at the pump.”

The brunette set to filling up a large pot, then started to giggle.

“What’s got you so tickled?”

“I finally get to give you that bath.”

‘Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except for a certain Mrs. Haught, who was in the midst of a monstrous botheration.

The critters and their mistress had gone to bed hours earlier, so the brunette damned near jumped out of her skin, when long arms slipped around her waist from behind.

“Cole Haught! You scared the bejeezus out of me!”

“Waves…when are you coming to bed?” the redhead yawned, “I can’t sleep right without you any more.”

“I see you’re wearing your Christmas present…how do you like them?”

“Soft, warm and comfy…as advertised…whatever made you buy them?”

“I figured I owed you some after I cut your old underclothes all to shreds…plus with the buttons all down the front and the flap in the back…they seemed a lot more convenient…for any number of things.”

“Oh really…”

“Incidentally, I really like the way that union suit hugs your figure,” the brunette flirted, “Just be sure no one sees you in it or they’ll know your secret right away.”

“I wasn’t planning on appearing before company in my new long underwear, Waves.”

“Mmmhmmmm,” the younger girl hummed distractedly, returning to her chores.

“You know, I bet you’d look real nice in the one I bought you, too…red is your color…just the thought of how it’ll hug those curves of yours does things to me…come on, baby…hows about you slip into that soft, comfy union suit and come to bed,” the redhead entreated.

“Are you crazy? Everyone we know is going to be here tomorrow and the house is a mess!”

“Waves…if you sweep that floor one more time, the wood is going to start to splinter…the house cannot get any cleaner…come to bed, please.”

“No matter how much I clean, there are cinders everywhere…it’s driving me insane…”

“You don’t say…”

“And this blasted tannenbaum, as your friend Robert calls it…I know he and Aloysius made a heap of money selling them in town and they’re all the rage…but the damned thing sheds needles faster than Champ sheds fur…and the food…I just know we’re going to run out…”
“Waverly…my love…take a breath…stop and look around you…the house looks wonderful…like a Christmas card come to life…and incidentally, the only alternative to cinders is freezing to death…”

“But the food…”

“Darling…there will be…let’s see, eleven of us tomorrow…and that’s only if Ma and Pa Gardner make it through the snow…the baby isn’t even two, so I doubt she’ll eat much…Narcissus is five and he doesn’t care about anything but animals, at the moment…you have a ham the size of Peony, assorted vegetable courses, three kinds of pickles, two kinds of pie, Christmas pudding with hard sauce, cookies and mulled cider. I’m sure Polly will be bringing bread and most likely some kind of traditional German Christmas delicacy…trust me…we will not run out of food.”

“You could help, you know!”

“I am trying to help…please come to bed, love…you’ve put so much work into this party…do you want to be too exhausted to enjoy it?”

“You’re a man!” Waverly huffed, “You wouldn’t understand about entertaining.”

“Pardon me?” the redhead arched an eyebrow.

“Sorry…force of habit.”

“Waves…come to bed…please.”

“Cole…”

“What kind of hostess will you be if you don’t get any sleep?”

“Fine…”she finally gave in, “But you’re getting up early, to help me, in the morning.”

Christmas morning, the house was full up with the exquisite aromas of roasting ham and fresh pine, from the evergreen boughs Waverly had draped on the mantel.

For a few moments, Cole just stood in the bedroom doorway, soaking in the beauty of her wife in her element. Her Missus was never so breathtaking as when she was on a mission. The redhead almost hated to disturb her.

“Merry Christmas, beautiful.”

“It’s about time you got up, you shiftless layabout.”

“Waves…it’s 6am.”

“I’ve been up since 4:00.”

“You didn’t even come to bed until after midnight…don’t you go making yourself sick.”

“I won’t…do you think you could bring in some more firewood? I want to make sure the house is warm enough for Miss Peony.”

“Of course, my dear…is there any coffee?”
“Uh-huh…you can have a quick cup when you come in with the wood..then I have a list for you.”

“Of course you do…” the redhead grumbled.

“What was that, Cole?”

“Nothing…nothing at all.”

“Uh-huh.”

After the older girl had finished her assigned chores, she noted the lateness of the hour, although any sane person who wasn’t having guests, would consider it early.

“Waves…shouldn’t you be changing into your party clothes? They’ll be here before long.”

“Oh my…is that the time?”

