Possum

by coolbyrne

Summary

A murder in the Old West brings together two headstrong women to solve it, and in the process, they discover each other. COMPLETE.
A/N: Please read my long-winded author's note at the end if you have the time! This is a set-up chapter for Jane; Maura to arrive in the next chapter.

For happycamper5. Yeehaw!

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She looked down from her perch about a mile out of town, revelling in the warmth and the silence of the Wyoming air. Nothing moved but the lazy whip of her horse’s tail. The town, Beybeck, was distant yet welcoming. Though the name came from a bastardized marriage from the Arapaho words meaning “Red” and “Moon”, midday gave no indication of either - just yellow sun and dry earth, with the occasional patch of green. She sat back and thought about how many times she’d seen this view over the course of her life. There was a proprietariness she felt towards the town, though she would never consider herself interested in owning anything beyond a small cabin, a new hat, a good horse. Beybeck gave her all those things and more.

The tin star pinned to her vest made her smile as it reflected the bright sun. She had never known any other place than Beybeck, but her father did. He came to Wyoming in ’46 with a new wife, a baby on the way, and 8 years of law under his belt. Lawman. Sheriff. The badge glinted at her again.

She never got to ask him why Beybeck. There were no telegraph stations for another 15 years and the railroad didn’t get done until ’68. Luckily, this coincided with the gold rush and coal finds, and Beybeck went from 36 hardy pioneers to 140 almost overnight. After the rush was over, the town evened out to around 500, the train bringing in the odd newcomer every now and then. She remembered what it was like in those early years, and how the rush changed everything; how her father was called upon to keep the peace with a gun instead of a word. He never took pride in killing, but he never hid the fact that sometimes, it had to be done. She didn’t know what that was like, touch wood. Having drawn her gun less than a dozen times in almost 10 years, she’d shot it only once. To put down a lame horse. No one was happier that the pendulum swung back to quiet again.

She stood and nearly toppled over, her thirty-seven year old bones stiff and protesting. She brushed the dust from her pants and stretched her arms to the sun.

“Hush, Nóhoo!” Her companion took her movement as a sign to get things going. “Would it mean the same to you if I told you to hold your horses?” A fly buzzing around his ear made him shake his head and she laughed. She took one last look at the town before gathering the reins. “All right,” she said, hooking a foot in the stirrup and swinging her leg around the old worn saddle. “Git.”
The mainstay of any town is the general store, and Cooper’s Supply was there before she was born. Before he took it over from his father, she could remember a young Matthew Cooper sneaking her sour candies when she could barely see over the counter. As the door opened, four heads turned and the first one to greet her was a man in his early fifties, with a friendly smile and a suit he seemed to have been born in. His piercing eyes twinkled at her appearance, and what little hair he had was revealed as he lifted his hat in greeting.

“Sheriff.”

“Mr. Murphy,” she replied in kind to the town barber. With a small tip of her head, she acknowledged his wife, Ruth.

Turning her head, she caught the eye of another man in the room and had to work at keeping her smile in check when he automatically looked down. The butcher, Daniel Lloyd, stood in sharp contrast to Joseph Murphy. He was tall with a shock of jet black hair at odds with his pale complexion. But it was his bright blue eyes that everyone remembered, if they got a good look before he averted them.

No one was surprised that she had to be the first to speak. “Mr. Lloyd.”

Daniel held his hat in his hands and shifted from one foot to the other before saying, “Miss Jane.”

That was very common in Beybeck: the Daniels, Josephs, Ruths and Marys. They were nothing if not a God-fearing people, even if it only meant going to church the morning after a night at Miss Blake’s. Even she wasn’t exempt from a Biblical moniker- ‘Jane’, meaning ‘Gift from God’.

The man behind the counter stood with his hands on his hips and pretended to be disappointed. “And here I thought I’d come over and surprise you, Sheriff.”

“My hat?”

“Came on the coach this morning.”
He bent down behind the counter and re-emerged with a box in his hands. Like a six-year old, Jane could barely contain her excitement. Very carefully, she rested the box on the counter and lifted the lid. Her old hat put to the side and forgotten, she stood in front of a nearby mirror and gazed adoringly at her new possession. The newness of it looked out of place when paired with the spurred boots and pants that were pale from the dusty ride into town, but she didn’t care. It almost went with the plain blue shirt that showed under her brown waistcoat. She could almost see the hat’s reflection in the star pinned to her chest and it made her smile. A few strands of dark hair were loose from her braid and she tucked them behind her ears before giving a nod of approval.

As she turned, she tried not to notice the look on Ruth Murphy’s face. It was clear that the older woman didn’t approve of her clothing, let alone the sidearm on her hip. Sighing inwardly, Jane was thankful that she was, at least, gracious enough to keep her thoughts to herself.

Much to everyone’s surprise, it was Daniel who spoke first. “Well, I…I think it suits you just fine, Miss Jane.”

“Thank you, Daniel.”

The two other men nodded in agreement, and as Matthew put her old hat into the new box, he said, “You know, that other thing came on the coach, too.” He tried to look conspiratorial, but he couldn’t quite disguise his glee.

Jane laughed. “You might as well bring it out and show the classroom.”

Quick as a wink, Matthew pulled out a second box and rested it on the counter. Each man leaned forward, and even Mrs. Murphy snuck a glance. He lifted the lid with a flourish, and Jane’s eyes lit up. Joseph whistled. “May I?” he asked. Jane nodded and he reached inside the long box and pulled out the rifle. “It’s the new Winchester, isn’t it?”

“Right from Cheyenne,” Matthew answered.

“It’s got to be, well, it’s got to be almost $20, doesn’t it?” Joseph ventured.

“Twenty-four,” Jane replied. “But thanks to Matthew here, it only set me back 12. He put in the rest. We’re donating it as a prize for the shooting contest at the festival.”
When the season began to change, every little town had its own autumn festival as a way to send off the summer. Beybeck was no different. As the town grew, so did the festival; friends, family, and visitors from the area all came in to celebrate, and it didn’t take long for the local businesses to see the benefits.

“I’m getting Samuel to paint a big sign advertising the store,” Matthew said. “Twelve dollars for the rifle is a small price to pay for the extra business.”

“I’m going to telegraph the Cheyenne Sentinel,” Jane said and gestured to the gun. “We’ll see how many people it’ll bring in.”

Joseph looked down the sights. “Might be enough to get me to dust off the ol’ revolver.” When his wife harumphed, he coughed. “Might not.”

Matthew grinned and held out his hand for the rifle. Carefully placing it back into the box, he looked at Jane. “Daniel just brought in some of his best beef for purchase if you’re interested.”

“More than interested,” she replied. “Can you put some aside? I’ll be in at the end of the day.”

“That’s fine, Jane.”

“Let’s settle the bill for the hat.”

He shook his head. “Settle when you come back.”

She couldn't help but take another look in the mirror before making for the door. “You’re a gentleman, Matthew.” She touched the hat's brim to everyone. “Daniel, I look forward to having a delicious dinner tonight, thanks to your efforts. Matthew. Mr. and Mrs. Murphy.”

Stepping outside, she tipped the hat back to let the warm sun on her face.
While the election of Esther Morris to Justice of the Peace in South Pass City thirteen years ago might’ve shown that women could handle a role in law as well as any man, Jane still heard the occasional “What would your father think?”, a reminder that a woman’s role still had its limitations.

Such was the respect for her father that it was simply taken for granted his son would take over as sheriff when he passed on. But, there would be no son - her mother died in childbirth and her father never remarried. Yet, when the time came, the town didn't object as the Cheyenne marshal pinned the star to her vest. Yes, it had something to do with her father, but Jane liked to think it had a lot more to do with her own character. Justice was important to her because it was important to him. She always tried to do what was right and in those rare instances when she wasn't sure, she would close her eyes and remember the metal song of his spurs as she trailed behind him.

Second on the list of ‘things that make up a prosperous town’ - a saloon. In this case, The Spittoon Saloon. She quietly snorted at the name as she always did. The swinging doors squeaked as they welcomed her inside. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the change in light and she immediately spotted three new faces. Must've come on the morning train. New arrivals were easy to spot, not just because they stuck out like a sore thumb in a town where everyone knew everyone else, but because they were the ones who didn't just look, but outright stared when she walked in. She often wondered what went through their minds first? A woman in pants? A woman with a sidearm? A woman with a badge?

She smirked. Maybe they're just admiring my new hat.

As she approached a table littered with cards and drink and cigarettes, she was greeted by four men.

Luke Cooper, Matthew’s younger brother by a decade, spoke first. “Afternoon, Sheriff.”

Immediately, the other three men followed suit.

“Sheriff,” a stocky man in his fifties said. Stan Thompson, otherwise known as 'Stubby' thanks to an unfortunate accident while hammering out iron in his blacksmith shop.

“Miss Rizzoli.” The immaculate Edward Harrington said in turn, his demeanour every bit as respectful as the suits he made.
“Jane.” The only man besides Matthew who would think of calling her by her first name. Barry Frost. Also, the only man at the table who hadn’t been in Beybeck before the gold rush or wasn’t born here. Jane recalled him coming in at the tail end of the rush at the tender age of 25, and putting his money into horses. He was hardworking and sharp as a tack, and she admired him greatly. Whenever she thought of how hard she had to work to prove herself, she thought of Frost; his dark skin drew more attention than her gender, but if it ever bothered him, he didn’t show it. She always teased him about becoming a lawman and being the next Bass Reeves.

“Af‌ternoon, gentlemen,” she replied. “Ezekiel, you might as well come out. I saw you when I walked in.”

A chaos of blonde hair was the first thing to peek out over the edge of the table. The face of a 17-year old, torn between holding onto the boyish features of youth and embracing the hardened edges of manhood soon followed. He slipped into the vacant chair at his side.

“Sheriff.”

“I think I need to have a little talk with Mr. McMillan about letting young men into his establishment.”

“I’m here strictly for educational purposes,” he protested.

Jane couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Stubby said, “He told us he could tell when we were lyin’ by our eyes. Read about it in a book or some such thing.”

“It’s true!” the young man piped up.

“I didn’t even know you could read,” Frost drawled.

“Very funny.”
Turning to the rancher, Jane pleaded, “Just tell me he hasn’t been drinkin’.”

“C’mon, Jane, we know he’s your boy.”

“So is that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’?”

He laughed. “And face the wrath of Jane Rizzoli? That would be a ‘no’.”

“Well, that’s somethin’, I suppose.”

Luke gestured to a nearby chair. “Sit in for a hand or two, Sheriff?”

She took the proffered chair but pulled it around to Ezekiel’s side. “I think I’ll sit in with this one, if that’s all right. See if I can learn anything.”

The ‘your boy’ comment was made in jest; if the blonde hair wasn't proof enough, everyone knew Ezekiel and his family. The Blacks were friends of Jane's father and the families had been close all her life. Even though she was old enough to take care of herself after he’d died, they made sure Jane was getting on all right. Having eleven mouths to feed didn’t stop them from inviting her over or sending one of the brood to her house with a hot meal. One day, they sent Ezekiel and she had been stuck with him ever since.

She smiled at the thought. He was a good kid, a voracious reader and a real keen eye. She was proud of the fact that he wanted to be a lawman like her.

She adjusted the chair so she could look over his shoulder. “Impress me.”

The table was a picture of controlled chaos. Glasses held drink that could only be whiskey. An ash collector overflowed with the ends of discarded cigarettes and cheroots. Mr. Harrington had been here a while, if the number of his expensive filters was anything to go by. Frost dealt out the cards, and as each man glanced at his hand, Jane's protégé scribbled notes on a scrap of paper.

“We really need to work on your handwriting,” she told him.
Frost turned to his left. “Your bet, Mr. Harrington.”

The tailor meticulously pushed a small stack of coins into the center of the table. “I bet 1 dollar.”

Considering it was a day’s wages for most, she wasn’t surprised by the reaction such a large sum received.

“Ah, give us a chance, would you?” Luke complained as he threw his cards down.

Stubby looked at Ezekiel, who was taking notes. “What do you say, Zeke? Any tips?”

“I’ll let you know when the hand’s over!”

“Stubby folds,” Frost announced before asking the boy, “and you?”

“I will call.”

As she watched him add his bet to the pot, Jane shook her head. “I don’t even want to know where you’ve come up with the money.”

Frost smirked and put his own in. “I’ll call as well.”

This produced more scribbling. Frost collected a card from Mr. Harrington and dealt him a new one in return.

“Our fine tailor takes one card. Zeke?”

In a voice that revealed nothing, he replied, “None.”
“None?” Frost echoed. “All right. The budding lawman takes none. Dealer takes two.”

“Another dollar,” Mr. Harrington bet.

Zeke examined him over the top of his cards. “Two pair? Or did you catch your flush. Or… nothing?”

Unreadable, the older man said, “It will take you a dollar to find out.”

“I see your bet, Mr. Harrington. And raise you two dollars.”

Frost threw his hand down in frustration. “You gentlemen are killin’ me. Killin’ me.”

“His mother’s gonna kill me,” Jane muttered.

The re-raise made Harrington pause. Whatever it was that Zeke saw in the man’s eyes at the start of this hand, Jane started to see it, too. There was a slight shift in his seat, and he folded his arms across his chest as he tried to evaluate what just happened.

“You took no cards, so either you’ve got a winning hand and or you’re bluffing.”

“It will take you two dollars to find out, sir.”

Both Luke and Stubby chuckled out loud, and Frost hid his smile behind a slight cough.

Mr. Harrington looked away. “Take it.”

Zeke giddily reached to the middle of the table to collect his winnings. He was still organizing it neatly when Frost asked, “Care to share, gentlemen?”

The older man flipped over his cards. He had a meager pair of fours. However, Zeke’s reveal
showed he had nothing better than...

“A pair of twos?!”

Stubby chortled at the tailor’s indignation. “I guess the boy’s right - the eyes don’t lie.”

Counting his money for the third time, Zeke happily exclaimed, “This will pay for that book Dr. Barnes is getting’ for me!”

“Mr. Lloyd brought in fresh beef today,” Jane informed him, cutting the celebration short. “I want you to buy some for your mother.”

“But…”

“We’ll talk about the book when it gets here. Now go, before your poor mother finds out where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing.”

He stood and patted his pockets to make sure his money was still where he put it two minutes ago. Tipping his hat, he acknowledged his fellow poker players. “Thank you, gentlemen.” He grabbed his makeshift notepad. “It’s been highly educational.” Then, turning to Jane, he smiled. “Miss.”

As the doors swung back and forth, Jane looked around the table. “At least he’s finally stopped calling me ‘ma’am’.”

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A/N: This started as an idea for a comic book almost 10 years ago. Then, when I realized how much work would be involved creating it in that format, I decided to go for a simple novel. The first 3 chapters have been sitting on my hard drive ever since! I was encouraged by my beta reader to try it as a Rizzoli & Isles AU to get the writing flowing again, so here it is. It’s quite an AU (Jane’s canon has been completely re-imagined, for instance), and I suspect I might switch it back to an original story somewhere down the road. But in the meantime, here you go.

I pride myself in the research I do for any fic that requires it. “Possum” is no exception. In fact, I’ve never done so much research as I’ve done for this story. The clothing, the money, the history,
and the events as they pertain to the U.S Territory of Wyoming in 1883 are all factually accurate. Women were allowed to be lawmen and African Americans were allowed to be horse handlers (we’re talking Wyoming after the Civil War). In this chapter, I mention Bass Reeves; he’s not a work of fiction, but a black Deputy Marshal in Oklahoma. I think we have this Hollywood idea of what the Old West was like, but often it’s completely wrong. I’ve tried to present it right. I’ve even tried to make sure the language is of its time. (So in a later chapter, when Ezekiel says he’s going to win the contest, I discovered I couldn’t use “shoo-in”, as that phrase wasn’t recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary until 1928.) With that in mind however, I’ve purposely avoided the stereotypical “western” dialect. Yes, there will be some ‘g’s dropped, but no one is going to sound like Festus from “Gunsmoke”. (eg. Shouldn't 'mount t'much; fifty cents'll do... Soakin’ in the crik a few hours'll swell them spokes back tight as pin feathers on a prairie chicken's rump.) Sorry, just can’t do it. In terms of historical accuracy, if you see a blatant error, please do let me know.
Such was the pace of Beybeck that the day’s big excitement was a new hat and a card game. Life was so slow that her dog’s idea of a greeting was a half-hearted raise of his head from his sprawl across the front porch.

“Patches, you lazy hound,” she said, bending to scratch his ear. As much as she would have preferred a different name, it was given, along with the dog, by Ezekiel’s younger sister, Catherine. “Don’t go bothering Nóhoo, now,” she told him, though this was just part of their daily routine. Beyond the lazy greeting, he never moved, exhausted from whatever adventures he happened to get into while Jane was in town. When she walked into the cabin, she left the door open for him, knowing he would come in on his own time.

She wasn’t embarrassed to admit she found comfort in the quiet routine. She was never one to yearn for the big town excitement of Cheyenne or Fort Laramie, having only gone into the latter to pick up her horse, and the former less than a dozen times. Good friends, good books and a good dog - she worried she’d be pushing to ask for anything more. The new hat took the place of honor on the peg behind the door, her old hat now relegated to the chair in the corner. She gave her overcoat a quick brush with her hand before it found a spot on the hat’s matching peg.

The heat made her debate whether or not to get the stove going, but she knew she had to do something with the beef she’d picked up before it went off. So, reluctantly, she started a small fire in the cast iron stove. One portion went into the iron skillet, and because it wasn't quite the season to have an icebox, the other portion got a generous amount of salt and a tight wrap in a clean cloth moistened with vinegar. She was pleased with her handiwork, knowing the package would keep the meat fresh for a couple of days.

When the beef was almost done, she took out some boiled potatoes from yesterday and fried them in the same pan. The smell attracted the attention of her ne’er do well hound, who huffed his approval from the porch. She grinned while dishing everything onto a plate, then slid onto the bench by the table her father had made.

“You know I’ll be out later with a whiskey, you mutt.”
He huffed again, then returned his attention to the open land. The beef melted on her tongue and she sighed in contentment. A perfect way to end the day, she thought. Seemed a bit greedy to ask for more. Don’t tempt the fates is what I always say.

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Noise had a tendency to get around in a two room house, but the pounding on the door was enough to make the glass in the small front window shake. Jane rolled over and squinted. She tried to gauge the time by the amount of light coming in, but her eyes couldn’t quite get things sorted, and her attention was taken by the noise. She pushed the quilt off and staggered to the door while trying not to trip on a disinterested dog. “All right, all right!” she shouted.

When she opened the door she was startled to see her young sidekick. “Where’s the damn fire, Zeke?” He didn’t answer, and it took her a moment to realize his eyes weren’t aiming in the direction of her face. “Eyes up, young man.”

“Sorry,” he stammered. “I just never seen you in your dressin’ gown before.”

Being rustled abruptly out of bed curbed her patience. “For cryin’ out loud, Zeke. The urgency?”

“Huh?”

“The reason you’re knocking down my door at this ungodly hour.”

The confusion didn’t leave his face. “Ungodly? It’s on past eight, Miss.”

She was never inclined to be up to greet the sun. Avoiding his unintended accusation, she nodded, “Carry on.”

“It’s Mr. Frost, Sheriff.”

Jane’s heart stopped. “Is he all right?”
“Yeah,” Zeke assured her, innocently unaware. “I mean, it’s Mr. Frost who found Father Hess.”

“Zeke…”

He must’ve finally recognized her impatience because he quickly added, “At his house. Father Hess’ house. He’s been murdered.”

Jane heard the words but it took her brain time to catch up. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected when she told him to get to the point, but it certainly wasn’t this. “He’s been what?”

“Murdered,” he repeated. “Mr. Frost wouldn’t let me see. Just said to come fetch you. Said you’d have to see for yourself.”

She stood in the doorway for so long that even Patches lifted his head with curiosity.

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Part of her silently cursed herself for thinking about the fates.