“You go on ahead, I’ll keep an eye on things…it won’t take me any time at all to get dressed.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll have any trouble getting you to lace up my corset this time…”

“Nope…the trouble will be all mine…trying to keep my hands off you.”

“You mean you haven’t come to find looking at my body mundane, after three month’s unimpeded access?”

“Not possible,” the redhead grinned, “I’ll never take that privilege for granted…not even if I get to make love to you every day for the next one hundred years.”

“You are just the sweetest thing…but there’s no time for you to get a jump on that marathon now…just keep an eye on that sauce, would you? Make sure it doesn’t boil over…I’ll be back before you know it.”

Cole had no sooner finished her coffee, than Waverly reappeared in her half-laced corset.

“Do me up?”

“Well, come over here…I can’t watch you and the sauce from the other side of the room…I think I may have to do this with my eyes closed…and I’ll never be able to resist kissing that ticklish spot right between your shoulder blades.”

“Behave…the guests will be here any minute…and me without even my corset cover on…”

“Corset cover? I haven’t even got my binder on yet…”

“Lace me up quick and get to it then…I don’t believe I’d care to spend the Christmas holiday being lynched.”

“Well, when you put it that way…”

Not long after, Champ started barking.

“They’re here, Cole…but don’t you go out and give them a hand.”

When the redhead emerged from the bedroom, Waverly found she had to catch her breath, “Oh my,
don’t you look dashing…I haven’t seen you in a tie since our wedding day.”

“It’s not very comfortable.”

“Don’t complain…you could be wearing a corset.”

“And on that note…”

“Look who it is, Waves…”

“Mr. And Mrs. Gardner…you made it…Merry Christmas…welcome to our home…please, come in and warm yourselves by the fire.”

“Merry Christmas, Waverly,” the elder woman responded, “You know better than that, now…it’s Ma and Pa.”

“Ma and Pa…sorry…take their coats, Cole…offer them some refreshment…I won’t be but another few minutes, I promise…just putting finishing touches on a few things.”

“I’d be happy to lend a hand.”

“Nonsense, Ma…you work all week…you set yourself down and let someone else wait on you for a change…I’m fine.”

“I’d listen to her if I were you,” Cole teased, “She damned near took my hand off earlier, when I tried to grab a taste of ham.”

“Serves you right,” Ma crowed, “Oh, what a lovely tree…”

No sooner had Cole and the Gardners settled by the fire with their drinks, than Champ started barking again.

The redhead took a peek out the side door, “It’s Polly and Robert…I’d better go out and help them…looks like they brought those chairs you asked to borrow.”

“Oh, thank God…” Waverly sighed, “I was afraid half our guests would be sitting on the floor.”

Soon, the brunette felt cold hands touching her skin, as her old friend enveloped her in a hug, “Merry Christmas, Michelle,” Polly whispered in her ear.

“Hush, you,” she scolded, “Merry Christmas, Pols…oh, what have you got there?”

“Some of my bread, of course or your husband would never let me in the house and some Lebkuchen…it’s a traditional German Christmas treat.”

“You know you didn’t have to…Cole’s perfectly well enough to make his own bread…but thank you for being so thoughtful…mmmmm, this smells yummy… like gingerbread.”

“That’s because it is gingerbread, Waverly dear.”

“My people were from England, how am I supposed to know that?”
“Search me…Robert, come say hello to our lovely hostess.”

“Ah, Frau Haught…Froliche Weihnachten!”

“And a merry Christmas to you too, Herr Schwan…but you must call me Waverly…After all, Polly and I grew up together…that makes us practically family.”

“I see you got ze glass baubles for your tannenbaum…good German quality…you’ve done a beautiful job wiz it…makes me homesick for ze old country…oh, yes…I almost forgot…zis is for you…Gluhwein…”

“Oh, thank you…I can’t wait to try it…please, sit…make yourselves comfortable by the fire.”

“There he goes…barking his fool head off again…that’ll be the Dolls clan.”

“I’m on it, Waves.”

“That’s odd, Champ just went quiet all of a sudden…”

“Oh, that’ll be Narcissus…he’s got a real way with animals…if it wasn’t Christmas, we’d have to pick him up bodily, to get him away from that dog and into the house.”

A few minutes later, the family came through the door in a flurry of shed coats, flung scarfs and excitable boys, on this their first official Christmas morning.

“Merry Christmas, all!” Dolls’ booming voice echoed through the house.

“Merry Christmas, Aloysius…welcome…Delia…boys…come in…come in…ah, Miss Peony…my how you’ve grown…please, join us by the fire…warm yourselves…” the brunette fussed like a mother hen.

“I’m so pleased that you all made it through the snow…welcome to our home,” Cole announced, “A merry Christmas to each and every one of you.”

“Did you offer everyone a drink, darling?” Waverly asked.

“Darling…” Dolls teased, copying the young wife’s tone.

“Watch it, you…” Cole mock threatened, “I bet I’m well enough to thrash you.”

“No you’re not,” the brunette scolded, “Behave yourselves, boys.”

“But, Ma…we wasn’t doin’ nothing.”

“Not you, Narcissus dear,” Delia soothed the child, trying to suppress a giggle, “She was talking to your father.”

“Ooooh, Papa’s in trouble,” Sweet William laughed.

“You’re not too old to put over my knee, boy.”

“Am so…tell him, Mama…I’ll be thirteen next Spring.”

“Oh, you’re practically a grown man,” the redhead joked, “Pretty soon we’ll be on the porch in our
rocking chairs and you’ll be working in the big woods.”

Sweet William did not look amused.

“When are we gonna open presents, Mama?” the younger boy asked, excited.

“Narcissus…you apologize to Miss Waverly…you know that’s not polite.”

“It’s OK, Delia…he’s right…it’s Christmas morning, high spirits are the order of the day…we’re all here now, there’s no real reason the children should have to wait any longer.”

“Just the same, he knows his manners better than that,” Delia informed her in no uncertain terms.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am.”

“Thank you, young man…you’re forgiven,” Waverly took a figurative step back, best not to step on parents’ toes if you could avoid it.

Little Narcissus wasn’t the only one who’d lost himself in all the excitement.

“Oh, we didn’t bring any gifts,” Pa Gardner apologized, “Cole, you didn’t tell me we were exchanging gifts.”

“Don’t you worry yourself, Sir,” Waverly assured the elderly gentleman, “You all have done so much to help since Cole’s accident, as far as I’m concerned, you don’t have to give us anything ever again. I just wanted to make you all a special treat of a party, to show you how grateful we are for your kindness.”

“Oh…and look at all the lovely wrapping…wherever did you get such pretty paper?” Ma asked.

“My sister and her husband own a large mercantile back east, as you know…we have her to thank for the fancy wrapping…they can get a lot of things so much easier than we can here…so, I sent to her for all of your gifts…except for Cole’s big gift of course,” Waverly blushed.

“Blushing?” Polly teased, “Whatever did you get him?”

Herr Schwan leaned over and whispered in his wife’s ear, which set her off giggling, “Oh…I see…”

Seeking to draw attention away from the subject, the brunette approached the pile of gifts, “Let’s see…who shall get the first gift of Christmas?”

“Me! Me!” Narcissus shouted, gleefully.

“Well then, the winner for both enthusiasm and volume is…Narcissus…here you go, little man…it’s a bit heavy…perhaps you should sit on the floor to open it.”

Carefully peeling away the paper, the little boy announced, less than enthusiastically, “It’s a boat.”

Crouching down, Waverly cooed, “The top comes off, honey…just pull up on the corner of the roof there,” she pointed.

The child did as he was told and when he saw what was inside, his eyes lit up like lanterns, “It’s full of animals!”

“It’s Noah’s Ark…do you know that story?”
The boy nodded gleefully.

“Say thank you to Mrs. Haught, Narcissus,” his mother reminded him.

The brunette was nearly knocked off her feet, when the boy ran to her, hugging her around the legs, “Thank you, nice lady.”

“Our welcoming,” she stammered, nonplussed, “I’m glad you like it.”

“Now, who should be next?”

The redhead spoke up, “The way we always did it in my family, whoever just opened a gift, gets to choose who gets the next one...what do you say little man, who’s next?”

“Mama...Mama next!”

“You heard the man, Waves.”

“Indeed I did...I believe that one may grow up to have a voice like his father...perhaps we should have him read the Clement Moore...what do you think?”

“Perhaps next year...”

“Here you are, Delia...I hope I got it right...”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” opening the package, Delia looked puzzled, “A suitcase...I didn’t even know they made wooden suitcases.”

“Open it, Delia...it’s not what it seems...”