As the minister, Father Robert Hess was given a house meant to reflect his position, which was a sight better than the two room log cabin she had. She thought the porch she’d added on after her father died was decadent, but Father Hess’ house showed no such restraint, with its columned porch and multi-paned windows. And four rooms! she thought. For a second, she wondered if she’d chosen the wrong profession. Looking down at the bloody mess on the bed helped her change her mind.

“Where’s your sidekick?”

Frost’s voice brought her out of her reverie, and she blinked. She stood shoulder to shoulder at the end of the bed with Barry, who was looking anywhere but at the body. “I sent him to fetch Dr. Barnes.”

With a forearm over his mouth, Frost muttered, “I think this man would be better served by an undertaker than a doctor.”
“Good thing he’s both,” she retorted. Realizing the sharpness in her voice, she sighed, “I’d like to get another pair of eyes to look at this. Someone who might be able to make better sense of it than I can.” She glanced away from the bed, but there didn’t seem to be a place to rest her eyes that didn’t have blood or brain matter on it. Smirking at Frost, she asked, “Upset tummy?”

He ignored the question. “You gonna let Zeke see this?”

It didn’t surprise her that he would get right to it. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “On one hand, he’s still a boy. Does he need to see something like this so soon?”

He nodded. “On the other hand, he’d think you didn’t respect his desire to be a lawman if you shut him out.”

She mirrored his nod. “Exactly.”

They were quiet for a moment until he ventured a sidelong look at the direction of the bed. “Who could’ve done somethin’ like this?”

“What makes you think it wasn’t Father Hess?” She tilted her head towards the pistol on the floor.

This didn’t seem to occur to him, because he gave a little snort of disbelief and tipped his hat back. “I can't believe that, Jane. He was a man of God. Suicide? Really? And why?”

“If you're right, that only gets us back to the beginning - who could have done this? You were the first one here,” she reminded him.

His eyes snapped up. “That’s not even funny, Jane.”

Shrugging, she said, “I’m just saying. First to arrive is the first suspect.”

“Knock it off.”
She reined in her accusations when she saw how genuinely riled up it made him. All kidding aside, she knew he couldn’t have been responsible. Even if she ignored everything she knew about the man, the lack of blood on his clothes and hands would clear him. She was puzzled by one thing. “How did you end up being the first one here?”

“I was in church this mornin’ and bumped into Mrs. Murphy,” he began. “She was all in a tizzy because Father Hess was nowhere to be found. I told her I’d ride out here and see if he was all right. I thought he might be doin’ poorly. I didn’t expect… this.”

“But it was Zeke who came for me.”

“I ran the holy hell out of Sally to get to the Blacks. They probably thought I’d seen a ghost. I told Zeke to fetch you and then I came back to make sure no one else stumbled on things.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Nothin’,” he answered. “I didn’t really understand what I saw myself.”

“Do you remember if was anything out of place either the first time you were here or when you came back?”

“I wasn’t really lookin’ the first time,” he confessed. “Never had reason to. Can’t imagine I’d miss anything if there was something to see, though.”

She nodded. Father Hess’ house was almost literally dropped in the middle of nothing. It was a fifteen minute canter into town and at least ten minutes to the nearest neighbour, in this case, the Blacks. She suddenly sympathized with Sally, Frost’s gorgeous black mare who most likely made that run in half the time.

She let his retelling digest for a bit. “Well now, I’ve been surprised twice in as many days.”

Frowning, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“First, a new hat, and now finding out you went to church.”
He saw her slight smile and shrugged. “A man shouldn’t ignore the importance of getting in good with the Man upstairs.”

Her smile faded when she looked down at the bed. “Didn’t seem to help Father Hess much, did it?”

“Sweet Jesus!” They both turned and saw Ezekiel standing in the doorway, crossing himself, his sketch pad dropped to his side.

“Not sure if that’s the right thing to say, given the circumstance,” Frost remarked.

Jane pushed her hat back and wiped her brow with a forearm. “So much for me having to decide whether or not he should see this.”

A new face rested a doctor’s bag on a nearby dresser and started rolling up her sleeves. Jane recognized her instantly: Maura Isles. A resident of Beybeck for less than 6 months, she was brought in by Dr. Barnes to train as his replacement. Jane wasn’t sure how she felt about that, but she seemed capable enough, and to Jane, that was all that mattered. “My uncle was an undertaker. I saw my first dead body before I was sixteen,” she said cheerfully.

Jane tilted her head. “Did you look as green as ol’ Frost here?”

He narrowed his eyes, but turned his attention to the woman. "Dr. Isles," he said, tipping his hat.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Frost," she replied.

Jane turned to the blond boy with some sympathy. “Zeke?”

“I’m okay,” he answered, before gulping and starting again. He lifted his book and flipped to a new page. “I’m okay. I just… I just never seen so much blood.”

Maura patted him on the arm. “Just think of it like your father slaughtering a pig and you’ll be
“You’re all heart, Doc.” Jane watched for a moment as the doctor took in their surroundings. “What do you think?”

With a practiced ease, Maura did a routine check to see if Father Hess had been alive the entire time his audience had been standing at his feet. Based on what remained of the minister’s head, they weren’t surprised when she declared, “He’s dead.” Wiping her hands on a towel, she continued, “But how that might have come about, I can’t say.”

Jane raised her eyebrows. “Seems fairly obvious, doesn’t it?”

“Because there’s a gun and a hole in his head?” Maura asked, nearly putting her finger into the wound. “That only tells me that at some point, a bullet pierced his skull. Whether or not he was the one who put it there, or if it was the cause of death needs to be determined.”

“But there’s nothing disturbed in the room,” Zeke piped up. “If someone had come in and done this, wouldn’t there be things knocked over and such?”

Jane nodded. “Good thinking, Zeke.”

The doctor just shrugged. “My job isn’t to speculate, that’s yours. And I don’t assume. I won’t know more until I clean him up and get a good look at him.”

Frost volunteered to give her a hand, and Zeke quickly jumped in with a bit of chivalry to take her place. On the count of three, they lifted the body and shuffled out the door. Dr. Isles collected her things, and Jane picked up Zeke’s sketch book and the pair followed them outside.

They strapped the body into the wagon, and Frost checked to make sure the ropes were tight. Zeke jumped out, smacked the dust off his pants, and acknowledged Jane’s approach with a nod.

Quietly, so the others couldn’t hear, she asked, “You sure you’re all right?”

“I think so,” he said after a slight hesitation. “I mean, Miss Isles is right. I see worse than this on
slaughter day. It's just..."

“Different.”

“Yeah.”

Handing him his book, she noted, “Your sketches are really coming on, Zeke.” Despite the gruesomeness of the scene, his drawing was clean and clinical in its depiction.

“Thank you, Miss. If you don’t mind, I just have a few more things I want to get down on paper, if that’s all right.”

“Go on,” she told him, and turned just in time to catch Dr. Isles climbing onto the wagon seat. A few strides took her to the side of the grey mare and Jane gave her a long stroke down her flank. “I'll be right behind you.”

“I’ll tell Dr. Barnes,” Maura answered and the horse was set on her way.

As Jane watched the wagon roll off, she felt Frost arrive at her side. After a moment, he asked, “What do we tell people?”

Shrugging, she suggested, “The truth always works. Trying to hide it will only cause panic. Besides, the story will be out before the end of the day. Beybeck's too small to hope people don't find things out.” She rolled her shoulders and sighed. “So, this is one hell of a day, isn't it?”

“Mmmmm,” he agreed. He dusted off his hat and said, “I think I'm going home. To a hot bath.” He looked down at himself. “I don't feel right, Jane.”

She knew he's wasn't talking about his health. It didn’t take much to understand that seeing something like the mess in the house changed people, even if was only a bit. “I know,” was all she said.

They shared a comfortable silence in the sun’s warmth as it inched upwards in the sky. When he finally spoke, it was an invitation. “Stop by later for a whiskey. Or maybe sooner, before I'm likely
to drink the bottle myself. God knows I could use something to forget today.”

“I'll bring you a bottle,” she offered. “To say thanks. You bein' here made it a hell of a lot easier for me.”

He nodded in understanding. “Imagine if it had been Mrs. Murphy.”

“That's what I mean!”

He grinned. “I'll see you later, Jane.”

“Take care, Frost.”

She watched long enough to see him gently heel Sally along before she returned her attention to the house. She'd almost forgotten Zeke until she saw him sitting on the step with his pencil and book.

“Let's see what else you've done.” He handed her the book and she was surprised at the second rendering - a rough yet very recognizable profile of Dr. Isles. Even in simple grey lead, he'd been able to capture the light in her eyes. “That… that's really nice,” she said out loud before she could catch herself. She quickly cleared her throat. “Anything else?”

If he heard her stammer, he didn't show it. “Didn't seem so, no. And I gave the rest of the house a look over. Now, I might've missed somethin', but it looked just like the bedroom. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing seemed to be out of place or missin'. I can see where Mr. Frost might be right - it looks like Father Hess killed himself.” He shook his head. “But I gotta agree with Dr. Isles, too. Until we have more evidence, who knows? And if someone else killed him, then why?”

Jane looked off into the distance, the town a blip on the horizon. “Maybe Doc will be able to help us out.”

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“I'm a doctor of the body, not of the mind, Possum,” he said.
Only one man called her 'Possum', the nickname given by her father after her tendency to feign sickness to get out of doing her chores. To her annoyance, it was a name Phineas Barnes tossed around regardless of the company. Glancing quickly at Maura, Jane was relieved to find the woman hadn’t seemed to notice. Barnes chuckled and, even though she knew he was trying to get a rise out of her, Jane glared at him anyway.

“So what can you tell me, doctor of the body?”

“I can tell you to scoot,” he replied as he moved quickly around the corpse. “Anything I do has to be done before the flies get here.”

“Lovely.”

He ignored her comment and continued. “We've cleaned him up as best we can with the tools at hand.” He waved to his surroundings, which was just a makeshift work room in the corner of his barn. Father Hess was laid out on a sturdy oak table, and Maura was organizing a small assortment of tools on a smaller table off to the side. Wiping his brow with the back of his forearm, he said, “I can confirm what you deem to be obvious - death by pistol. However, considering the trajectory, there’s a question of whether or not it was self-inflicted.”

This caught her off-guard. “What?”

Maura stepped forward with an eagerness that brought an unexpected smile to her face. Before she even realized what happened, the doctor had gently guided her to a low bench, while Phineas chuckled quietly in the background.

“Lie down here.”

It was more of a statement than a request, considering Maura already had her prone by the time she said it. “That’s a new hat,” was all Jane could say as she handed it over. She was inexplicably pleased to see the doctor treat it with care as she placed it on a nearby peg.

“Now,” Maura began, “there are several things worth noting, even though you’re not quite at the height we found Father Hess.” She reached back for something from the woodworking wall. “Don’t be alarmed,” she said, while pointing a 6 inch piece of iron at Jane’s head. “This is a gimlet used to drill holes in wood. Though I suppose the human skull would be drillable.”
“Let’s keep that as a thought,” she replied dryly, eyeing the instrument.

Maura smiled. “What I want to show you is the bullet’s trajectory. First, based on the bullet hole I found in the bed, Father Hess was shot while lying down. Like this.” She gently placed the end of the gimlet against Jane’s forehead. “Now, imagine this is a gun. Do you think you could shoot yourself at that angle?”

She brought her hands up and pretended to hold a gun, but after several attempts, it was clear she couldn’t replicate the angle without causing unwanted pain. The only way to mimic the act was by using her thumb to push the trigger.

The doctor must have read her mind, because she shook her head. “The gun was found in the floor, on the right side of the bed. I would consider the probability of that happening at less than 1%.”

“She knows her numbers,” Phineas piped up.

"And he was left-handed," Jane added. "I remember being surprised to find out I wasn't the only one."

This information made Maura tilt her head with curiosity. "Your parents didn't try to correct it when you were young?" she asked.

Jane snuck a glance at Phineas who was busy undressing the body. "Pop must’ve figured there were more important things to worry about." She wondered if her use of ‘Pop’ instead of ‘they’ would be noted. The slight flush that crept up the woman’s neck answered her question, and Jane suddenly felt sorry for the edge in her response.

"Oh, I..." The curiosity was evident, but Maura didn't ask for more. In fact, she went in an entirely different direction. "'Pop' first made its appearance in American English in 1838. It’s derived from the French word 'Papa'." The flush only grew. "I'm sorry. I don't... What I mean is..."

"She's not very good with people," Phineas finished bluntly. "Not the live ones, anyway."

"Yes, that's what I meant," Maura said with a measure of gratitude in her voice.
The awkward confession made Jane smile. With an urge to put Maura at ease, she asked, "You were talking about... trajectory? Is there more?"

The woman nodded enthusiastically, clearly relieved to move on to more comfortable subjects. "Oh, yes." In her element once more, she smiled. "While it's hard to determine how close the killer was, we can get an idea of their height. Imagine this gimlet being 2 or 3 feet long." She pressed it gently against Jane's forehead again. "Do you see the difficulty the farther away I get?"

Her demonstration made it easy; the farther away her hand, the taller she would have to be to keep the trajectory. "The angle can't make him more than 6 feet I'd say, give or take."

Maura nodded her approval and Jane grinned. "Somewhere between 5'8" and 6. And don't discount the fact it could be a woman."

Though the idea surprised her, Jane knew at any given moment, anyone could be compelled to pull a trigger, and she filed away the reminder. Looking up into lively hazel eyes, she asked, "Anything else you want to show me while you have me on my back?" Phineas' snicker highlighted how the question might be taken, but it seemed to go unnoticed by the woman who was staring back with unspoken questions Jane suddenly wished she would ask. Just when she was certain the comment had gone past the doctor, the whisper of a smile made her think otherwise.

"That's all. For now."

Maura extended a hand to help her up, but she politely declined. Needlessly brushing the front of her pants and adjusting her boots, Jane shook her head with a rueful laugh and wondered what had come over her. In her defense, there had been little reason to spend time in the new doctor's company, and she wondered if it was just the newness of being able to have a conversation with another woman. She continued to roll this over in her mind despite the soft hand on her back tempting her towards other thoughts. When the hand lingered as Jane retrieved her hat, she couldn't help the flush that now found its way to her cheeks. She pulled the hat lower than necessary, but the attempt to cover her reaction was all for naught, if Phineas' amused bark was anything to go by.

"That was all very informative," Jane said, refusing to back down from the man's sly look. "And I'll keep that information in mind, but truth be told, I'm not sure where to go from here. I suppose I need to find out who was at the Father's house last."

"Ask Ruth," Phineas offered. "That old bat could tell you who used the outhouse last."
Jane laughed, both at his curt, yet accurate assessment, and at Maura's open-mouth astonishment. "I'll definitely have a talk with her. Suppose I should talk to a few people."

"Well, we all know where they are right now."

She nodded, and for Maura's benefit said, "The saloon. Okay." She placed her hands on her hips and sighed. When her head dropped in thought, she realized Maura's hand was still at her waist. The doctor must have noticed it, too, because it quickly fell to her side, and she took a step back.

"I should... what I mean to say is... glad I could help." She immediately turned and went back to the body, picking up the first thing at hand, which happened to be the gimlet. As soon as she attempted to use it, she realized her error, and it bounced to the floor in her haste to put it down before anyone noticed.

Naturally, it didn't get past Phineas. "Is that some fancy new medical trick they're teaching in Boston these days?" he asked facetiously.

Though she found humour in the situation, she felt Maura's embarrassment from across the room. "Be nice," she whispered to him. Louder, she said, "I really do appreciate your time, Dr. Isles. If you find anything else you think would help, I'm always around."

The compliment and invitation seemed to put the doctor at ease, because she smiled and said, "Thank you, Sheriff. And please, call me 'Maura'."

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Her first instinct was to head back to Father Hess' house. The 'how' of his death had been answered; it was the 'who' that needed work. But what she wanted to do and what she needed to do were two different things, and she knew word had already spread. Not much happened in the sleepy town, so when something finally did, it gave people something to talk about. Jane knew as Sheriff, she needed to make an appearance, if only to nip the more extreme gossip in the bud.

With a practiced ease, Jane slipped her foot into the stirrup and swung onto her horse. They loped into town, stopping first at Cooper's Supply, if for no other reason than it was the first building to greet a rider coming in from the east. She tied the horse to a post and took the two steps into the
store. Sure enough, a gaggle of men were huddled around the counter.

“Like old women,” she said.

Daniel Lloyd turned and immediately removed his hat. “Miss Jane.”

“Hello, Mr. Lloyd,” she said in return. “What's got you men all riled up?”

“Father Hess, o'course,” the shopkeeper answered. “We heard what happened to him this morning.”

“And what might that be exactly?”

“Well, that he's dead for one thing,” Joseph Murphy offered, eyes wide. “Is it true?”

She sighed, knowing she could give them nothing but the truth. “I'm sorry to say it is, Joseph.” The men turned to their gossip huddle again, their voices low and incredulous. Before it could escalate, she spoke up again. “Gentlemen?” She waited until she had their attention. “Gentlemen, I know this is a bit of a shock, but I don't want talk to get out of hand.” No one spoke, so she continued, “I'm hoping I can count on you to help me keep things orderly.”

Matthew frowned. “What do you mean by that, Sheriff?”

She tipped her hat back. “I'm just saying you know how things are when something upsets the ladies' knitting circle.” Joseph nodded and smiled. “People are gonna talk and not a lot of it will be the truth, not because people want to lie, but because they don't know the whole story and it's better to make up what they don't know than leave things hanging.”

“So what is the whole story, Miss Jane?” Daniel asked.

“You know something, Daniel, I don't really know,” she confessed. “But here's what I do know-Phineas has determined that someone may have killed Father Hess.”
The collective response was a gasp of disbelief. “What?” Joseph took off his hat and all three men crossed themselves.

“I don’t believe it,” Matthew said, though his voice was less than convincing.

“Would you rather believe he killed himself?” she asked.

The men pondered this as an alternative and none seemed to like it.


Jane shrugged helplessly. “I’m gonna do my best to find out. But in the meantime, I need you to try and keep everyone on the same page. If anyone asks, tell them what I’ve told you, but let’s try and keep the rest of the speculation sensible.”

“There’s going to be an awful lot of it, Jane,” he informed her.

“I know,” she sighed, “but let’s not add to it, okay?”

The men nodded. “What about the festival?” Matthew asked.

“What about it?” Jane asked in return.

“You don’t think this is goin’ to put a damper on things?”

She scratched behind her neck and shrugged. “I don’t think it will make things better to cancel. People’ve been looking forward to it all summer.” The men silently agreed. “And it won’t bring back Father Hess. We’ll do the best we can and deal with things as they come. It’s all we can do. Gentlemen?” She waited for a silent confirmation from the men before walking out the door and back into the sun.

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A/N: I mentioned that I might use these notes to give a bit more info on some of the historical references, so I'll start here. Not much in this chapter to mention except:

-Jane’s horse’s name is Nóhoo, which is an Arapaho word; the meaning will be revealed later. (The Arapaho were a Native American tribe that lived on the plains of Wyoming.)
Her usual routine had her heading to the saloon after a stop at the general store, but the clock above the post office said it was too damn early for a whiskey and she didn't want to face a barrage of questions the minute the doors swung open. Besides, she knew Joseph would take it upon himself to be the town cryer, and whoever didn't hear it from him, would hear it from his wife by the end of the afternoon. No, today - this weird, unexpected day - she changed direction and headed back to Father Hess' house.

“C'mon, Nóhoo,” she commanded the horse and after a lazy shake of his head they started off down Main Street with the sun at their back.

Under any other circumstance, it would have been a nice day for a ride. The sun had yet to hit its peak, and there was just enough wind to keep the sweat at bay. It didn't take the pair long to reach the trail just outside of town, where the path got narrower as it veered away from the main road. The horse cantered at an easy pace, and Jane didn't bother rushing him despite seeing the Father's house just over the hill.

There's no real reason to be in a hurry, what with him already being dead. She snickered quietly at her own black humour. She wasn't one to take death lightly, having had her own fair share of experience with it, but she also knew often the only way to deal with it was to use humour as a buffer. Dr. Isles alluded to it best: out here, they'd all seen it, some more than once. When the initial shock was over, you realized death was just part of life, and you knew you accepted that risk when you made the decision to head west.

She was lost in her thoughts of blonde hair and hazel eyes when her horse suddenly started backpedaling. “Nóhoo!” she barked, pulling the reigns back with a sharp jerk. A soft hand on his neck calmed him down enough for her to dismount and take a look at him. “What's going on?”

"Field mice are very common in this area," a voice said.

Jane spun, gun drawn and cocked. "Jesus!" she exclaimed.
"Perhaps not the most appropriate greeting, considering the situation," she grinned.

"Dr. Isles, you scared the tar out of me." She carefully released the hammer on the pistol and slid it back into its holster.

"I believe I asked you to call me 'Maura'." This got a breathless chuckle as a response. "You have an incredibly quick draw," she remarked.

"You're lucky my instinct to not shoot is just as quick." Glancing around, she asked, "What in the world are you doing here?"

Maura noticed the searching gaze because she explained with a sheepish smile, "My horse is grazing in the barn. I didn't think there would be any harm giving her some hay," she shyly added then suddenly became alarmed. "You won't arrest me, will you?"

She couldn't help but laugh. The doctor was so genuine, Jane was certain she had never met anyone quite like her. "No, I'm not going to arrest you- this time." She pretended to sound serious, but added a wink to reveal the joke. They looked at each other longer than necessary until Jane turned to her horse. "Did a little mouse scare you, boy?" she asked, using the gentle creature as a distraction. He shook his head and looked away, as if wounded to be embarrassed in front of the doctor.

Maura saw it, too, because she came over and asked, "May I?" When Jane nodded, she stepped right up to the four-legged companion. Her white hand looked even paler against his black coat. "You're very handsome, aren't you?"

He bobbed his head up and down and Jane rolled her eyes. "Don't play coy, Nóhoo." To the doctor, she said, "You never said what you were doing out here."

Much to the horse's dismay, Maura's focus returned to Jane, who would have sworn the animal gave her the stink eye. The thought made her grin inwardly. She couldn't blame him; in the little time she had spent in the doctor’s company, she was already drawn to her, like the magnets Miss Collins once showed her in school. She couldn’t imagine anyone who wouldn't want to be the center of her attention, man or animal.

"I wanted to put Paul-Jean Coulier’s discovery of fingerprints to the test."
"Ah," she replied. "I've heard of this. He did something with iodine, didn't he?"

Her knowledge seemed to take Maura by surprise. "Yes, iodine fuming."

Jane tried in vain to not take offense. "Henry Faulds’, the first person to get a fingerprint from something other than paper. A greasy finger on a bottle, if I remember right. But maybe I read it wrong."

"I didn't mean anything by... I'm so sorry."

Maura turned to leave, but stopped when Jane took her elbow. Stepping in front of her, she rolled back on her heels and pretended not to notice the soft linen under her fingers. "No, I'm sorry. I'm just being a horse's ass." The horse made a sound that was almost a snort and Jane glared at him. "All right," she told him, "We're only gonna be a few minutes." They walked the last dozen yards to the house, her hand still at Maura’s elbow. Turning at the porch, she looked over her shoulder to give the horse one final glare. He nonchalantly shook his head.

“He’s very well behaved,” Maura marveled. “You’re not afraid he’ll bolt?”

“Never has.” She held the door open and let Maura in first.

Nothing greeted them but silence, though Jane was more than happy for it. Having one scare was enough. The door lead right into the living room which was small and square, with two chairs, an oak table, and a wood stove. The kitchen stood off to the right, adding nothing but a basin and a food closet. Someone from the church sewing circle was likely responsible for the pretty curtains on the single glass window that let light into the room. Everything seemed to be in order, but she waited for an affirmative nod from Maura before turning towards the bedroom.

The four room house was really three and a half, considering the fourth room was barely larger than an outhouse. Squeezed between the living room and the bedroom, Jane took it to be a makeshift study area, with its tiny table and collection of books and papers. She wasn't surprised that the most prominent book on the table was the Bible. “The Book of Job,” she whispered, naming the section that was open. The book was much older than the one in her house and she couldn't resist taking a moment to touch the soft rice paper before deciding to go into the bedroom. She took a deep breath and stepped inside. The first thing to hit her was the smell, but the doctor, already examining the door handle, appeared unaffected.
"Was this door open when you arrived?" Maura asked.

Jane only paused for a second. "Yes." She watched her closely, drawn in by the woman’s curiosity. "You didn't ask about the front door."

Maura tilted her head at Jane. "Was it open?"

"No. But you didn't ask. You assumed."

She might as well have slapped the doctor. "I did no such thing! I extrapolated the odds of-"

Jane held out her hands as she would with a startled horse. "Whoa, whoa," she said softly. "I was just pulling your leg. You know, earlier you said you didn't assume, so I... You were right - the door wasn't open."

Maura pressed her lips together, and Jane watched the corners of her eyes crinkle. "Sorry. I'm just..."

"Very serious about your work," Jane finished for her, reflecting the smile with her own. "I get it. And because the door wasn't open, you knew not to bother looking for fingerprints. We've all touched the door handle."

"Even the simple act of you touching it to let us in just now would have lessened the chances considerably," Maura added.

Jane glanced around, though she would have been the first to admit she wasn't sure what to look for. With the body gone, the shock was too, and now she could look at the bloody mess without any revulsion. Both the bedsheets and the wall behind the headboard were brown with dried blood, but when she looked away, it was easy to forget what happened here.

"Seems like everything is in its place," she said, more to herself than to Maura. When the doctor looked up from the door knob, Jane shrugged. "Not that I've ever been in the Father's bedroom to know one way or the other. I wonder if anyone has?"
Maura pondered the rhetorical question. "I admit I don't know much about fathers, religious or otherwise."

Jane hummed and continued examining the room. The only thing that seemed worth her time was the large bookcase in the corner, but she made sure to check under the bed as well as the small night table.

"He definitely liked his Chicken Feed," she said, tilting a small brown paper bag towards Maura, revealing the tri-coloured candy inside.

"So much corn syrup," Maura tsked.

Jane grinned. Nothing on the book case appeared to be out of the ordinary. Another Bible, various books on theology, and a crucifix. But it was the wooden box that caught her attention. It was a box of simple design, but what puzzled her was the brass lock.

"What could a man of God be worried someone would take?"

Maura reached into her bag and pulled out a coin envelope. "Perhaps it was what they would find over what they would take."

Jane grunted, the box temporarily forgotten. "I thought you were going to do something with iodine."

Maura shook her head. "I can’t do that here; it needs to be done in a contained area. But in the meantime…” Delicately, Maura tapped the envelope's mysterious contents into the palm of her hand. "Cocoa," she said, as if that explained everything. Then, leaning in closer to the door knob, she blew the fine powder until it covered the entirety of the crystal handle. Little puffs of air gently feathered the excess away until she was satisfied with the result. Rocking back on her heels, she beamed. “Look.”

Curious, Jane stepped forward, careful to avoid the hem of Maura’s dress. She bent at the waist until she felt blonde waves brush against her cheek, and she caught herself inhaling a soft floral scent. Daringly, she spoke against the doctor’s ear. “What am I looking at?"

To her surprise, Maura didn’t pull back. If anything, she drew them closer by turning her head to
“Oils in our skin are left behind on everything we touch,” Maura said, unaware or uncaring of their proximity. Jane’s eyes flicked down to her lips. “Iodine will pick up the smaller prints, but the cocoa is the perfect density for uncovering the oil in the larger ones. See?”

Reluctantly looking away, her eyes followed Maura’s finger. Sure enough, there was a clear print on the handle’s bevelled edge. Attraction set aside for the moment, she smiled. “That’s incredible!” She leaned in even closer, examining the ridges. “Where did you learn how to do that?”

The blush was so fierce that Jane could almost feel it against her cheek. “Well, I… I’d read so much about it… fingerprints, I mean. And I found it fascinating.” She was warming up to the subject, and her unbridled joy was infectious. “I began to wonder if there was a way to take Paul-Jean Coulier’s experiment outside of a controlled environment.”

Her eyes returned to Maura’s. “So you came up with an alternate to iodine.”

“Yes! It took weeks of testing different powders, but I finally decided on cocoa as the most viable option.” The hazel eyes danced in delight at the memory and Jane grinned. A small line formed between Maura’s brows. “You’re laughing at me.”

“What? No!” she denied vehemently. “I’ve just never seen anyone so excited about cocoa. I can picture you pressing your thumb on something, then blowing powder on it, over and over until you hit the right one.”

The remark appeased Maura. “I suppose it was rather funny,” she admitted with a chuckle. “And quite a mess!”

They started at each other longer than necessary after their laughter had died away. Their breaths intermingled, and Jane wondered if ‘hazel’ was an adequate descriptor for the gold and brass that looked back at her. She didn’t realize she had been leaning forward until the brim of her hat bumped into Maura’s forehead.

“Oh-!”

“Sorry,” Jane quickly apologized. Looking back at the door knob, she coughed lightly. “So what do you do now? I mean, there’s the print, but what’s next?”
Collecting herself, Maura, too, cleared her throat before speaking. “I brought a box specifically made to carry the handle back to Dr. Barnes. Do you have a pocket knife?”

Jane frowned, but slowly reached into her pocket. “What are you doing?”

Maura took the offered knife, fingertips grazing and lingering. When she looked down, her eyes lit up once more. “Is this a Russell Barlow knife?”

Jane wondered if the doctor would ever cease to surprise her. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“The signature ‘R’ with the arrow through it,” Maura said. “The bone handle is gorgeous. Where did you get it?”

“Phineas gave it to me the day I became sheriff,” she answered.

“You two are very close,” Maura remarked softly.

She nodded. “Yeah, he’s like a father to me.” The words were out before Jane realized she spoke them. Bringing the conversation back to the matter at hand, she tilted her head towards the door. “I’m guessing you want to bring the whole thing back to the barn?”

“Yes.”

She sat back and watched Maura carefully begin to remove the screw. Her hands were small but steady and seemed accustomed to delicate yet purposeful tasks. They were both quiet; nothing could be heard but the faint scrape of the metal untwisting. She was so mesmerized by the movements that she nearly jumped when Maura spoke.

“I left the box on the porch. Could you get it for me?”

Jane nodded, and with a stretch, she walked the short distance to the front door and immediately found the box. The return trip was made just as quickly, but by the time she stepped into the bedroom, the doctor was already holding up the handle triumphantly.
“I got it.”

Jane held out the box. “So did I.” They both smiled.

“Tub to fabricate something out of foam,” Maura said, gently placing the handle and plate into the box. “I hope it holds everything in place.”

Jane bent her head to look into the box. “You came up with the idea. I don’t know why it wouldn’t work.”

“You flatter me,” Maura said.

“It’s not flattery if it’s the truth,” Jane replied. “Of course, I’ve only known you for about a day, so the odds have been in your favour.”

“I’m sure I will give you plenty of reason to change your mind.”

There was a vein of sadness that ran through her comment. Jane was having none of it. “I find that hard to believe, and since I haven’t seen it, I’ll keep not believing it.”

“That’s horrible syntax,” Maura chastised, though the upturn of her mouth softened the words.

“Yeah, well just don’t tell my old school teacher.” Jane reached for the locked box on the bookcase and tucked it under her arm. “I figure I don’t have much else to do today; might as well go through this and see if I find anything that could help. Are you finished here?”

Maura brushed out the few wrinkles from her linen dress. “I think so. This was my reason,” she held up the box.

Jane held out a hand towards the door and the women walked out into the late afternoon. “Look at those two.” She jerked her head towards the two horses who were nuzzling against each other.
Maura smiled at the sight. “No wonder he didn’t bolt.”

Feigning indignation, she stopped on the spot. “Are you implying my horse is led by his hormones?”

“Yes!” Maura laughed.

“Hmph. C’mon, Nóhoo, before these ladies get us into trouble.”

“Are you saying you’re also led by your hormones?” They were both startled at the banter, and Maura quickly stammered, "You... you named your horse the Arapaho word for 'Stallion'."

"Yeah," she replied, covering her blush. "But no one around here knows what it means, so I'm hoping it sounds majestic or something. Right, Nóhoo?" The horse barely turned his attention away from his new friend. "Traitor."

Smiling, Maura approached her horse with a soft clicking of her tongue and a gentle hand. "Have you made a new friend? Seems to be the day for it." She glanced at Jane then back to her horse. Tightly fastening the box to the back of the saddle, she pulled herself up and over in a single smooth motion.

"You've been riding for a while," Jane remarked.

“Since I was a child, yes,” she said “Where are you off to now?”

Jane settled into her own saddle with the wooden box between her thighs. “Back home. Might make an appearance at the saloon to catch the latest gossip, but... “ she looked back at the house. With a heavy sigh, she said, “It’s been a long day.”

Maura nodded. “It has been filled with more than I expected. If I find anything about the fingerprint, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

She didn’t want the moment to end just yet, but she didn’t know how to extend it, so with a slight smile, she tugged the reins and gently heeled Nóhoo.
He didn’t move.

She repeated her actions a little more firmly. Still, nothing. He stamped into the dry ground and shook his head, his snort eliciting a muffled laugh from Maura. Jane narrowed her eyes.

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m sorry.” Her tone said otherwise. When the horse nuzzled against hers, Maura cooed, “Do you want to come home with us, Nóhoo? I bet Yeino has some hay she’d love to share with you.”

“Sorry, what? ‘Yeino’?”

Maura ignored the question and instead, brought the two horses side by side. “Would you like that?”

But Jane wasn’t letting her off the hook that easily. “‘Yeino’?”

Sighing, Maura rolled her eyes. “I thought it meant ‘smoke on the wind’.”

Jane nodded. “Sounds like the perfect name for a grey horse. Too bad it means ‘tomato’.”

“No,” Maura said, “I know that now, thank you.”

She tried not to smile at the doctor’s indignation. “But you knew what ‘Nóhoo’ meant.”

“Because I was determined to learn the language after I discovered what the cattleman had named my horse.” She stroked the animal’s flank. “By the time I figured it out, I didn’t have the heart to change it. Isn’t that right, girl?”

Jane softened at the sight. “Well, looks like Stallion and Tomato have made up their minds. I mean, if it’s okay with you.”
Maura smiled. “I’d love it.”

“Great. The Blacks are on the way to your place. Can we make a quick stop?”

Maura nodded and gently steered her horse to the left. Only when he realized Jane was doing the same did the horse start off on a canter. Rolling her eyes, Jane bent forward and whispered in Nóhoo’s ear. “Chasing women is only going to get us into trouble, boy.” He snorted, but wasted no time catching up with the pair.

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A/N for all manner of things mentioned in this chapter:

- Paul-Jean Coulier discovered the ability to identify fingerprints on paper through iodine fuming in 1863.

- In 1880, Dr. Henry Faulds furthered the idea of using fingerprints to identify people. He’s also credited with identifying a greasy fingerprint left on a bottle of alcohol.

- “Chicken Feed” was one of the original names for candy corn that came into being in the 1880s. The recipe hasn’t changed much, containing pretty much the same amount of corn syrup today that Maura wrinkled her nose at in 1883.

- The cocoa idea was my own creation, completely fabricated.

- The Russell Barlow knife is exactly as described.

- We find out what Nóhoo means. And yes, “Yeino” does mean “Tomato”!
Chapter 4

A/N: Sneaking in an early chapter before the regular update on Tuesday. This one’s for you, hearts-in-armor. Your bravery when it comes to jumping into an on-going story will never be forgotten. :p

Looks like I fixed the line spacing in this chapter! As well, fact/historical points are listed at the end.

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The mid-afternoon sun pressed gently against their backs as the path led them east. The horses insisted on a leisurely pace that their riders didn't resist. They rode in amiable silence for some time before Maura spoke.

"Have you been in Beybeck long?"

Her horse sidled up alongside. "Going on 38 years," she replied.

It took Maura a moment. "Oh, you were born here!"

"Yep. Born and bred." They traveled a bit farther, with Maura clearly making an effort to choose her words correctly. Jane smiled. "Go on." When Maura looked at her quizzically, she said, "Whatever it is that's rolling around in your head, just say it."

"Well... having had time to think, it occurred to me that I might have said something to offend you. At the barn," Maura clarified.

Frowning, she replayed the moment in her mind but came up empty. "What do you mean?"

"About your left-handedness. I implied your parents might have tried to correct it. Dr. Barnes told me about your parents. I'm sorry about your mother."

Jane stared into the horizon. "I'm sorry Phineas is such a gossip."

"Oh, no!" Maura protested. "He volunteered the information in casual conversation."

"You talked about me? Casually?" The corner of her mouth twitched upward.

"Well, I... we hadn't talked before today. In any depth, I mean. You and I." Her stammer tugged the corner ever higher. "I thought if we were going to work together, I should get to know something about you. Dr. Barnes was very helpful."

Jane snorted, remembering his slyness at the barn. "I bet he was." Before Maura had a chance to ask what she meant, she said, "My ma died in childbirth. Pop died almost 10 years ago."

"I'm sorry," Maura said sincerely.

Shrugging, she waved away the apology. "I never knew my ma, so I guess I don't really know what I missed."

"You miss your father, though."

She blew out a long breath. "Every day." Not allowing the sentiment to linger, she asked, "What
about you? Not that we don't like having you here, but what in the world brought a Boston girl to Beybeck?"

"How do you know I'm from Boston?"

"You're not the only one who has casual conversations with Phineas," she smirked.

Maura shook her head at the comment. "Then you know I met him in Boston."

Jane's eyes widened in surprise. "No, I didn't know that." She searched her memory for a time when Phineas hadn't been there. The old coot had to be dragged to Cheyenne to see his own doctor; she couldn't imagine him in Boston.

"In '72," Maura supplied helpfully. "Louis Pasteur had a speaking engagement at Harvard Medical. It was fascinating!"

Jane tilted her head. "Germs."

"Yes, that's right! He expanded on the role of cleanliness in matters of sickness. You're very well-read."

Jane deflected the compliment. "Phineas leaves his books laying around sometimes." The doctor shook her head. "So you were in Boston at a lecture, and that's where you met Phineas."

"Yes. I was 26; it was quite eye-opening."

"First time in a big city?"

"Oh, no. I lived in Paris for most of my adolescent years."

"Wow," Jane said, suddenly feeling out of her depth.

"In fact," Maura continued, oblivious to Jane's discomfort, "Dr. Pasteur was amused at the idea that I had travelled from France to America to see him. Of course, I told him he was mistaken; I traveled from France to go to Harvard."

Jane couldn't stop the smile that crept across her lips. "And Phineas?"

"I don't think he went to Harvard." Maura paused until she realized that wasn't the expected answer. "Oh! You mean, how does he come into it. Dr. Pasteur had a translator who was quite snobbish." She wrinkled her nose at the memory. "I didn't need his services, because I speak French."

"Of course you do."

"But Dr. Barnes doesn't. And when he approached Dr. Pasteur, the translator pretended not to understand the questions. It was incredibly rude."

"So you stepped in and translated," Jane guessed.

Maura nodded. "Yes. He was very curious, and Dr. Pasteur was so thrilled to talk to him. I enjoyed it very much."

"And you've kept in touch all this time?"

Maura brushed an errant strand of hair from her eyes and smiled at Jane. "There was something
about him… I felt I could talk to him.”

“He does have a good ear,” Jane agreed.

“No, it’s not that. It’s… I didn’t really fit in. They’ve only just allowed women into Harvard Medical,” she said. “They turned me down time and time again. But I was determined to become a doctor, to the disappointment of my parents. Dr. Barnes loves medicine the way I do, and he never held my gender against me. He treated me like an equal, and for that, I will always be in his debt.”

The depth of Maura’s sincerity and humbleness was heartwarming. “Wait. So how did you become a doctor?”

Maura clicked an appreciative signal of praise to her horse as she maneuvered a tricky patch on the small incline. “He got me a job as an apprentice with a friend in Boston. Fortunately, Harvard came to its senses four years ago and began letting women in. I joined immediately, and because I already had the experience, I was able to condense the program in half. And here I am.”