Mrs. Dolls opened the case and upon seeing its contents, began to cry.

“It’s called a French easel,” Waverly explained, “It opens up into an easel, plus there’s room inside for all your paints, paper and brushes.”

“Oh, Waverly dear...thank you so much...you have no idea how much this means to me...how much I’ve missed painting...”

“There’s a card inside...read it.”

“Miss Waverly...no...it’s too much...”

“First of all, Delia...no...if you couldn’t make art any more that would be too much...you have a gift...you should always be able to paint...I’ve made arrangements with my sister that whenever you are running low on supplies, you just need to write to that address and she will send you replacements free of charge.”

“Oh...how wonderful,” Ma Gardner interjected.

“Waverly...it’s a beautiful thought, but I can’t let you do that...I will pay...somehow,” Delia insisted, “I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Fine...you may pay me...in the sum of one painting a year...”

Mrs. Dolls smiled, “You have a deal...I think the next gift should go to...”
“Not so fast, Delia…I believe my husband has something for you too.”

“Before you start protesting, Ma’am…this is really something more for your new home than you…I know that unlike the Missus and myself, you are a churchgoing folk…now, back where I come from, there are a whole lot of Catholics and there isn’t a single home that doesn’t have one of these proudly displayed at Christmas…I don’t know much about the Baptist church, but I figured it’s all the same God…anyway, I hope you like it.”

Delia opened the crate to reveal a crude, wooden manger, packed with figurines of Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the three Magi and various animals, along with a shepherd and an angel.

“Back home, where there are a lot of French Canadian immigrants, they call it a creche…the figurines are from Germany…Robert tells me they are best when it comes to making that sort of thing…I don’t know exactly what you’d call it in English…I hope I haven’t offended you in any way…I just saw it and thought of you.”

“I’d call it lovely, Red…I’m not offended in the least…I think it’s a beautiful tribute to the birth of our Lord and savior…thank you…it will have a place of honor in our home this Christmas and all those to follow.”

Cole beamed with satisfaction and relief, “So, who shall be next?”

“Oh, let me think…hmmmmmm…Sweet William.”

“Please, Mother,” the boy sulked, “William will be quite enough, thank you.”

“Well then, William,” the man of the house addressed the young man, “I picked this out myself,” Waverly cleared her throat, “When my lovely wife asked me what I liked at your age that is…”

William peeled open the paper to reveal two books, The Deerslayer and Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper.

“They were my favorites when I was your age…I lived in the same area where they take place and I read them over and over, imagining I was back in that time…I hope you’ll enjoy them as much.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Merry Christmas to you, William…who shall have the next present?”

“The pretty blonde lady,” he mumbled, shyly.

“Polly it is, then…”

“There are two for her, Cole…start with the round one…”

“Ooooh, do my eyes deceive me or is that a hat box?” Polly enthused, “Oh Waverly, it’s gorgeous!” she took it from the box, examining it from all angles.

“Big sister assures me its the latest fashion from back east…as for the other package…that actually is from her…”

Polly lifted the lid of the large rectangular box, “Oh my…am I seeing things?

“She figured you must be awful homesick by now and thought she’d send you a few tastes of Pennsylvania.”
The blonde wiped tears from her eyes, “I am genuinely touched, you must give me her address, so I can write and thank her personally.”

“Remind me before you leave.”

“Hmmmm…ladies first, I always say…Mrs. Gardner must be next.”

“Oh, what a lovely shawl…all that handwork…thank you, Waverly dear.”

“There’s another box for you, but I hesitate to open it with the young ones in the room, not to mention my husband or you’re liable to lose half of it before you leave…remembering your sweet tooth, I had my sister send some of every candy and sweet she could get her hands on…there ought to be enough to carry you through the winter.”

“You dear, sweet girl…no pun intended…you do know me…now, I suspect this old curmudgeon must be next, before he pouts himself to death.”

The room’s occupants laughed aloud as the old gentleman gave his wife a sour look, followed by a loving smile.

“Oh-huh…here you go, Pa…I just told my brother-in-law to send me a box of the best he could find. I don’t know your taste, but I know they’re bound to be a damned sight better than anything you can get your hands on here…no offense meant to your own establishment.”

“Cigars! A whole box of real Monte Cristo’s!” he exclaimed in much the same fashion that the five year old had over his animals.

“You’ll be smoking ‘em on the porch,” Ma informed him.