“And here you are,” Jane repeated. “I am curious about one thing - why are you here?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“I mean, you’re cultured and educated. And from France!” They shared a chuckle before Jane continued. “You must have had all kinds of places knocking on your door offering you a job. Why this place? I mean, look at it.” She vaguely gestured around her.

“You’re here.”

“Yeah, but I was born here.”

“Have you ever left?”

“I’ve been to Cheyenne a handful of times.”

“But you’ve never left. Why is that?”

Jane had never considered the question. Born and raised, it was the only place she felt she belonged. Not that she wasn’t up to a challenge, but there were routines and expectations in Beybeek that made her feel at ease. People she had known all her life; people she came to trust as they weaved their way into her tapestry. It was home, and she had never considered giving it up for anything.

Before she had a chance to voice her thoughts, Maura spoke again. “I think I was looking for a place to fit in. A home.”

The fact that the words almost mirrored her own made Jane blink in surprise. Shifting in her saddle, she coughed lightly then replied, “Well, you’ve come to the right place. At least, I hope you feel you have.”

Maura took a deep breath of the lush purple larkspur that blanketed the area. The sun caught golden flecks in her hair and brought out the freckles that were sprinkled across her cheeks. “Yes,” she said at last, “I do.”

…..

The Blacks’ house was just around the bend, but they were greeted well before they arrived.
“Jaaaaaaane!!” The voice belonged to a floppy-haired 7-year old boy who came barrelling towards them over the dry terrain.

“Careful, Isaiah,” Jane said from her saddle. “Don’t spook the horses.”

The boy made a noise that sounded like a scoff. “Hey, Nóhoo!” The horse stopped and greeted his friend. “What’s your horse’s name?” he asked Maura, not at all alarmed by the large animals.

“Yeino’,” she replied.

Isaiah laughed. “That’s a funny name! Yay No. She can’t make up her mind.” Maura opened her mouth to protest, but he quickly said, “Sorry if I offended, Miss.”

Jane slid off her horse and silently encouraged Maura to do the same. “C’mon, you can walk us in.” She ruffled his hair and let him take the reins. “What have you been doing today?”

He skipped over a small boulder. “Gatherin’ the beans for harvest. Pa says we gotta make sure it’s done ‘fore school starts next month.”

“So why aren’t you doing that now?”

“Cause I’m takin’ a milk break,” he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Maura laughed. “You’re Ms. Isles, right?” he asked over his shoulder. “Lil’ Cat had a sore mouth and you made it better.”

Seeing Maura’s confusion, Jane said, “What he means in his mangled English is, his 5 year old sister Cathy must’ve seen you about a bad tooth.”

“Ah, yes. Part of my job involves dentistry, though it’s not really my specialty.”

He looked over at Jane. “She talks real good!”

“Keep listening. You might learn something,” she told the boy. “And it’s Dr. Isles to you, young man.”

His eyes widened. “A doctor? I bet you’re real smart. You’re pretty, too.”

“Well, I…” Maura blushed.

“Listen, Casanova,” Jane said, “find a girl your own age.”

He just beamed at the warning. “Most everyone is in the field, but Ezekiel’s in the back practicin’ his shootin’ for the festival.” He gently led the horses to the fence. “Should I tie up your horse, Miss? I mean, Dr. Isles?”

“That would be nice, thank you, Isaiah,” she replied.

“Where’s your mother?”

Isaiah tied Yeino to the post, but left Nóhoo to his own devices. “She’s in the house, workin’ on her embroidin’.”

Jane smirked. “I think you mean ‘embroidery’.”

He shrugged. “Come watch Ezekiel!”
Shaking her head, Jane said, “Later. I want to see your mom first.”

“Okay, let me go tell her you’re here!”

Before she had the chance to say anything more, he bolted towards the house, shouting all the way: “Jane’s here! Ma! Jane’s here!”

“Very subtle,” she said under her breath, drawing another laugh from Maura.

The two approached the open door, and Jane stepped in first, then moved to the side to invite Maura. The house was small and it was hard to believe they fit 11 children into the space. Yet somehow they did, while never making it feel cramped. The two-storey home didn’t have much in terms of amenities, but what it did have was warm and welcoming. None more so than the woman who sat at the large oak table that took up almost the entire wall. She stood up immediately and embraced Jane.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like my hugs,” Susan Black said. Stepping back slightly, she rubbed Jane’s arms and asked, “How’ve you been?”

“Do you mean in general, or today?”

Susan nodded. “I heard about Father Hess. It’s almost impossible to believe.” Turning to Maura, she wiped her hands on her apron before extending one in greeting. “Dr. Isles. This is a pleasant visit.”

“I’m happy to see you again. And you, too, Miss Cathy.” A precocious 5-year old peeked out from behind the pleats of her mother’s dress. “How is your tooth?”

The invitation drew the girl out. “All better!” she beamed, flashing a smile and pointing at her tooth.

Maura knelt down and cupped the girl’s face. With her thumbs, she gently lifted the upper lip and leaned in. “Oh, it looks very good,” she said. “You’ll have that for another year or two before it falls out.”

The girl blinked. “It’s gonna fall out?”

“Don’t worry; it’s very natural. Everyone’s teeth fall out. Then new ones grow back,” Maura explained.

“Did your teef fall out?”

“Yes. But look.” She smiled, showing her teeth. “They all grew back. But you only get one chance, so take care of them.”

“You gave me paste,” Cathy remembered. “I brush!”

Susan reached down and ran her fingers through her daughter’s hair. “You sure do, sweetheart.”

Maura stood. “I’m very proud of you.”

“Now if I could only get the boys to be as concerned about their teeth,” Susan sighed. “Anyway, what brings you out here, Jane?”

Jane had watched the interaction between Maura and Cat and smiled at the moment. Getting back to the matter at hand, she said quietly, “I wanted to talk to you about Father Hess’ house.”
Susan nodded. “You’re lookin’ for someone to clean it up.”

Making a face, Jane admitted, “Yeah. I know it’s a really bad job, but I don’t know if I trust anyone else to do it.”

The woman shook her head. “Jane, I’ve probably seen worse just bein’ a mother to this brood! Let me see if I can get to it tomorrow, if that’s all right.”

“That would be great, Susan. Thank you so much.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver dollar. Susan tried to refuse it, but Jane was insistent. “I can’t ask you to clean that room and not pay you.”

“If I clean my room, can I have money?” Cat asked innocently.

Jane crouched down. “How many people do you share your room with?”

The girl held out her hand and touched her fingers. “Lisbeth, Anna, an’ Judith.”

“Wow, that’s a lot, huh?” The little girl nodded vigorously. Quick as a wink, Jane produced a nickel from behind the girl’s ear. “I suppose that deserves something.”

Cat’s mouth dropped open and she squealed. “Do it again!”

Maura covered a chuckle with the back of her hand, and Susan groaned, “Look what you’ve done now.”

Jane ignored the complaint and did the trick again, this time coming up empty. “Oh no. Guess your ear only had one nickel today. Maybe next time I’ll find another one.” She laughed when Cat started wiggling her ears, as if to shake out any remaining money. “Put that in your bank, okay?” Her knees cracked when she stood. To Susan, she said, “I appreciate it.”

“I would appreciate it if you came for dinner some time. You, too, Dr. Isles.”

“Me?” Maura said. “I mean, I would be honoured, of course.”

“You’ve been in Beybeck for over six months now, and we haven’t had a chance to get to know you beyond bringin’ this one in to get her tooth checked after Samuel hit her with a ball.” Jane winced at the image. “It’d be nice having you. And you,” she turned to Jane, “you don’t visit enough. Sittin’ and drinkin’ whiskey all alone in that house. Shameful.”

“Gee, thanks, Ma,” Jane said, rolling her eyes.

Susan ignored the feigned melodrama. “How about tomorrow night? Ezekiel brought home some of Daniel’s best beef yesterday, and it’ll go off if I don’t use it soon.”

Jane looked at Maura who nodded. “I guess that’s a ‘yes’.”

“Good.” She hugged Jane again. “Now you’d better go see that boy out back or he’ll take offense.”

Their conversation had been peppered with the intermittent sounds of gunfire. “Isaiah told me he’s practicing for the contest,” Jane said.

“And I told him ammunition doesn’t grow on trees, so he’d best not be wastin’ it.”

Jane chuckled. “I’ll go see how he’s doing.”
“We’ll see you tomorrow around 4.”

“Sounds good.”

The women stepped back outside and Jane led them around the corner to where three young boys were watching Ezekiel intently, whooping and hollering whenever a can went flying due to his unwavering aim. He was steady and focused, taking his time before each shot, making sure it was true.

“You’re not going to get that much time in the contest,” Jane said, just as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet went awry and he groaned. “Darn it! You made me miss.”

Jane shook her head. “You made yourself miss. You lost your concentration. I should be able to set off a firecracker at your feet and you should still hit the target.”

“I’m gonna win that Winchester,” he vowed.

“Winchester? What are you talking about?”

He grinned. “Mr. Cooper has it on display at the store. I know it’s the prize for the shootin’ contest.”

Sighing, Jane rested her hands on her hips. “There really is no such thing as a secret around these parts, is there?”

“An’ I know you’re not enterin’ this year, so I’m aces to win it.”

“You’re incredibly confident,” Maura praised.

He nodded, a lock of hair flopping in front of his eyes. “I learned from the best,” he said, pointing to Jane. “Show her.”

Jane started to refuse, but the other boys began dancing around. One tugged at her shirt and chanted, “Shoot, shoot, shoot!” while another raced to the fence and set up six cans. Zeke’s smile was broad and infectious.

“Fine, fine,” Jane relented. “Step back.” She gently placed her hands on Maura’s shoulders and positioned her off to the side. Checking to make sure everyone else was a safe distance away, she stepped into the well-worn spot 10 yards from the fence. She took a slow, deep breath, closed her eyes then exhaled. In an instant, six shots rang out in quick succession. She held the pose for a moment, her right hand still over the hammer of the pistol in her left. Then with a quick move, she twirled the gun for show before sliding it back in her holster. All six cans were on the ground. The three boys cheered wildly and Zeke beamed. Maura’s mouth was agape.

“How did you learn to shoot like that?” she asked as Jane approached the group.

Nonchalantly, Jane replied, “The same way he’ll learn - just practice.”

“That was incredible,” Maura said in awe.

The compliment warmed Jane who glanced down at her feet.

“There ain’t enough bullets in the whole world for you to get that good,” Samuel said to Ezekiel, expertly dodging a punch to the arm.
“Get goin’,” he said to his younger siblings. “Time to feed the pigs.” The trio ran off, pretending to shoot off guns in the air. When they were out of earshot, he turned to Jane. “I’m still gonna win that contest.”

“I think you will,” she agreed.

“Did you find anything about Father Hess’ murder?” he asked.

Jane shook her head, and gestured for him to follow as they made their way back to the horses. “Not yet, but we did go back to the house. Might have a couple of things to check out. We came by to see if your mom would clean up the room.”

“She invite you for dinner?”

“Yes. You know how she is.”

“I know she wants to show off the embroidery she’s doing for Sarah’s new dress. So be prepared,” he warned with a smile. Seeing the wooden box strapped to the saddle horn, he asked, “Wasn’t that in Father Hess’ bedroom?”

She nodded. “It’s one of the things I want to check out.”

“What’s the other?”

Jane looked at Maura, handing the answer over to her. “I uncovered a fingerprint on the bedroom door handle,” she told him. “I’m not quite sure what I’m going to do with it yet, but it’s something.”

“How’d you do that?” he asked in amazement.

“Perhaps the next time you visit Dr. Barnes, I can show you.”

“Yes, please!”

The sun was lowering in the sky, bathing everything in reds and pinks. “We should get going. And you should get to doing something besides target practice,” she said to the young man.

“Bullets don’t grow on trees, yeah, I know,” he replied with an eyeroll. “Don’t be late tomorrow!”

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Though Jane’s house was south of the Blacks, she insisted on accompanying Maura east. “I wouldn’t feel right as an officer of the law not escorting you home. It’s getting dark.”

“It’s barely dusk,” Maura protested, but not too strongly.

And so they loped silently away from the sunset, their shadows casting long dark voids across the trail. Her house was closer than Jane had remembered, though she had only visited once, coming out to introduce herself during Maura’s first week in Beybeck. The two-storey home was just as majestic as she had remembered.

“I didn’t realize they were going to build such a large house,” Maura said, as if she could read Jane’s thoughts. “I often feel a little… overwhelmed.”

Jane was certain the unspoken word was ‘lonely’, though she didn’t say anything of the kind out loud. Instead, she said, “You need a dog.”
Maura hummed. “I’ve thought about it. Do you have one?”

“If you can call my miserable excuse for a hound a dog, then yeah, I’ve got a dog.”

“Oh, I bet he’s wonderful.”

Jane snorted. “I’ll be sure to tell him that if I can get him to pay attention to me long enough to listen.” They pulled the horses up to the barn and Nóhoo whined. “Hush! We’ll come back again, I promise.” She looked at Maura. “I mean, if that’s okay with you.”

“I’d like that very much.” The moment pulled taut between them. “I’m sure Yeino would like that, too.”

Jane grinned at the hasty addition. “Good. And we’ll see each other tomorrow. Should I stop by and we’ll go together?” She knew she was veering dangerously close to turning the dinner invitation into something more with her question, but she was surprised to find she didn’t care.

Apparently, neither did Maura. “I’d like that. Say around 3? I might even have some whiskey to serve you.”

“Let me guess, you’re more of a wine drinker?” Before Maura could defend herself, Jane winked. “Tomorrow at 3. We’ll be here, won’t we, Nóhoo?” It was easier to deflect her feelings into conversation with her horse than to contemplate why the thought of spending more time with one Dr. Isles felt like the best thing in the world.

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A/N for odds & sods mentioned or intentionally not!

-Louis Pasteur was never in Boston; that’s just me making stuff up to fit.

-Women, though agreed upon by a vote of 11-7, were not actually allowed into Harvard Medical School in 1878 as I’ve stated in this story. Perhaps Maura should have gone to Boston University instead (they had female graduates as early as 1848).

-When Zeke brags about winning the contest, my first thought was to have him say, “I’m a shoo-in to win.” I looked it up and discovered the earliest use of the phrase wasn’t recorded until 1928. It’s the little things you don’t realize until you become obsessive about accuracy!
The morning sun shone through her window, shining a beam of light across Jane's bed. She stretched and yawned before reluctantly jamming her feet into her boots and making the short trip to the outhouse. *I bet Maura has indoor plumbing,* she sighed then chuckled. *Already?* she scolded herself. She turned off thoughts of the doctor while she did her business, but images of hazel and blonde returned after she washed up. Giving up the fight, she allowed herself to think of the day before, when they had spent the better part of it together. Realizing how quickly she found herself drawn to the doctor surprised her; she wasn't one to trust lightly or immediately. Yet with Maura, it was as if they weren't beginning a new friendship, but revisiting an old one. She lit the stove and put the pot on to brew. She’d just reached for a pan when Patches whined at the door.

"Why don't you ever go outside when I do?" The dog's reply was a half-hearted bark that made her roll her eyes. "Hold on." Dropping a scoop of grinds into the water, she cracked an egg into the pan before crushing the shells and adding them to the pot. As the egg started to sizzle, she walked to the door. "Go on," she said, holding it open. She didn't close it behind him, instead allowing the cool breeze into the cabin.

The box she took from Father Hess' home was sitting on the kitchen table, some of its contents spread across the worn surface. She had started going through the papers and photos last night until the dusk had forced her to light a lamp. The fire and the quiet had shaken away the day's demons and lulled her to sleep in her oversized chair. By the time she had woken up, night had fallen completely, and her zeal to unlock the box’s mysteries had waned. Leaving everything as it was, she had turned down the lamp and crawled into bed. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to reveal itself in the light of day.

The pot began to boil and she took it off the fire, barely giving it a moment before she dipped her cup into it with flare. She was rewarded for her efforts with hot, ground-free coffee. She couldn't think of a better way to start the morning.

"Better than yesterday," she wryly said aloud. The one thing she did find yesterday, a contact name for Father Hess, went to the top of her to-do-list for the day. Speaking to Phineas about the body was second. She remembered her promise to swing by Frost's for a whiskey which she had yet to fulfill. She wondered if she would have time to do it all before 3 pm. Before her dinner with Maura. *And the Blacks,* the stern voice of realism said in her ear.

"Yeah, yeah," she replied, glad the only audience to her conversation was her dog who was prone, halfway in and halfway out the door.

The voice couldn't dash the vein of happiness that ran through her like a ribbon of gold. She hadn't had any real reason to spend time with the new doctor in the six months she’d been in town. If she was honest, part of her fought it; she didn't want to consider the reason Phineas had invited the woman to Beybeck in the first place. The 5-year old in her thought if she just avoided her, nothing would happen, and Phineas would go about his business forever. But now, after just two days of
Maura Isles’ company, the 37-year old woman wondered why it had taken her so long.

It had been a while since she’d given her feelings any consideration. "No," she corrected herself. "Feelings about..." She couldn't finish the sentence out loud, even alone. About women. She'd had her moments in Cheyenne, where she could get lost among the 5000 other people, and explanations could be cast aside for a silver dollar. But back home? It’s not that she’d ever hide who she was, but she’d never had reason to reveal, either. Maybe that was about to change...

Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself? the voice asked. You don't really know her. You don't think she has her fair share of suitors?

The coffee soured along with her mood. "Dammit," she cursed, her sharp tone enough to even get the dog's attention. She was angry at herself for allowing hope into her heart, and doubt into her head.

"What do you think, Patches?"

The dog stretched out and shook his head, as if he had heard it all before. Jane wasn't sure if the half-yawn, half-bark was a vote of confidence or not.

.....

"It doesn't seem to matter how early I get in, you're always here before me."

Phineas looked up from his paperwork. He peered at Maura over the rims of his wire framed glasses and said, "No rest for the wicked. And you'd best get used to it, too."

She grinned at his poor attempt at sternness. "Fortunately, my body is on a very rigid clock with the sun." She sat at her small desk and opened a heavy leather book. The office was separate from the barn, but only enough to give patients distance from whatever might be taking up the table in the mortuary. It offered a sense of professionalism that pleased her. "Nothing in the book today, though Mrs. Tillsdale is expected to deliver any day now."

"Triplets," he said. "She's due in 3 days?" Maura nodded. "I'll wager her water breaks today. Triplets are notoriously early."

"I've never delivered triplets."

"Same as a single, just three times the work," he said. "You can come with me if we get the summons."

"Today? Oh. Yes, of course."

His eyes narrowed. "Spit it out."

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I know I won't have the luxury when I become the full-time physician, but... I agreed to go to the Blacks today for dinner."

“That’s very charitable of them,” he said. “How did that invitation come to be?”

“Well...” she stammered, “as you know, I went back to Father Hess’ yesterday. To see if I could get a fingerprint.”

“I saw it in the barn. Well done.”

She smiled at the praise. “Well, Jane... that is to say, Sheriff Rizzoli was there, too. She wanted to
see if there was any clue that might lead us to the killer.”

His lips twitched at her correction. “I see.”

“When we were finished, her horse didn’t want to leave, and he insisted on following me.”

“The horse?”

“Yes.”

He took off his glasses and lazily swung them back and forth between his folded hands. “Did the horse also get you the invitation to dinner?”

“Oh, no, he was outside when Mrs. Black—” she stopped abruptly, hearing the teasing nature in his question. Two spots of red painted her cheeks. “Ja- the sheriff wanted to ask Mrs. Black if she’d clean the bedroom. As you know, the Blacks are between Father Hess and my house.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“Mrs. Black first extended the invitation to… the sheriff, then graciously included me.”

Gently placing his glasses on his desk, he sat back and pressed his lips against his steepled fingertips. He watched her intently under bushy eyebrows, nodding and humming every so often, as if having a conversation with himself. It was the only sound in the room. She found his scrutiny unsettling, and finally blurted, “I don’t know what to do.”

“About what?” he asked not unkindly.

Her hand fluttered to her mouth and she looked away. “I don’t know…”

He let the moment settle before leaning forward. “I think you do, Maura.” The use of her first name drew her eyes back to him. “I’m an old coot, set in my ways. But just because I don’t want to change doesn’t mean I can’t.” He let the words sink in, then continued, “And if you live your life waiting for the people who won’t change, it will be a very unfulfilling life, my dear.”

The words pricked her heart and she drew in a shaky breath. “Do you… she’s never married?”

Maura prayed the doctor would pick up the implication behind her question.

“Oh, she’s had her fair share of male suitors,” he said. “But she’s never been interested. In them.” Suddenly it had become a game of insinuations, and she couldn’t help but laugh. He realized it as well. “Should we send each other messages in Morse Code?”

She covered her face and shook her head. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with you,” she muffled into her hands. She was saved any further embarrassment when Zeke appeared in the doorway.

“I hope I’m not interruptin’,” he said. “Dr. Barnes.” He touched his hat to the older man. “Dr. Isles.”

“Hello, Ezekiel,” she greeted, thankful for the distraction. “No, you’re not interrupting at all. What brings you by?”

“Well, I thought maybe you could show me that fingerprinting thing you did. If you’re not busy, o’course.”

“I would love to. I’m very keen to try the iodine fuming.”
Barnes frowned. “What’s this?”

“We’re going to test Paul-Jean Coulier’s discovery of latent fingerprints through iodine fuming,” she answered excitedly.

He raised an eyebrow. “Well, just don’t go blowin’ up my barn.”

“Oh no,” she said, “iodine is corrosive, not combustible.”

“Ha!” Zeke laughed. “She got you, Dr. Barnes.”

He glowered at the boy, but the twinkle in his eye was playful. “Maybe I should’ve read about all these chemicals in that book I ordered for you.” Reaching behind to a small shelf, he slipped out a book and held it out.

Zeke’s eyes widened in delight, but his smile quickly fell. “I gave my poker winnings to Mr. Lloyd for some of his beef.”

“That is a shame,” Barnes agreed. “But it’s good beef, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, it’s the best in Beybeck.”

Barnes scratched his chin. “The sheriff is gonna have to decide what to do with Father Hess. My guess is, she’ll find some kin and they’ll want to do a proper burial. When the time comes, I won’t be able to do all the liftin’ and such. If you promise to work for free then, I’ll give you the book now.”

“Yes, sir!” he answered immediately. “Whatever you need, you just ask!”

Barnes let the book touch Zeke’s outstretched hands, but pulled it back to say, “Remember what you promised.”

“I will, Dr. Barnes, I will.”

“All right.” He relinquished the book, much to the young man’s joy. Gingerly getting to his feet, he said, “I’m going to visit Mrs. Tillsdale and see how she’s doing. You two stay out of trouble.”

“What about Father Hess?” Maura asked.

Barnes shook his head. “We’ll go over my notes later. I need to be around a little life before we start talkin’ about death.” He touched her arm as he passed, and did the same to Zeke. “You mind Dr. Isles now.”

“I will, sir. I promise.”

“All right.”

…..

Every place in Beybeck had its own particular smell, from the fresh baked aroma of William Stuart’s bakery to the smoke and whiskey of the Spitoon. Due to Fred Langley’s fastidious nature, the town’s post office always had a welcoming scent of lemon and sawdust. Jane made sure to wipe her feet in the coarse mat inside the door.

"Good day, Sheriff," he greeted with a smile.
"Mr. Langley."

He straightened his glasses and tugged at his vest. "What brings you in today? Here to hang wanted posters for the despicable person who murdered Father Hess, I hope."

She leaned against the polished counter. "Afraid not, no," she replied. "But the day's not over yet." She reached into her small coin pocket. "Actually, I'm here to send a telegram to Cheyenne. Spent all morning going through the Father's personal things before I finally found some kin."

The postmaster snorted. "All morning? Could have saved yourself some time and just asked Ruth Murphy."

She laughed despite herself. "I'll remember that in the future."

Wiggling his fingers, he gestured to the paper in her hand. "Let's see what you have there." He took a moment to skim over the words before he frowned.

She knew it wasn't over the content. "My penmanship hasn't gotten any better since 6th grade," she admitted.

He clicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth. "Let me see what I can do." On a crisp sheet of paper, he touched his pen, drawing the ink across the emptiness. When he turned it for Jane to see, his printing was neat and even.

*Sara Guildcrest-
My condolences
Your brother Robert has passed
Would like to visit Cheyenne at your convenience to make arrangements
J.Rizzoli, Sheriff*

She wrinkled her nose at the telegram. "Not very sympathetic, is it?"

"Sympathy will cost you more."

"Fine. Send it." She pulled out two quarters.

"Now, you know you might not get a reply today? It's not only dependent upon her wanting to respond, but who they've hired to deliver. I can't vouch for what they do in the big city."

She acknowledged the comment with a smile. "Well, it's a start. I'm going to the Blacks for dinner, but I'll come back around before going home for the night. If you get an answer, could you slip it under the station door?" When he nodded, she said, "Thank you."

"Thank you for wiping your feet."

Her grin grew larger and she tipped her hat at the door before leaving the warm citrus scent behind her.

.....

“I was afraid of that,” Maura lamented. The duo stood over the glass box that contained the door knob and watched as the iodine fumes dissipated. “The iodine will only latch onto the oils on a porous surface.”

Zeke considered her words. “You mean it’s havin’ a hard time catching on because the handle’s so
smooth.”

“Smooth, but more importantly, impermeable.” She saw his confusion and smiled. “The oils can’t soak in.”

He didn’t try to hide his disappointment. “I really wanted to see how it worked.”

Sympathetic to his reaction, she took a piece of paper from her desk. “Take this.” He appeared puzzled by her request, but reached for the paper. “Now let go.”

His brows pressed together. “Miss?”

Laughing lightly at his expression, she gently tugged the paper until he let go. Unclasping the top of the box, she carefully removed the door knob and put it to the side, making room for the paper which she leaned against the glass. After making sure there were enough iodine crystals in the reservoir, she rolled the tube in her hands, warming it up long enough to place it into the small hole in the box. She blew softly but steadily, filling the closed box with fumes. Zeke was captivated by the action. Slowly but surely, a yellow print emerged where he had touched the corner of the paper.

“Whooooo!” he exclaimed. “Look at that! Dr. Isles, you did it!”

“Well, technically, the iodine- oh!” Her correction was interrupted by a huge hug from the young man.

“Sorry, Miss,” he said, immediately putting her down. “That’s just… my gosh!”

His reaction was infectious. “Did you know the fingerprint will fade over time as the iodine dissipated? It can be anywhere from days to hours.”

He bent and looked at the fingerprint again. “I wish you could’ve done that with the handle from Father Hess’.”

“I am disappointed,” she admitted, “but the premise turned out the same; we got a fingerprint, just through different means.”

“What will you do with it now? With that fingerprint, I mean.” He gestured to the door knob.

“First, I’ll have to take a photograph. Then…” her voice faltered as the scope of the job became apparent. “Then get everyone’s fingerprint.”

His mouth dropped. “Everyone in Beybeck?”

“Yes.” The defeat was evident in her voice.

“Well now, wait a minute,” he said. “Not everyone. The Sheriff told me you figured out how tall the killer was with a gimlet?”

Maura smiled at the memory. “Not exactly. But yes, I suppose I did. They’re somewhere between 5 feet 8 inches and 6 feet.”

“All right. So out of 540 folks in Beybeck, how many do you think are children?”

“Oh,” she said, trying to pull up some figures. “Perhaps...260?”

“Okay. That leaves us 280. We’ll forget about the Wilson clan, ‘cause they’re all giants. So that’s
about 25 more. The Fitzsimmons have been in Fort Cheyenne for a week. That’s another dozen, right?”

She saw what he was doing and appreciated the gesture more than she could say. “You’re right. We could narrow it down substantially just by eliminating the obvious. Thank you, Ezekiel.”

He waved her off with a shy shrug. “Nothin’ to thank me for, Miss. We’re a team.”

“Yes, we are.”

“I’m 5 foot 11, so you’d best start with me. I’ve never had my fingerprints taken before!”

She shook her head at his exuberance and smiled. “Let me get the ink pad.”

…..

She watched in admiration as the calico horse was put through its paces. Commands to stop or start at the wooden markers placed at various distances were met immediately, as if the horse and rider were one. The sweat was a sheen on the horse's white and brown coat, a sign they had been out for a while, yet the animal showed no sign of tiredness. They came around to run the course again when Frost saw her. Touching his hat and broadly grinning, he tugged the reins and brought the horse to the fence.

"You entering the festival with her, Frost?” she asked, stroking the horse. "She's amazing."

He shrugged though didn't deny the compliment. “Had her since she was a foal. Rancher didn't think she'd make it, so I got her for a song. What did he know, hey, Phoenix?” He gently slapped her flank and rubbed her mane.

"And here I thought you were only interested in fast things."

Raising an eyebrow, he said, "If I didn't know you, I'd think that was some kind of innuendo."

She smirked. "But you know me."

"Uh-huh." The friends shared a laugh. "I enter the race every year; thought maybe I’d try something a little different this time."

"Tired of winning, huh?"

"It is such a burden," he replied facetiously. "Now, don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing out here at this time of day?"

"I forgot I was supposed to come out last night for a whiskey."

He slid off the horse and called over a ranch hand. "Give her a good cool wash," he told him. "She did good work today." When the hand and the horse left, he hung his arms over the fence railing. "I did wonder what happened, but I just assumed you were hot on the trail of a killer."

““You sound like the newsies in Fort Cheyenne. ‘Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Small town sheriff on the trail of a killer!’” They both laughed. “No. Just got caught up looking through Father Hess’ house for clues.” Before he was able to ask, she said, “Just a box with some personal correspondence and some photos that weren’t labelled, but….” She shrugged. “I did find an address for his sister, so that’s something.”
He pulled off his leather gloves and motioned for her to follow him. Stepping out of the corral, he made his way to the small house that sat back from the barn. “You should have come over. I would’ve gone with you.”

She leisurely bumped shoulders with him. “You think your stomach was up to it?”

“Very funny.”

“Besides, I wasn’t there alone - Maura was already there.”

“‘Maura’?”

She chose to ignore the sly poke. “Yeah, you know, Dr. Isles.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, pointing to a chair. “Have a seat. I still owe you that whiskey.” Catching her quick glance at the clock, he paused the bottle in mid-pour. “Unless you gotta be somewhere else.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’m just having dinner early today. Told Maura I’d go by her place first.” She heard the words and cringed, knowing he’d pick up on them immediately.

He didn’t disappoint. “Dinner with ‘Maura’, huh?”

“No,” she said. “Dinner at the Blacks. With Maura.”

He continued pouring the whiskey. “Oh. So like a date.”

“No! Just… two new friends having dinner with old friends. That’s all.”

He handed her the glass half-filled, and took the seat across from her with his own drink. “How long have we known each other?”

The question threw her off-guard. “What? Over 10 years now. Why?”

“Have I ever gave you any indication I’m someone to pass judgment?”

She shifted in her seat, not entirely unsure where the conversation was going. “You’re one of the fairest people I know, Frost.”

He tilted his head in thanks. “You know why we’re nothing more than good friends?”

She shrugged. “The scandal would be huge?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Because I’m coloured? Nah. I get enough whispers and looks every time I venture outside Beybeck. Hell, sometimes in Beybeck. We’d just be something else to talk about. No, that’s not the reason. The reason is, I know I’m not your type.”

There was something in the way he emphasized the last word that brought heat to her cheeks. “Frost…”

“I knew it! I knew it.” He leaned forward and touched his glass to hers. “To all types.”

“I hate you. You know that, right?”

His grin was bright and infectious. “Yep.”

…..
They didn’t talk more about it in the short time she had left, but even if she would never admit it outright, it felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She knew at her age, people wondered about her, why she never married, why she never had suitors. She’d never been confronted with those questions, and if she was honest, she wasn’t sure how she’d answer them until now. Frost, in his gregarious way, had somehow made it feel like he’d answered them for her, like he had opened a door and invited her to step through.

She’d contemplated going so far as to wear a dress to dinner, but she knew there would be no end to the kids’ teasing if she did. Besides, dresses always felt foreign to her and worse, made her feel foreign. The shirt and pants were her second skin, even if the shirt was a relatively new one she had been saving for special occasions. Now standing in Maura’s doorway, seeing the blonde again, she thanked her judgment.

"Do I look all right?" Maura asked, a slight concern in her voice.

Jane closed her mouth and nodded. "I was just thinking how glad I was I didn't wear a dress," she admitted. "Not sure I could've competed with that." Her eyes went down to Maura's feet then back again.

"Oh, is it too much?" She clenched her hands. "I was worried about this. I didn't know what to wear. Should I go with something formal or something casual? Or somewhere in the middle?"

The way Maura relayed the internal struggle made her laugh. "Is this formal?"

"No. This is the 'somewhere in the middle' choice." She must have seen Jane bite her bottom lip, because she said, "I knew it! Let me go change."

She reached out and took Maura's hand. "Tell me about this dress."

"What?"

"The dress. Tell me about it. I was expecting the…” she gestured animatedly with her free hand. "You know… big."

"The bustle," Maura said.

"Yes."

"This is an Aesthetic dress," she explained. "It’s meant to rebel against the trappings of the Victorian style. I brought it from Boston."

"I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything with so many flowers on it."

Maura pinched the fabric and did a small curtsey. "I had the hem cut shorter than is fashionable. It’s quite scandalous, but absolutely necessary out here."

"Scandalous!" Jane repeated.

Maura saw the smirk and smiled. "I see what you’re doing."

"What? I’m talking to you about dresses."

"A subject in which you’re so very interested."

"Exactly. And you know who else will be interested? Alice Black, Zeke’s twin. She’s already an amazing seamstress and will want to know all about how all of that," she waved at the dress again,
“got made.”

Maura looked down at the dress. "So this will be appropriate?"

"More than appropriate," she assured. "Now let's go. I had some of that beef the other day and it's divine." She breathed out the last word and pulled a smile from Maura.

If either woman noticed that they walked to the door hand in hand, neither said.

.....

The smell was the first thing to greet them; the combination of stew and apple pie wafted around them like a welcoming embrace.

"I really need to come out here more often," Jane sighed contently.

The second thing to greet them was a rambunctious duo with wild curly hair and sky blue eyes. They swung the door open and squealed.

"Auntie Jane!" said one.

"An' a lady!" finished the other.

Jane swooped down and scooped both up in her arms. "Nathan and Grace, this is Dr. Isles." She lowered her voice, feigning secrecy. "But I think if you ask her nicely, she'll let you call her 'Maura'."

"Maura!" Nathan greeted loudly.

Jane winced. "That's okay, I have an ear on the other side to spare."

She snuggled into their necks, drawing giggles and shrieks before Susan shouted from the kitchen. "What in the Dickens is all this noise about?"

Jane gave each child one last raspberry on their cheeks before letting them wiggle out of her arms and race to their mother. Maura watched them run off and smiled.

"Don't worry," she told Maura. "You'll have plenty of time to get to know them."

"They're adorable."

"They're 4. They're hellions."

"I'm certain you had no part in that development."

Jane's mouth dropped in mock surprise. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Jane!!" Samuel yelled from the top of the stairs.

"Why are we all shouting?" Susan yelled. Hearing her own volume, she said, "Now I'm doing it." She stepped around the corner to meet them, wiped her hands on her apron before enveloping Jane in a hug. "Get that silly look off your face."

"How did you-"

"I'm a mother. I see everything. Don't ever forget it." She pulled back and looked at the small
collection of her brood. "Isn't that right?" They collectively nodded their heads, some more vigorously than others. "Dr. Isles," she said, turning her attention back to the visitors. "Don't be thinking you're above getting a hug, but I wouldn't want to soil that beautiful dress."

"Oh, thank you," Maura replied. "For complimenting the dress, I mean. I hope you'll hug me in the future."

Jane threw her head back and laughed. "Like she needs an invitation! Ow!"

Susan lightly pinched her. "Sass. Dinner's almost ready. Whose turn is it to set the table?"


"Nathan, you be nice to your sister," Jane said sternly.

"Yes, Miss," he replied, eyes downcast.

"Who gets to sit beside you at the table?" she asked kindly.

Like a switch, the joy came back to his face. "Maura!"

Jane couldn't help but smile. "Well go on, get the chairs." She turned to Maura. "You sure you're ready for all this?"

"I'll certainly be ready for a good night's sleep when it's all over," Maura replied, her voice an equal measure of trepidation and amusement.

She reached down and gave Maura's hand a quick squeeze. "You might be sitting beside Nathan, but I'll be sitting beside you. You'll do great."

.....

Despite the size of the family and the scope of serving a large dinner, it went off without a hitch, with everyone accustomed to the routine and their role in it. Jane made sure to introduce everyone individually, and Maura dutifully committed names and ages to memory, no easy task with 13 new people. Bowls of beef stew were served at the head of the table by the patriarch, Joshua Black, and passed down to the opposite end, serving Susan first, then worked their way down the right side of the table, then the left. Bread and drink was served in the same manner. Grace was said and the meal began.

Chatter was clumped into small groups around the table, and Jane caught Maura looking around with a kind of sadness in her eyes. Leaning into her side, she asked, "Everything okay?"

Maura nodded. "I was an only child," she said at last. "This is very... "

"Crazy? Loud? Insane?"

Laughing, Maura said, "No. Nice. Isn't it, Nathan?" The young boy looked up at her and showed his teeth and half his meal.

"Nathan!" Susan chastised from the end of the table. "Mind your manners!"

Maura slipped her arm around the boy’s shoulder and gave him a hug which surprised Jane and Nathan both. "You can show me your smile later."

"Forgive my eavesdroppin’," Joshua said, "but did you say you’re an only child?"
“Yes, sir,” Maura replied.

“What’s dat?” Samuel asked from across the table.

“It means I don’t have any brothers or sisters,” she answered.

The table stopped and stared. “None at all, Miss?” Zeke asked.

“None at all.”

“Wow!” Nathan exclaimed, his mouth now free of food.

“Don’t know why you’re all surprised,” Jane scoffed. “I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

“You got us,” Samuel said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You don’t got anybody?” Isaiah asked innocently.

“Well, I… I have my adoptive parents.”

This was new to Jane. Curiosity piqued, she couldn’t help but ask, “You’re adopted?”

“What’s dat?” Samuel asked again.

“We really need to work on your conversation skills, kiddo,” Jane teased. She looked at Maura, silently giving her a moment to decide whether she wanted Jane to answer, or if she would answer herself.

“It means she has a new mommy and daddy, isn’t that right, Maura?” Susan gently offered.

Maura understood the need to make it as simple as possible for the younger children. “Yes, that’s what it is.”

Isaiah’s eyes were wide as saucers. “You mean you got old parents and new parents? Wow!” He looked around the table. “That means she gets extra presents at Christmas, you coots!”

“No name-callin’!” Joshua ordered.

“Is that true? Is that true?” Nathan asked, tugging excitedly at Maura’s arm.

She couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, that’s true.”

‘Ooohs’ and ‘Ahhhs’ went around the table, and though Maura seemed to take the attention well, Jane rested her hand on Maura’s thigh as a measure of quiet support. She was surprised to feel Maura’s hand gently cover her own.

“Well, if you ever need to surround yourself with a brood, you’re always welcome here,” Joshua said. “You won’t ever find yourself at a loss for company.”

“Thank you, Mr. Black,” Maura replied. “It means so much to me.” She looked at everyone around the table, ending with Jane. “You’ve all made me feel so welcome.”

“Can we have apple pie now?” Samuel asked.