“Fine with me…it’s much quieter out there.”

The woman of the house stifled a laugh. It was like looking at herself and Cole, thirty years in the future.

“As I see Miss Peony has just woken up, I believe she has waited long enough…haven’t you Miss Pea?” the old gentleman cooed, waving at the toddler.

“Before you open it, I should explain,” the brunette told the child’s mother, “Where my sister lives, there is a local woman who is a dollmaker…her creations are one of a kind and in very high demand by collectors…anyway, my big sister, who I must say has become a bit full of herself it seems, said any child who had been cursed with a patchwork pony stitched together by my clumsy fingers, deserved something very special made for her and her alone…so, she told the artist everything I had told her about Miss Pea and she made a doll especially for little Miss Dolls…I haven’t even seen it myself…a little girl should be the very first to meet her new best friend…so I can’t tell you what to expect…anyway…that’s it.”

“You are going to make a fine mother one day, Waverly…you have a real understanding of children,” Delia said, lifting the lid off the box.

Inside the package was a finely crafted cloth doll, with skin the color of Delia’s own, curly black hair and a sky blue dress, spotted with sunflowers.

“Oh, she’s perfect…oh my, Miss Peony…what do you think?”

The toddler immediately latched onto the new doll, dropping her patchwork friend like a hot rock.
“Well, I guess that answers that question.”

“It seems to me,” Delia observed, “that this big, silent blonde fellow has been waiting very patiently.”

“Well, Herr Schwan…”

“Truly…you must call me Robert…we are practically family, remember?”

“Of course…how could I forget…well Robert, I don’t know how much Polly has told you about the area we hail from…but there is a large German community…and they hold onto the old ways very strongly…I thought that by now, you must be craving a touch of your homeland, so…my sister packed you a box like the one she made for Polly, only it’s all German foods and things…also, she found this…”

“Soll und Haben? All six volumes…in German? Oh,” he wiped a tear from his ice blue eye, “I can go home again without even leaving my Polly’s side…Danke schoen…”

“Well, that just leaves Aloysius and Cole…as it turns out, you have a pair of matching packages…here you go, boys…”

The partners opened the large boxes simultaneously, to reveal long, heavy wool coats, lined with shearling and heavy leather gloves that were furred inside.

“To keep you warm, when you’re working out in the woods…if they don’t fit, we can send them back for the proper size. Now, Friend Dolls, since I owe my husband’s very life to you as well as so many other things, which contributed to the two of us coming together…your wooing advice notwithstanding,” she teased, “I wanted to get you something special…something just for you…but, seeing as you are quite the most inscrutable person I have ever met and thusly the most difficult person in the world to shop for…I had not so much as a single idea what to buy for you…so, I simply told my sister everything about you that I could think of and relied on her experience and expertise as a merchant…I have no idea at all what she sent…but she assures me you will love it.”

“Should I be scared?” Dolls teased, “Just how much like you is this sister?”

“Well…for one thing…her husband is nowhere near as handsome as mine…”

“Uh-huh,” the big man winked at his business partner, before lifting the lid off the box.

Inside was a fine, top of the line, bowler hat, the color of cocoa powder and the trim and silk band, matched the color of the big fellow’s skin almost exactly. Grinning like a boy who has seen his heart’s desire for the first time, Dolls took the hat from the box, placing it on his head at a jaunty angle.

Waverly had to admit, it was truly quite astonishingly becoming…not unlike Cole and the white Stetson, Dolls and the bowler appeared to have been made for one another.

Delia shot her husband a certain sort of look, that Waverly had been on the receiving end of many times since she and Cole had begun sharing a bed.

Wynonna knew what she was doing.

“There’s a mirror in my old room, if you’d like to take a gander at yourself Aloysius.”
“No need, Waverly,” he smiled, proudly, “I know I look fine.”

“I hereby retire my temporary position as Santa Claus, Father Christmas or Kris Kringle, whichever you want to call him…and now, let’s eat…some of our guests have a long way to travel before sunset…”

“Yes…” Cole agreed, “Come join in the bounty of our table and good fortune, my friends…a merry Christmas to you all…may it be the first of many you spend in the warmth of our hearth and hearts…a toast to my wife, who worked her magic and whipped up this amazing party, using only the strength of her considerable will…ladies and gentlemen, I give you Waverly…raise your glasses!”

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