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A/N: Just two notes for this one- first, if you brewed coffee in a pot, you would often crush egg shells and put them in with the coffee grounds. It kept the grounds down so when you scooped your cup in, you’d be (moderately) grounds free. Second, the Aesthetic dress is as Maura says; it was a simpler dress for the time period, ditching the tight lacing and the big bustle in the back, but often using floral or colourfully patterned material to make up for the lack of formality. (Aesthetic Period 1880-1890)
The end of dinner was the same controlled chaos as the beginning, only in reverse, with each person having a role to play. The table was cleared and the dishes were cleaned in military fashion, and after some stern cajoling by their mother, the kids unlatched themselves from Jane and Maura and drifted off into groups to play. Maura was drawn into a conversation with Alice about her dress and the style, and the teenager was instantly won over by Maura’s knowledge and access to the Montgomery Ward catalogue. Jane, Susan, Joshua, and Zeke sat in the corner of the living room, sharing a drink and a dash of gossip. They caught up on what they knew about Father Hess’ murder, which, by Jane’s own admission, wasn’t much.

But soon, the inching of the clock to 7 as well as bedtimes on the horizon got Jane to her feet. “You little shavers need to be getting to bed soon.” She ignored the collective groan. “When you get to be grown, you can stay up as late as you want. I stay up past 9!” She might as well have told them she came from space.

“I wanna stay up ‘til 9,” Nathan whined.

Zeke scoffed. “You can’t even count to 9.”

“Yes, I can! 1-2-3-4-5-”

“That’s enough,” Joshua interrupted. “You two calm down and start gettin’ ready.”

Nathan’s shoulders slumped. “I guess.” His exaggerated stomping made it clear how he felt about the matter.

“I was very glad to sit beside you,” Maura called out from the corner. “I’d like to do it again sometime.”

He turned and beamed. “Tomorrow?”

Maura laughed. “No, not tomorrow. But soon, I promise. Okay?”

He ran to her and held out his pinky finger. “Pinky swear?” Maura looked down in confusion, but mirrored his pose. She was startled when he hooked his finger with hers and gave a squeeze. “Pinky swear!” And with that, he bolted up the stairs.

“I’m not sure what just happened,” she said.

“You’re forever indebted to a 4 year old is what happened,” Jane chuckled. To the Blacks, she said, “As always, Susan, dinner was amazing.”

The woman stood and, this time, Jane didn’t protest the embrace. “You’re always welcome, Jane. And you, too, Maura. Though it looks like you don’t have much of a choice now!”

“Very nice meetin’ you, Miss Isles,” Joshua said, extending a hand. “Don’t worry, it’s a regular handshake.”

Maura smiled and returned the gesture. “Everything was wonderful. Thank you.”
“Zeke,” Jane said, looking at her sidekick, “if you have time from your chores tomorrow, why don’t you meet me at Father Hess’. I’m hoping to hear back from his sister, and in the meantime, I gotta collect his things.”

“I’ll go out around noon,” Susan said. “Ezekiel can come with me if you wanted to meet us out there.”

“Sounds perfect,” she replied. To Maura, she said, “Okay, let’s get you home.”

Final goodbyes were said at the door, some made several times to the same bouncing child, and at last, they set off. As summer turned to autumn, the nights were becoming cooler, though the sun refused to give up so easily. Shadows were long, but they rode in comfortable silence. It was only when Maura’s house appeared in the distance did one of them speak.

"I think it's going to rain," Maura said, face upturned to the sky. "Did you want to come in and wait it out?"

Jane paused. There was something in the invitation that seemed to hold more than an offer for simple shelter. She tried to search Maura’s eyes for a sign, but the hat shaded her gaze. For the first time in her memory, Jane wasn't sure she could trust her gut. It both scared and excited her. "I, uh, I need to go into town and find Phineas. I haven't had a chance to talk to him about Father Hess."

"He went to the Tillsdales; he was fairly certain Mrs. Tillsdale was going to deliver today."

"The triplets?" She pretended to be unimpressed. "That shouldn't have taken him all day."

Maura laughed. "You're a hard taskmaster, Sheriff."

There it was again - a tone in the comment that hinted at a newfound closeness. They arrived at the house before she had time to contemplate it further. Of his own accord, Nóhoo followed Maura to the barn, and horse and rider watched as the doctor made sure her horse was settled for the night. Needless, Jane dismounted. Had it been anyone else, she would have said her goodbyes from her saddle and been on her way. Somehow, with hazel eyes dancing across her face, it didn't feel right.

She stood with the reins in her hand, suddenly uncertain. "So... I'm glad you came to dinner."

"Me, too."

The silence stretched until Nóhoo flicked his tail as if tired of her hesitancy. "I had a great time. I mean, I always have a good time with them. But I had a great time with you."

They had swayed closer and closer to each other until their boots touched. "Me, too."

Jane chuckled and was about to tease Maura for her repetition when the blonde nuzzled her nose with Jane's. It was a tentative pass, a testing of the waters that Jane was more than willing to confirm. Their eyes were open, as if trying to gauge the other's reaction in the short space between them, but it was when Maura's eyes closed as their lips brushed together that gave Jane her answer. A soft moan was followed by hands curling around her neck, and she responded by circling an arm around Maura’s waist. Lips touched for a second time, but now with purpose and intent, and teeth joined in, lightly biting and pulling. When tongues finally grazed each other, they were impossibly close, nearly melded into one.

Then Maura stepped on Jane's foot, and the spell was broken.

Rather than embarrassment or awkwardness, they pulled back with humour and flushed faces. Jane
chuckled at their clumsiness, but held on for a moment longer. Maura slipped her hands from Jane's shoulders, but slid them down only far enough to fidget with the buttons of her open-neck shirt. Maura's eyes dropped to her hands, and she shook her head in quiet amazement. Loathe to break the spell, Jane slowly drew her fingertips up Maura's ribcage and over her shoulders, tracing a path over her biceps until arriving at her wrists. Though her hands were gloved, she could swear she could feel the softness of Maura's skin through the leather. With gentleness, she took Maura's hands in hers and brought them to her lips.

"I should go," Jane said at last.

"No, you shouldn't." Maura's response was so immediate and without hesitation that it made them both laugh.

Kissing Maura's temple, she said, "No, I should. But tomorrow's another day, right?"

Maura pulled back and placed a chaste kiss on her chin. "Tomorrow's another day."

....

She was glad her horse knew the way back into town, because she didn't have a clue. She was also glad she didn't see anyone along the way, because she was sure that the smile plastered across her face would scare man and animal alike. Passing Cooper's, she focussed on the reason for coming back to town and got her emotions in check as best she could. Pulling up to the saloon, she tied the horse to the post, much to his chagrin, and went inside.

Evening had brought out the oil lamps inside, giving the saloon a golden dim that could be construed as romantic for those using Miss Blake's services, and dangerous for those who might have nefarious intent at the gambling tables. Those who weren't interested in either, like Phineas Barnes, could be found in the corner, prying pennies from friends at the shuffleboard table.

"What a surprise," Jane drawled as she approached the group. "Be careful, Jarrod," she warned one of the men. "You never know what kind of tricks Phineas is learning in all those books he reads."

The old man narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the doctor's stack of winnings. "Hmph!"

Phineas waved off the accusation and took his turn. "What brings you out, Possum? I thought you had a dinner date?"

She watched the penny slide effortlessly to the table's edge, using the moment to let the heat fade from her cheeks. "Well, some of us have to work, you know."

He ignored the jibe and watched Jarrod push a penny. He clapped in triumph when the penny fell off the end. "I'll give you that one just so you don't think I'm cheating you," he told his frowning friend. "You can buy me a whiskey with it." Jarrod grunted again, but collected the coins and shuffled to the bar, leaving Phineas and Jane alone. "And for the record," he continued, "Mary Tillsdale went into labour, just like I thought, and her damn fool husband fainted and hit his head on the floor. I've been busy."

Jane covered her snort with the back of her hand. "I guess that's reason enough. So did you find anything new about Father Hess?"

He brushed aside her question. "We can talk about that tomorrow. You won't get anything done tonight anyway. How was your dinner?"

"Oh, I see," she said, "you're just being nosy."
A light danced in his eyes. “I take that to mean it went well.”

“Mind your business, old man.”

“You are my business, you little sprout!” They smiled at each other. He seemed to be giving a private thought some consideration before he reached over to cover her hand with his. “You know why I asked her to take the position?”

“Sure,” she shrugged. “You knew her in Boston.”

If her knowing this piece of information surprised him, he didn’t show it. “That, and I’m not gonna be around forever, you know.”

The smile fell from her face. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I know, Possum. So why don’t I do all the talking?” She tried to pull her hand away, but he held firm. “You’ve been through a lot, more than most at your age. Your mother died giving birth to you, and your father, God rest his soul, was taken from you much too soon. I’ve done the best I could. I hope it’s been enough.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

Ignoring the question, he asked one of his own. “You know I was married once?”

She nodded. “Teresa. You have a photo on your wall of the two of you. I think I remember meeting her once, but I’m not sure.”

“You were five when she died,” he told her. “Consumption took her in ’51.” He paused as if reliving the memory. “I never remarried, and I don’t regret it. I’ve lived a good life with good friends. But if I had to do it all again, I might decide to let someone in. Makes life less lonely that way.”

Jarrod returned and placed the whiskey in front of Phineas. He reached for her glass, but Jane covered it with her hand. “Where’s all this coming from?”

“You and Maura need to be less lonely.”

“Oh, God,” she groaned. He took advantage of her eye roll and whisked the glass out from under her hand. “Why is it that the men in my life want to talk to me about women?” He raised an eyebrow and she answered the unspoken question. “Frost was all about this today, too.”

“He’s a good man, that Barry,” Phineas said, throwing back the whiskey.

“Yeah, well, good men would know to stay out of my love life.” She knew he’d catch the last words, even in his inebriated state.

Sure enough, he perked up ever so slightly. “Oh?”

“Fine, you nosy old man- dinner went more than well, and there’s a very good chance the two of us will be ‘less lonely’, okay? Happy now?”

The smile was broad and wide. “Possum...you have no idea.”

“I think I do by the look on your face.” She tried to be disapproving, but his joy couldn’t be denied. “Nosy old man,” she repeated with a smile. “Listen, I gotta go; I’m hoping I got a telegram today from Father Hess’ sister. Mr. Langley said he’d slip it under my door if it came while I was away.”
She reversed their hands so hers was covering his. “Can I trust you to get home safe and sound?”

“Possum, I’ve been drinking longer than you’ve been alive!” he said, giving the slightest wobble.

“Right. I’ll tell Carl to cut you off.” Before he could protest, she leaned in and gave him a quick hug.

The gesture caught him off guard. “What was that for?”

“It’s the least I could do for all that you’ve done.” They held each other’s gaze for a moment. Bringing some levity back into things, she turned to Jarrod. “Don’t let him take all your money!” He raised his glass and Phineas laughed. With one final squeeze of his hand, Jane said, “I mean it. Don’t take all his money.”

He waved her off with a snort and returned to his game. Jane took a small detour to the bar and dropped 4 bits on the counter. “See he gets home, okay?”

Carl nodded. “No problem, Sheriff.”

She took one last look at the old men in the corner before stepping outside. The sun was gone and the scent of rain was in the air. *Looks like Maura was right.*

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At first, she couldn’t distinguish the sound from thunder. She had just made it home in time before the skies opened, and after going over more of the contents of the wooden box, she’d decided to call it an early night. There had been a telegram pinned to the door of the Sheriff’s office with a request that she try to make it to Cheyenne within the next two days, and thoughts of the city, all she had to accomplish the next day, and a certain blonde doctor had helped her drift off to sleep. A sleep that was now disturbed by what she slowly realized was someone banging at her door.

Taking a moment to light the oil lamp, she debated on whether or not to throw something over her night clothes. The insistent knocking made up her mind. Patches grumbled in the corner, he, too, unimpressed by the disturbance. To the dog, she said, “I hear ya, mutt.” To the door, she shouted, “Hold your horses!” both in frustration at being woken, and to be heard over the tumultuous storm outside. The clock read just past 11, but she felt like she’d slept for days. Her hand turned the knob and she very nearly yanked the door open. She stepped back in shock.

“Maura!”

The doctor stood on her stoop, drenched to the bone. Jane’s heart clenched in dread. “What’s wrong?”

“Jane…”

She put down the lamp and gently led Maura inside. Searching around, she grabbed the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. “You’re freezing!”

Maura could only nod. She pulled her over to the fire and stoked the ashes back into flame. A few bits of kindling brought the heat back into the room as well as some light. What it revealed in Maura’s face shot icy tendrils through Jane. Hazel eyes that were normally inquisitive and warm now seemed blank and emotionless; lips that Jane had caressed not six hours ago were cold. Her hat was plastered to her head. Jane tugged at the knot under Maura’s chin and pulled the hat away.
“Tell me.”

“I’m so sorry, Jane. It’s… it’s Phineas.”

The world stopped.

The pain that shot through Jane was so physically crippling that she bent over and winced. She felt as if she couldn’t breathe and a part of her wondered if this was what it felt like to drown. Suddenly, Maura became the caretaker, holding up Jane around her waist and brushing back her long brown hair.

“No,” was all she could choke out.

“Carl Boeman sent someone to my home around 9,” Maura said slowly, as if in a daze. “He… Phineas… had a heart attack in the saloon. By the time I got there, it was already too late. There… there was nothing I could do. Nothing…” She whispered the last word.

“No!” Jane said again, more vehemently this time. She stepped back from Maura and shook her head. “No.”

“Two gentlemen helped me bring him home. To his home. I… I tended to him the best I could.”

The wail that slipped from her lips was such that it startled her dog who came to her and whined. When she didn’t respond, he licked her hand as a comfort. Jane stared off into the darkness of the room, the fire playing a strange game of shadows on her face. Tears that fell from her cheeks went unnoticed, and her eyes slowly faded into dull black. It was only the chatter of Maura’s teeth that finally broke her from her spell.

“You’re freezing,” she said again, this time pulling her closer to the fire. “Stay.”

In four long strides, she opened the chest at the end of her bed and took out two more blankets and some night clothes. Stepping behind Maura, she began to undo the lacing on the dress. Maura turned in momentary confusion, but Jane softly whispered her assurance. “It’s okay. Let me.” Maura nodded and Jane continued until Maura stood in nothing but her underclothes. The ride in the rain had been so torrential that it soaked her combination to the bone. Maura tried to undo the front buttons, but shaking fingers made it impossible. Jane’s warm hands curled around and began releasing the buttons, one by one until they both realized they were at an impasse. Jane hesitated to undress Maura completely, her heart and her mind at war with each other. Maura made the decision for them, slipping the thin straps over her shoulders and pushing the garment down to her feet before stepping out of it completely. Maura’s nakedness was like a light in the darkness. Boldly, Jane pressed her lips to the nape of Maura’s neck, and they stood for what seemed like an eternity. At last, Jane bent forward and silently guided Maura’s feet into the dry garments. When the final button had slipped into its notch, she guided Maura to the bed and drew a blanket up to her chin. Unfolding another one, she placed it over her before gently kissing Maura’s forehead.

She stepped away from the bed, much to Maura’s confusion. “You’re not… I mean, it’s your bed.”

“No,” Jane replied softly. “I… I’m going to stay up for a while. Make sure the fire keeps going until the storm passes. You get some rest.”

“Jane, I’m sor-”

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

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A/N: A few things: A “combination” was basically a light onesie that buttoned at the front, worn underneath regular clothing. The Old West’s underwear. "Shaver" was a slang for a young child, and the Montgomery Ward catalogue got its start in 1872. By the time of this story (1883), the catalogue was over 200 pages and had over 10,000 items.
Day broke to the sound of something sizzling, and the smell of something delicious. Jane lifted her head from the big chair in the corner, and immediately regretted it. Her neck protested at the position she put it through overnight, and she winced at the sharp pain. Things slowly came into focus and the first thing to greet her was her dog who barked at her movement.

“Calm down. I’ll let you out in a minute.” She frowned, uncertain of anything that was happening. It was the voice of the woman in the kitchen that brought it all back.

“I tried to let him out, but he didn’t want to leave your side,” Maura said. “I thought I should make breakfast. For last night.”

‘Last night’ and all it entailed hit her heart like a sledgehammer. “Phineas…”

“Yes.”

She looked at Maura, who was trying to concentrate on the task at hand. She stood in front of the stove, still in Jane’s night clothes, the elastic ankles bunched up around her feet. There was something incredibly calming at the sight, like the final puzzle piece falling into place, and she felt her eyes tearing up. *Less lonely.* The words squeezed the air out of her lungs and she had to look away.

“I know you probably don’t feel like eating,” Maura continued, “but you have a long day ahead.”

She nodded dumbly, her mind not yet ready to deal with all that she needed to do. Maura seemed to sense this because she said, “Why don’t you take your dog outside?”

“‘Patches’,” Jane replied softly. “His name is ‘Patches’.” His ears perked up at his name and he put two paws on her lap. “Yeah, yeah, I’m coming.” Gingerly, she rose from the chair and changed into her pants and shirt before drawing her hair back in a loose pony tail and slipping her feet into her boots. When she opened the door, the dog was immediately at her feet. “I won’t be long,” she promised Maura.

She must have been longer than she thought, because when she returned, the bed was primly made, the blanket she had used in the chair was folded neatly, and Maura was pacing ever so slightly.

“Everything okay?” Jane asked, wondering if the question sounded as inane to Maura as it did to her.

“Yes. I mean, you didn’t take Nóhoo, so I knew you hadn’t gone far. I was just worried. Silly, I know.”

“No, it’s not silly,” she replied. Despite everything that happened the day before, she felt like she was standing on uncertain ground. She wanted to hold the woman who cared enough to worry so much, wanted to take her to the bed and unmake it with their desire. But she knew it would be too soon, too close to the rawness they were both feeling, so instead, she touched Maura’s waist and
placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. “Has the food gone cold?”

“I put it in the stove. It should still be warm.”

Maura guided her to sit while she brought out the dishes and set coffee on the table. Jane felt rather than tasted the food go down her throat. “I need to tell Zeke.”

Maura nodded. “Would you like me to come with you?”

She did, but she knew it was something she needed to tell the young man herself. “He’ll probably not want the company. But I appreciate it. Besides, I’m sure you have... things to do.” They both knew she was talking about Phineas.

"Just the standard practice," Maura said. "It won't take long." She paused before asking, "Do you know what he wanted? In terms of... service?"

Jane stood and walked to her pithy bookshelf. From under a candle, she produced a key. "This is for his safe. He told me all his personal papers were there. I know he has a will, because he..." she could barely get out the words, "he made me executor." Sitting again, she placed the key in Maura's hand and their fingers held each other for the briefest of moments.

"Okay," Maura said. Pausing again, she appeared to be contemplating her next words until Jane tilted her head in encouragement. "What are you going to do about Cheyenne and Sara Guildcrest?" Jane frowned in confusion. "I didn't mean to pry," she insisted.

Jane followed her gaze to the telegram that had been pushed aside when Maura set the table. "Oh." Leaning back, she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "I'll have to go. Maybe if she didn't answer, I could put it off, but not now. Besides, there's someone out there guilty of murder. It's my duty to make sure justice is done. He would've understood." She didn't have to say Phineas' name.

"Yes, he would have," Maura agreed. She began clearing the dishes, but Jane reached out for her wrist.

"Leave them."

"Okay." Time stretched taut between them until Maura finally spoke. "I should get dressed."

Silently, Jane released her hand, and watched as she moved around the small space, collecting her clothes from the chair by the fire. Again, Phineas' words wafted through her mind. "I just saw him," she said. Maura froze at the words. "Last night. I went to the saloon to see if he had any information about Father Hess. I just saw him." She rubbed a knot in her oak table and banged on the surface, startling Maura. "I just saw him!" she said again, the emotions coming to the surface at last. "We talked about... it was almost like he knew."

Maura approached her with care. Kneeling down, she placed her hand on Jane's thigh and looked up. "He couldn't have known," Maura assured her. "It was very quick."

With a gentle pull, Maura brought her to the floor, and when Jane felt arms circle around her, the floodgates opened. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered into blonde hair.

"What in the world are you sorry for?"

Her arms tightened around Maura. "I know you've lost someone, too. I just..." her sobs smothered her words. Maura's tears left dark patches on her shoulder.
"Shhhh," Maura said. "It's okay. It's okay."

The slow rocking brought her emotions in check, and Maura reluctantly let go. Using her collar to wipe her eyes, she sniffed. "I'm a mess."

Maura pushed Jane's hands aside and used her thumbs to brush away the last of the tears. Their eyes held a myriad of emotions, each seeking the other for an answer. Almost feverishly, their mouths met, not with the shyness of their first kiss, but with the intensity that came from emotions pulled so tightly that release wasn't just needed, it was required. Maura had yet to put her hair up, giving Jane the chance to run her fingers through it for the first time, and she sighed against Maura’s mouth. The whimper she got in return cast aside all uncertainties. Goaded by blind need, she lowered her mouth to Maura’s neck and sucked at the fair skin. Maura clutched at the front of Jane’s shirt, first in wanton encouragement, then in reluctant realization.

“No,” Maura whispered. When the assault on her neck didn’t stop, she summoned an ounce of strength and repeated the word. “No.” As she pulled away, Maura slowly released the fistful of fabric, but didn’t allow her to get too far. “Not like this.”

Jane inhaled deeply through her nose and willed her heartbeat to return to normal. She knew what Maura meant, and despite what she wanted, she knew now was not the time. Emotions were running too high and she couldn’t separate the loss of Phineas with her desire for Maura. She knew it wouldn’t be fair to any of them if she pushed the issue now. Still, she couldn’t resist one more kiss, and was relieved when Maura returned it in spades.

“Okay,” she said at last. “Okay.”

Maura brushed a finger across Jane’s forehead, pushing aside a lock of thick dark hair. “I’ve never seen you with your hair down.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.”

The moment was broken by an inquisitive dog who must have wondered what his owner and new friend were doing on the floor. Sitting back on her heels, Jane ruffled the dog’s ears. “Everything’s okay, mutt.” She glanced at Maura who nodded and smiled. “Everything’s okay.”

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Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Note: This is the 2nd of 2 chapters posted today.

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She tried to carry Maura’s image with her along the way, but it was a long ride to the Blacks. As she got closer and closer, her heart got tighter and tighter. Even her horse seemed to sense something was wrong because his gallop was fidgety and uneven. Reaching down, she stroked his mane.

“It’s okay, boy. It’s okay.”

The truth of it was, no matter how many times she said it, things weren’t okay, but she summoned the strength to move forward. An image of her father flashed across her mind, and she momentarily squeezed her eyes shut at the memory. The Blacks’ house came into view, and she cast aside the emotion that flushed through her.

“Jane!!” Isaiah greeted, the ‘a’ sliding over a washboard as he ran towards her.

“When did you get the job as family greeter, huh?” she asked, bending in the saddle to ruffle his hair. “You want to lead Nóhoo in?”

He reached up for the bridle. “Where’s Miss Isles?”

“She had some things to do in town.”

“I hope she’ll come back and see us. She’s pretty.”

The purity of the 7-year old’s assessment made her smile. “What did I tell you? Get your own girl.”

“Is she your girl?”

She was saved from an answer by Susan’s appearance in the doorway. “Twice in two days,” she called out. “Are you sure you’re really Jane Rizzoli?” When the soft humour failed to draw a smile, Susan’s tone dropped. “Everything okay, Jane?”

Fighting the sudden tremble in her voice, she asked, “Where’s Ezekiel?”

A hand came up to cover her mouth. “Phineas,” she whispered. Jane could do nothing but nod. “Isaiah,” Susan said sharply, “go find Ezekiel.” Her voice brooked no argument, and he was off like a shot. She waved Jane in.

Walking into her second home, she found it hard to believe she had been here just last night, sitting at the side of a woman who quietly turned her life upside down. Less than a day ago, she listened to children laughing and regaling them with tales of adventure. It didn’t seem fair that reality could sweep that joy aside so brazenly. Susan touched her shoulder to get her to sit, and she complied without resistance. A mug was set in front of her, its contents black and hot.
“What happened?”

She looked blankly into the cup. “Heart attack.” Susan took in a sharp breath, pulling her from her reverie. “He was at the saloon,” she said. “They sent someone to get Maura...Dr. Isles but uh… it was… there was nothing she could do.”

Susan touched her shoulder, but this time to initiate an embrace that Jane gladly accepted. Her outpouring of grief was short - she had let so much out with Maura - but that was the moment Zeke arrived in the kitchen. She quickly pulled back from Susan and hastily wiped an errant tear, but the image had been seen.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. His mother walked over to hug him, but he sidestepped her attempt. “What’s wrong?”

Jane knew there was nothing she could say but the truth. “It’s Dr. Barnes.”

It was all she said, but he filled in the rest, as she knew he would. His head bowed and his chin began to tremble, and suddenly, years that brought him to the edge of manhood were stripped away to leave a boy in their place. “No… no… I don’t believe you.” She didn’t say anything in return, because she knew in his heart, he did believe. A thick lock of blonde hair fell over his teary eyes. The room was quiet except for his low sobs.

Isaiah bounded into the room, but stopped when he saw the adults. “Why’re you cryin’?” he asked his brother. “How come Jane was cryin’? Did you two fight?”

“No, sweetie, we didn’t fight,” she assured him. “We just… were talking about sad things.”

Isaiah frowned. “Why would you wanna do that?”

Jane glanced at Zeke who roughly brushed away his hair and his tears. “It’s just something adults do.”

“I’m not gonna do that when I’m an adult,” he vowed.

“I hope you never do,” she replied.

With a hard cough, Zeke wiped his hands on his jeans and asked, “We still goin’ to Father Hess’?”

It took a moment for Jane to remember their plans for the day. “No, we should get into town and… see Dr. Isles.” She tried to disguise their real intent from Isaiah.

“I can put Father Hess’ things together for you, Jane,” Susan said. “I’ll get Joshua to cobbled a box together and take it with me.”

“Don’t worry about anything other than clothes and books,” she told her. “And whatever personal items you find. Though to be honest, he didn’t have much.”

Susan nodded. “I’ve got to go into town later today. I’ll bring it in with me.”

The women hugged again, this time initiated by Jane. “Thank you, Susan.”

Isaiah’s face lit up. “Can I go into town with you later, Ma?” The excitement was a jarring reminder that life went on.

“Sure, my love,” Susan said, running her fingers through his hair.
Taking a deep breath, Jane looked at the quiet teenager. “You ready to go, Zeke?”

His face blank and his voice flat, he said, “Yeah.”

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The ride into Beybeck was quiet, first words spoken only when they rode past the General Store.

“The news is probably around by now,” Jane said, “but I’m going to drop by the saloon.”

“Okay.”

“You want to come in with me, or head over to Phin- Dr. Isles’?”

“I’m gonna go. I… I need to see him.”

She nodded. “I won’t be long.”

He tipped his hat and pulled his horse around.

Dismounting, she loosely corded the reins around the post in front of the saloon. It was a somber sight that greeted her when she swung the doors open. There were no card games today, only quiet men gazing into their glasses, cigars burning but forgotten. The bartender wiped the same spot four times before realizing. All eyes went to Jane as she entered the establishment.

“Hey, Carl,” she said to the bartender, the majority of her sympathy reserved for him.

“Sheriff,” he said. Though it wasn't even noon, he automatically put a glass on the counter and poured her a whiskey.

She knew it was his way of using routine to deal with things, so she took it and downed it in one swallow. It wasn't as if she didn't need it.

When she reached for her money, Carl lifted a hand. "On the house, Jane."

She bent her head in thanks, then turned to the group at the centre table. They greeted her with shell-shocked murmurs.

She sat and tilted her hat back. "I don't have to tell you what happened," she said.

Stubby shook his head vehemently. "It's a damn shame. A damn shame."

Frost looked at her with sad, soulful eyes. "I'm sorry, Jane."

"If you give me his measurements, I'd be happy to have a suit made up for him by the end of the day."

Jane turned to Edward and declined with a slight shake of her head. "We're gonna go through his papers, but I'm betting he didn't want anything formal. You know how he is. Was."

"He didn't rest on formalities, that's for certain," the tailor agreed. "But the town might want it."

"Fuck the town!" Jane spat, drawing the attention of other patrons. She gathered her emotions. "Sorry. I'm just... I'm going to do right by Phineas, even if that means offending all the Mrs.
"What in the world is goin' on?" Frost asked, almost in a daze. "Someone kills Father Hess, and now this?"

Stubby drained his glass. "Speaking of Father Hess, have you found anything?"

"Not yet. He has a sister in Cheyenne, though, so I've got to make the trip. Susan Black's gathering his things for me."

Frost frowned. "Sounds like you're leaving today."

"No, but I'll have to look at something in the next day or so."

"Before the festival?" Stubby asked.

"I just want to get this over with, you know?" The table nodded as one. "I need something to move this forward; hopefully, I'll find it in the city." She placed her hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet. "I'm guessing the whole town knows by now. About Phineas, I mean."

"Those who don't will find out soon enough," Frost said.

"Yeah." She tapped the table with her fingers. "Anyway, if I can count on you gentlemen to share the news, I'd be grateful."

"You can count on us, Sheriff," Stubby assured. "You know that."

"Let us know what his wishes were," Edward said.

She pressed her lips together and nodded. Rather than heading for the door, she swung by the bar and put a bill on the counter. "A round for the table," she told Carl. "And one for you, too."

She raised her head from the paperwork. "Oh. Hello, Ezekiel."

Quickly removing his hat, he stepped into the room. "Miss." Her eyes flicked around his lanky frame, but he was alone. He must have seen her searching glance, because he said, "She went to the saloon. To make sure people knew."

Maura was well aware of how he avoided saying Phineas' name. Delicately, she asked, "Would you like to see him?"

He could only nod, so she stood and gently led him to the next room. She had gotten two men to bring Phineas in and place him on a long table. Twelve hours had passed since his death, and despite her best efforts, time was beginning to take a toll on the body. To his credit, Zeke didn't look away.

"What... what will you do with him now?"

She chose her words carefully, suspecting he didn't want to know specifics. "Well, I was able to find his papers," she began. "Papers that were very clear about his wishes. Primarily, he didn't want to be embalmed." He looked at her in confusion at the word. "Preserved," she said. "The most common practice is to preserve the body before burial, so that people might have time to pay their
"last respects." She was surprised to hear him snort.

"If they couldn't pay their respects while he was alive, he wouldn't give 'em a minute to do it when he was dead. 'Judge a man by what he says about you when you're not in the room'. He taught me that."

"That's very good advice."

"So you won't... 'embalm' him." He stumbled over the new word. "What will you do?"

"What he wished. I will clean him and dress him, and have Mr. Andrews bring a new pine box. Phineas wanted to be buried as soon as possible. He has a plot beside his wife." She heard how clinical her words sounded. "I'm sorry."

"You're a doctor. You know about death more'n anyone."

"That's very likely, yes."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt you. I understand." He looked down at the body. "It hurts."

She stood beside the young man and tentatively leaned into his arm. "I know."

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Jane’s spurs jangled lightly as she approached the door. Her hand hovered over the knob, and a part of her wanted to believe that if she didn’t step over the threshold, Phineas wouldn’t be dead. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she closed her eyes and shook her head. She of all people knew such hope was only a fantasy. She turned the handle and stepped inside. Concerned eyes immediately met her own.

“Jane.”

Quietly closing the door behind her, she glanced around. “Where’s Zeke?”

Maura tilted her head towards the next room. “He asked for some time alone.”

Jane nodded. Leaning back against the door, she tried to look anywhere but at the desk that was butted against Maura’s. She had never known that desk to be anywhere but where it was; Maura’s desk that was the new addition. To maximize the small room, they had put her desk to his to make an inverted “L”, with hers facing the door. She imagined the two of them in conversation, discussing the newest medical discovery or secretly sharing the latest gossip. The image made her smile through her tears.

Hastily wiping her cheek, she asked, “Did you find his papers?”

“Yes. Exactly where you said they would be.” Maura lifted the envelope. “His Last Will and Testament. I didn’t look.”

Jane shrugged. “There’s no family secret in there or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking. At least, there wasn’t when I signed it as his witness 10 years ago. I get everything. Yay.” She drew in a deep breath. “Well, everything but the books. Those go to…” she looked at the door to the next room.

“That was very generous of him,” Maura said.

“We’ll have to go see Mr. Salchester at some point,” Jane said, referring to the town lawyer.
“Wouldn’t surprise me if there wasn’t something in there for you.”

“Me?”

“It’s been 10 years. Right around the time he met someone he thought was good enough to take his place. He wasn’t the type of man to let a thing like that go by without recognition.”

“Having this job is recognition enough.”

She shrugged again. “Just the same, don’t be surprised if your name’s read out.” Motioning to the rest of the paper on the desk, she said, “I didn’t realize being a doctor in this town was such a busy job.”

“Normally, it isn’t,” Maura admitted. Holding up a notepad, she said, “I found this on his desk last night. I didn’t read it then, but I took a look at it this morning while I was waiting for you and Ezekiel to arrive. It’s Phineas’ notes on Father Hess.”

Jane stepped forward and took the pad from Maura. “Beyond his penmanship being worse than mine, it looks pretty straightforward. Or no?”

“Do you see the word he’s circled?”

“Hyperdontia’?” She narrowed her eyes. “Something about teeth?”

“Very good. Extra teeth, to be exact, or ‘supernumerary’ teeth.”

“So… Father Hess had extra teeth?”

“Two extra molars, one on each side along the top. Normally, when hyperdontia is found, it’s a single tooth between the anterior incisors.” She tapped her front teeth. “Supernumerary teeth as molars, and two? I can’t stress to you how rare this is, Jane.”

She let the information find a place in her brain. “Okay. Father Hess had extra rare teeth. Or rare extra teeth.”

Maura shook her head, her expression brimming with excitement. "It's hereditary. That's what all these papers are - Phineas was going through his old files."

"Wait. The disease is hereditary, meaning someone related to Father Hess has the same condition."

"It's not a 100% certainty," Maura warned, "but in all likelihood, yes."

Jane cracked her neck, to Maura's dismay. Ignoring the scowl, she said, "If he had relatives in Beybeck, we would've known. His sister could've said something in her telegram. She didn't."

"Maybe she doesn't know."

Jane's eyes widened. "You're not thinking... a kid?"

"I'm merely giving some options," Maura replied with a shrug. "What do you know of him before he arrived?"

"Not much," she confessed. "I guess I just assume they come out of the womb a 'man of God'," she said.

Smiling, Maura said, "Past transgressions might have led him down that path."
Jane nodded. "Something to ask the sister." She looked at his desk. "The teeth must've jarred his memory. He thinks...thought someone in Beybeck has the same condition."

Maura agreed. "Why else drag out the files? When are you going to Cheyenne?"

She answered the question with one of her own. "When are we..." Her voice trailed off and she looked at the door. Thankfully, she didn't have to say more.

"His wishes were very clear: simple and immediate. I haven't had a chance to visit Hector Andrews to make the arrangements."

"Why don't you let me do that?"

"I'm sorry. That was presumptuous of me to-"

"No, it wasn't. I just... I've got to do something besides stand around."

"Why don't I sort the train to Cheyenne in the meantime?"

Jane knew she wasn't the only one who needed a distraction from things. "Sure. The sooner the better."

"Should I get a ticket for Ezekiel?"

The question surprised her. "I never thought..."

"He is wanting to be a lawman," Maura reminded her. "I wondered if he'd learn something by coming with us."

"Wait. You're coming, too?"

With a slight frown, Maura said, "You weren't thinking about going to Cheyenne by yourself, were you?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure what I'm thinking." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Okay. As much as he's not gonna like it, Zeke can't come. Even if we leave in the morning and come back on the evening train, it's almost 8 hours to the city. I take him away from his chores enough, as it is. His family needs him. And you know," she looked wistfully at the door, "I think he needs his family."

"I won't disagree, but don't forget that you're his family, too. I saw you at dinner last night - they love you like you're blood."

She was about to reply when the door opened.


"I'm going to see Mr. Andrews," Jane said. "You're welcome to come."

He hesitated, and Maura quickly offered another choice. "I've got to go through all these files," she told him. "We think Dr. Barnes might have found a connection between Father Hess and someone here in Beybeck."

The chance to focus on something other than their loss seemed to bring a measure of relief, because he replied, "I'd like that. To help out, I mean."
"That's wonderful." Standing, she gestured him to her side of the desk. "I haven't started, so you're free to decide how you want to approach it. Please just try and keep them organized."

He nodded. "What is it I'm looking for?"

Maura reached for the notepad Jane had left on the edge of the desk. "We're looking for anything that references 'hyperdontia' or 'supernumerary'. In layman's terms, something to do with extra teeth, specifically, extra molars."

He took in her information with rapt attention. "Extra teeth. Yes, Miss. I'll set aside the file if I find anything."

"I'm very grateful for your help, Ezekiel." To Jane, she said, "In the meantime, I'll make those arrangements to Cheyenne."

Watching the exchange between Maura and Zeke, she was warmed by the budding mentorship. "You can stay here as long as it takes Dr. Isles to run her errands. But then I want you to get home, understand?"

"Yes, Miss."

His nose was already pressed to paper, though he chanced a quick look at the adjoining door, then just as quickly, looked at her. With a deep breath, he nodded almost to himself, and with each passing minute, she watched him take another step closer to manhood. There was something about it that almost made her sad.

"I can do this," he said.

She flashed a half-smile, and stepped aside to hold the door for Maura. "I know you can."

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Outside the building, they paused to discuss their plans. Knotting the hat strings under her chin, Maura looked up at Jane.

"Is there a specific time you’re thinking of leaving tomorrow?"

"Preferably the morning train," Jane replied. There were only three daily trains that came through Beybeck on their way to Cheyenne, and because she wanted to get in and out of the city in the same day, the early train was the only choice. "If we get into Cheyenne around 4, we can talk to the sister and be on the evening train back."

Maura nodded. "I’ll see what’s available. What time—" she looked over her shoulder at the building.

"The train leaves here at 8. Most folks are up at 6. I’ll talk to Andrews about having something at the cemetery around 7; if people want to come and say some last words, they’re more than welcome."

"We don’t have a minister," Maura said. "Will that be a problem?"

"You mean, will Phineas be worried St. Peter might not let him in because we didn’t have a man of God say something?" Jane shook her head and smiled. "I could recite from the Bible, for all he cared. He always told me, ‘When we’re done, we’re done’. Besides, funerals are for the living."
Maura reached out and took her hand. “Would you like me to come over this evening?”

She inhaled deeply. “No. I think I just need to be alone tonight.”

“Oh okay.”

She felt Maura pull away, but held on firmly. “It’s not you, okay?” By the doctor’s reaction, she had read her mind. Tugging her closer, she repeated, “It’s not you. I’m just-” she waved vaguely at her head with her free hand, “all over the place. Father Hess’ murder, Phineas, and whatever this is that’s happening between us.” A flash of hurt flickered in Maura’s eyes, and Jane shook her head. “I’m not saying this right. I don’t mean to lump you in with negative things. This isn’t a bad thing, you and me. It might be a bolt out of the blue, but it isn’t bad.” She squeezed her hand for reassurance. “You’ve got to understand, I’m a simple person with a very simple life. My biggest concern half the time is wondering if my dog will start growing roots on my porch.” Maura smiled. “But you, Dr. Isles, you’ve put a spoke in my wheel, and under normal circumstances, maybe I could let it work itself out.”

“But the last few days have been anything but normal,” Maura said.

“Exactly. So I’m going to sort out things with Hector Andrews, then I’m going to send a telegram to Cheyenne, then, I’m going home to try and forget about today. Until tomorrow.”

This seemed to appease Maura, because she squeezed Jane’s hand in turn. “Thank you. For explaining.”

“So I didn’t make a meal out of it?” she asked with light-hearted sarcasm. “That’s gotta be a first.” She let the moment settle comfortably between them before saying, “Okay. I’m gonna go. Meet you here in the morning?”

Maura agreed, and they stood looking at each other, neither certain of what to do next. Finally, Jane laughed. “I guess when I say ‘I’m gonna go’, I should probably do that.” With reluctance, she let go of Maura’s hand, but not before squeezing it one last time, a comforting gesture as much for her as it was for Maura.

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The sun was barely making its presence known, but she was keen to get going. Thankful for long legs that allowed her to swing one over the small crate strapped to Nóhoo's back she said, "Hush," at the animal's complaint. "It's a 15 minute trip." The horse quieted but shook his mane in protest. She made sure her own pack for Cheyenne was cinched tight before setting off.

The night had been quiet, and more than once, Jane had wished she’d let Maura stay after all. The silence had never bothered her; in fact, it was the main reason she never moved into town after her father died. She had grown accustomed to the symphony of the night - the insects and the animals going about their business, oblivious to the trials and tribulations of the human race. A coyote’s howl piercing the darkness, her dog sniffing in his sleep. But last night, it felt like an endless blanket of nothingness, as if all living creatures were acknowledging her grief. The sun couldn't come up fast enough for her liking, and even Patches was startled awake when she slipped her boots on.

Despite the early hour, there were other riders on the trail, one going into town and one coming out, the latter no doubt having spent most of the night in the arms of Miss Blake's delights. She tipped her hat to both without breaking Nóhoo's gentle lope. She had contemplated stopping at Maura's first, but didn't feel it was right to drop by unannounced. Besides, she was fairly certain the doctor had a much earlier body alarm than she had and, as such, was already in town.

Sure enough, as she rounded the building, Nóhoo snorted at seeing Yeino. Jane shook her head knowingly. Before she could dismount, the doctor appeared in the doorway.

“A girl might start to think you were waiting for her,” Jane greeted.

“The girl should keep thinking it,” Maura replied with a smile.

Jane’s feet hit the ground and she patted her horse appreciatively. “I knew you’d be here early, but I thought I’d come to see if I could help. You know, with…” Her eyes flitted towards the building.

“Mr. Andrews’ has already been,” Maura said.

“He did it all on his own?”

“No, Jane,” she softly replied. “They were all here.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure…”

Rather than explain, Maura gracefully slid into her horse’s saddle. “You coming?”

Her mouth opened, but confusion swallowed the words. So instead, she gave a simple nod, swung a leg over Nóhoo, and followed the doctor.
The cemetery was a short trot to the edge of town. It was well kept for such a small thing – Hector Andrews made sure the smattering of trees were always tended, and the wooden fence never leaned. The corner had a handful of the earliest markers, mostly plain wooden crosses that didn’t appear to have any order to them. But as the markers grew outward, a graft of lines formed, creating even separation between rows. Because of this order, she knew exactly where her father was buried, and she knew where they would put Phineas to rest. But if the cemetery’s order had let her down, the group that gathered at the spot would have guided her. Horses and wagons by the dozen were roped off on the other side of the fence, and at least a hundred people stood waiting.

Jane remembered Maura’s words. Whispering, she said, “They’re all here.”

Maura turned in her saddle. “They started trickling in around 5:30,” Maura said. “Mr. Andrews and his assistant at first, but before I knew it, Barry Frost came in, then Daniel Lloyd, then the Blacks. Then suddenly, there were a dozen inside and a small gathering out front. I thought it best to bring everyone here.” Maura slipped off her horse and tied it to the post. “I hope that was okay.”

She nodded dumbly and dismounted. “Yeah. Yeah, of course. I just... I didn’t expect so many.”

"Hector made sure everyone knew. I know he took great pains to spread the word."

Jane looked through a film of tears. She knew Phineas had been loved - she didn’t have the monopoly on those feelings for him. But to see just how many shared that love made her knees go weak.

Maura gently touched her elbow. "Ready?"

The crowd parted when they saw Maura and Jane approach. She tipped her hat in acknowledgment and made her way to Mr. Andrews. To his surprise, she wrapped her arms around him.

“Thank you so much for everything you’ve done,” she whispered in his ear.

“My pleasure, Sheriff,” he replied. “We grew up together, you know? We were like brothers.”

Jane gave him one last squeeze before pulling back. Taking a moment to compose herself, she then turned to face the crowd. She removed her hat, partly out of respect, and partly to give her hands something to do to stop their fidgeting. All eyes looked to her. She cleared her throat.

“I, uh... I guess I should say a few words.” She struggled to not curl the brim of her new hat. “First, I know this is an unusual place to gather; some of you would’ve preferred a church.” She stole a glance at Ruth Murphy. “But as most of you know, we don’t have a minister, and besides, I know it’s not what Phineas would have wanted.” She didn’t dare look at the coffin that was off to the side. She hated this, hated having to put feelings into words. How was someone supposed to summarize a man’s life in a handful of sentences?

“We all knew Phineas in our own way,” she began. “Maybe he was just your doctor. Or maybe he was a friend, or a brother.” She looked at Hector who nodded appreciatively. “Maybe he was a teacher, or a mentor.” Ezekiel bowed his head, and Maura smiled serenely while discreetly wiping away a tear. “Maybe he was a shuffleboard hustler.” A soft laugh went through the crowd, none louder than from Jarrod Cooke. “Maybe he was a...a father.” Her voice trembled and her fingers tightened. She looked at Maura again, and in the woman’s quiet countenance, found strength and peace.

“He was something to everyone,” she continued. “There wouldn’t be so many of you here today if he wasn’t. That can never be replaced, and I know I will never forget it. The empty place in my
heart won’t let me.” A sob from Mrs. Murphy seemed to punctuate the moment, but Jane wanted to make sure. Looking at her young apprentice, she asked, “Would you like to say anything, Ezekiel?”

He lifted his chin and shook his head. “No, Miss. ‘Cept maybe that we all have empty places now.”

She nodded, and was grateful when Hector addressed the crowd. “Can I get some volunteers to help me lower the box?” Over a dozen immediately raised their hand. “Jane,” he said, “I only need 5 plus me.”

“Well, you only need 3, because you’ve got me and Zeke.” She picked out the remainder. “Barry, Daniel and Jarrod, can you help?”

They each grabbed the end of a rope and lifted the plain pine box up, then slowly lowered it into the ground. The ends were dropped softly, and they stood, somber and silent. It was Ruth who broke the silence when she took a place by Jane’s side and began to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Pockets of the crowd joined, and it was ended with a collective ‘Amen.’ She touched Jane’s arm before departing without another word. One by one, they stepped forward to pay their last respects, some adding a word to Jane.

“Stop by when you get back from Cheyenne,” Frost said.

Susan Black pulled both Jane and Maura into her embrace, then slipped her arm around her son’s waist. “Come on, my boy, let’s go home.”

Slowly, they began to depart until only the four of them left were left: Jane, Maura, Hector Andrews, and his assistant. He waited for a subtle nod from Jane before relaying it to his helper. The young man picked up the spade and began dropping dirt into the hole. Though she brought her hand to her mouth, it couldn’t cover the choked sob from escaping. The finality had finally sunk in.

“I’ll meet you at the train station,” Maura whispered, the uncertainty of what she should do evident in her voice.

Jane’s free hand reached out blindly until it met with Maura’s. “No. Stay. Please.”

With hands clasped, they stood side by side and watched as the worker went slowly about his business.

The train to Cheyenne was at 8, and they got to the station in plenty of time. For all the difficulties involved in building the line to the west, the train was remarkably punctual. As it pulled into the single platform, Jane checked her ticket again.

“First class, huh?”

“It’s a lovely car,” Maura replied. “All the Pullman ones are, of course, but the first class cars are particularly nice.”

Jane looked down at her boots and discreetly wiped the toes on the back of her calves.
Picking up on the unease, Maura said, “Please don’t feel that way. You deserve something nice after everything that’s happened. Let me do this for you.”

She already knew she’d never be able to deny Maura anything, particularly when the request was coupled with pleading hazel eyes. “Fine,” she replied with a gruffness that fooled no one. “But if I get a weird look from some hoity-toity, they’re getting a one-way ticket off the train.” She was pleased at the smile the comment got her. A tug at her foot drew her attention. “Hey!” she exclaimed, clasping the arm of the man who was trying to lift her bag.

He looked up in alarm. “Ma’am?”

Stepping forward, Maura said, “He’s the porter, Jane.”

“Pullman porter,” he said, his flashing white grin a sharp contrast to his dark skin. Touching the shiny brim of his hat, he explained, “I saw you holding the first class ticket. Bag carriage is included in the price.”

Jane narrowed her eyes but released her hold. “Okay.”

“If you ladies would like to follow me?”

Taking both Jane’s bag as well as Maura’s and topping it off with the box that contained Father Hess’ possessions, he deftly climbed the short steps onto the train, much to Jane’s silent admiration. With a light touch on her waist, she guided Maura to follow, holding out a hand to help her up. As she entered the car, Jane tried to make sure her mouth didn’t drop open.

“Is this your first time on a Pullman train?” the porter asked.

“First time in first class,” she answered.

He nodded while storing their luggage overhead. “As you can see, the cabin seats four, so I hope you will enjoy the extra room. The curtain to the window can be opened or closed at your discretion, as well as the privacy curtain.” He gestured to the heavy drapery that was tied off to the side by a thick gold braid. “We’ll be making two stops along the way where you may get off the train to get food, or, if I may recommend, we have a lovely dining car attached to your left. Our famous sandwiches are available for 75 cents.”

Jane blinked, trying to take in all the information. “Seventy-five cents?! That’s almost a day’s wage for some. There’d better be a piece of gold between that bread.”

His lips twitched and he bravely defeated the grin. Pointing down the end of the train, he said, “You’ll also find the ladies lavatory in that direction. I’ll be stopping by with a drink cart approximately 15 minutes into our trip, but if at any time you need assistance, please don’t hesitate to ring the bell.”

Jane grumbled, but asked, “What’s your name?”

The grin could not be contained. “My name is Sambar, but you may call me ‘George’.” He touched his hat again before departing.

Frowning, Jane turned to Maura. “Why would I call him ‘George’?”

“It’s after George Pullman,” Maura explained. “It’s a nickname given to the porters.”

She shook her head and sat down, carefully testing out the plush velvet seat. “I’ll be calling him by
his name, thanks.” Pressing her hands into the cushion and raising herself up and down, she
couldn’t help but admire the accommodations. “This is really nice. I mean, really nice.”

Maura sat in the opposite seat and drew the curtains back to look out the window. The train whistle
blew three sharp notes before pulling slowly out of the station. “I’ve always loved trains,” she said.
“They always seem to be going somewhere adventurous.”

Jane snorted. “Yeah, the exciting city of Cheyenne! C’mon, you lived in Paris. Unless you were
talking about trains in Europe, then yeah, I could see that.”

“Europe, America, it doesn’t matter. They were always going away from where I was. That was the
important thing.”

There was a sadness in Maura’s voice that couldn’t be missed. “You’ve never really said much
about your family,” Jane said. “You mentioned you were adopted, and I know you lived in Paris.
Were you born there?”

“Oh, no,” Maura replied, shaking her head. “I was born in Boston. I don’t really know anything
about my birth parents. I only know I was adopted as an infant.”

“How did you end up in France?”

A wisp of a smile crossed Maura’s lips. “My father is in the shipping business, but my mother is an
artist. According to her, there’s no better place to be as an artist than Paris.”

“I don’t know arts from crafts.”

The smile grew bigger. “Well, in the end, I preferred Boston.”

Jane let the information sink in. “But not so much that you didn’t want to leave.”

Sighing, Maura said, “I was alone. Which, considering I was alone for most of my life, shouldn’t
have mattered. But I suppose as I got older, I wanted to share my experiences with… someone.
Anyone. Share my successes and my secrets. Have a shoulder to cry on when I failed, someone
there to give me a kind word when I felt at my lowest.”

“I can’t believe you had no one.”

“No?”

“No. I mean, look at you. You’re… you’re you.” Jane waved vaguely at Maura. “You’re…
amazing.” The soft jingle of the drink cart ended their conversation. “Here comes Sambar,” she
said. “Maybe he’ll take the deed to my house in exchange for a whiskey.”

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She woke from a dream of golden hair and shuffleboard. "Mmm." She lifted her head and regained
her bearings. The owner of the golden hair smiled.

"You fell asleep after the last stop," Maura said, answering the unspoken question.

She nodded and yawned. "Sorry, must've been something in that fancy sandwich you made me
eat." Maura's eyes widened and her mouth dropped. Before the doctor could protest, Jane grinned.
"Teasing. It was delicious," she admitted. "Even if it did cost half a day's wage."
"It did not!" Maura objected, then sheepishly asked, "It didn't, did it?"

She pressed her lips together but didn’t have the heart to drag her along. "No, not for me. But I can see why people outside of first class never make it to the dining car. Should I ask how much the tickets cost?"

A pink blush stained Maura's cheeks. "$45."

"For both?" Maura shook her head. "Each??" She took her silence as an affirmative. "Wow. That is half my wages - for a month!"

"You don’t get paid enough."

The deflection made her laugh. "Good thing I don’t eat 75 cent sandwiches every day."

"Do you think Sara Guildcrest will receive us?"

"I sent her a telegram this morning. Hopefully, she's got it by now. I have her address from some of the Father's letters." She looked out the window and sighed, drawing Maura's concern.

"What is it?"

"I dunno. I just... I'm feeling the pull to get justice for Father Hess, and I'm feeling the pull from... Phineas." She still couldn't bring herself to say the words out loud. "And I don't think I'm giving either one the attention they deserve."

Maura reached across to touch Jane’s leg. “They happened so suddenly. No one is blaming you for prioritizing one over the other. You shouldn’t blame yourself either.” Jane murmured her agreement completely unconvincingly. “We’re on our way to Cheyenne. We’re going there with a purpose. We’re focused and we’ll get the job done.”

The insistence in Maura’s voice gave her confidence and she smiled. “‘We’, huh?”

“‘Yes. We.”

She could only shake her head. “Okay. So when do ‘we’ get into Cheyenne?”

Maura referenced the paper schedule. “According to this, we have another hour.”

Jane leaned forward and craned a look into the bag. “Are those sweets?”

Pursing her lips in amusement, Maura replied, “Yes. Would you like some?”

“Please, do you know me?”

“Not entirely,” Maura said, “but I’m getting there.”

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Historical notes: Everything about the Pullman train is based on research, from the layout to the price of the sandwiches to the Pullman porters. All porters were African American and was one of the few jobs that was considered quite prestigious. Google ‘Pullman Company’ for more information if you’re interested!
Cheyenne, for all its wealth - most brought on by the cattle boom of the last decade - was still trying to shake the rawness of the old west. Or perhaps its citizens couldn’t quite bear to let it go. That was why, among the large Romanesque homes and the Cheyenne Club still stood the old Hurlbut Pharmacy and the feed store, why the wide and clear Capital Avenue crossed the narrow, uneven 16th Street. Population had tripled from 1500 to almost 5000 in a decade, and with it brought a cross-section of money and histories. It was as suitable for Jane in her 8 year old boots and dusty chaps as it was for Maura in her pristine ‘Aesthetic’ dress. She was never one for the trappings of the big city, but it was hard not to get caught up in it when she saw the happiness on Maura's face.

"You are not going to tell me this is just like Paris."

Maura shook her head. "Oh, no, it's nothing like Paris," she agreed. "It lacks Paris' art and charm. But that's what makes Cheyenne so enticing." Jane raised a doubting eyebrow. "Can't you feel it? We're 17 years away from the turn of the century, and it feels like we're all on the cusp of something new and unknown. That's an exciting thought."

"That's a frightening thought," Jane said. She hoisted her bag over her shoulder and gripped the wooden box by the handles before scanning the area for a coach. Her whistle died on her lips when she saw the large horse appear.

"Well, well, well." The voice that met them was booming and deep. "Jane Rizzoli!"

She squinted up at the rider. Tall in the saddle, even at 60, a man with a strong jawline and playful green eyes looked back. Beaming, she said, "William McMurty. Haven't you retired yet?"

"Just waitin' for you to come to your senses and take over my position."

"Guess you're going to have to live forever," Jane bantered.

He threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Same ol' Jane." He touched the brim of his hat, acknowledging Maura. "Miss."

"Will, I'd like you to meet Maura Isles. She's come from Boston to be our new doctor."

Maura stretched her hand up to introduce herself. "Very nice to meet you, Mr. McMurty."

He took her small hand in his big paw and shook it gently. "Very nice to meet you, too, Miss Isles. That ol' dog Phineas finally retired? Well, at least one of us managed it." He must have seen the pain that flashed across her face, because he immediately removed his hat, "Aw, no. No. I'm awfully sorry, Jane."

Rather than go into the details, she simply said, "Thanks."

"That's not why you're in Cheyenne, is it?" he asked.

"No," Jane replied. "I'm here to drop off this box to Sara Guildcrest." She pulled out a piece of paper and read off the address. "Any idea where that is?"
“Yep, clear across town. You need a coach?”

“I’m not going to fly there, Will.”

He snorted. “I miss ya, Jane. C’mon, I’ll get you set up.”

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The driver took the smoother streets as long as he could, until direction forced him down a washboard road. He barked his apologies from outside the carriage, as the two women were jostled to and fro inside. It was a rough ride for several minutes before the horses mercifully came to a halt. Glancing out the window, Jane saw a row of buildings and businesses identified by signs desperate for a coat of new paint. This was the old part of Cheyenne, as Will had told her, and it seemed like it had been largely forgotten in the cattle boom, as new and bigger places sprung up. The driver opened the door and helped them with the box, and when Jane made a motion to pay, he shook his head.

“Sheriff took care of it, ma’am.”

Jane put some of the money back into her pocket, but handed him a quarter. “Just the same.”

He nodded appreciatively. “I was told I should stay?”

“Yeah. I’m hoping we won’t be long. Is an hour okay?” she asked.

“The sheriff paid me well. I got all day.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “Should I take the tip back?”

Grinning, he said, “No, ma’am.”

Grunting her feigned disapproval, she curled her fingers around the box. “I’m assuming we can trust you with our bags?”

He scowled. "This ain't Laramie, ma'am."

The tone clearly indicated what he thought of the other city. Jane gave a slight nod in understanding. Pointing in the direction of the side door, she said, "After you, Doctor. I'd hate for you to be behind me if I fall down a flight of stairs with this box."

Maura tested the handle, and when it turned, she waited for Jane to give her silent approval before she pushed the door open. The stairs were old but sturdy, and Jane's fear was all for naught. Maura precariously let her hands hover over the banister in the event of an accident, but she refused to actually touch them.

"You're a doctor," Jane said. "You deal with germs every day."

"I know where those germs came from," Maura threw back over her shoulder.

The top of the stairs led to the only room on the landing. Standing side by side, Jane put the box down at her feet, wiped her hands on her pants - to Maura's chagrin - and knocked on the door.

After a brief rustling from the other side, the door opened.

A pinched face peered into the hallway. "Yes?"

"Sara Guildcrest?"
Yes.

"I'm Jane Rizzoli. I telegraphed you about your brother Robert." The woman appeared confused, so she tried again. "I'm from Beybeck. Sheriff Jane Rizzoli."

"Oh!" she said in surprise. Opening the door wider, she said, "You signed them 'J. Rizzoli'. I thought you were a man. Please, come in."

She glanced at Maura, who paused to introduce herself. "Dr. Maura Isles. I'm terribly sorry for your loss."

Sara smiled weakly and stepped aside. "Excuse the mess. I was just getting supper ready."

Jane brushed away the apology. "We're sorry for coming at such a bad time. The train from Beybeck doesn't do much for accommodating schedules."

She turned and gestured to a pair of well-worn chairs. "I appreciate you coming as soon as you did. I know it's a heck of a ride."

"Have you been to Beybeck?" Maura asked.

Sara shook her head. "No. But Robert would visit when he could. Always said he'd visit more if it wasn't 8 hours away."

"I never really got to know him, beyond the usual," Jane admitted. "What brought him to Beybeck?" She didn't miss the way Sara suddenly licked her lips.

"Well... I suppose he heard you were looking for a new minister? Can't say that I know, really."

Jane seemed to give the comment some thought. "We didn't have a church before he came. He was instrumental in getting it going. He'll always be remembered for it."

"He would be honoured to know that."

"How about you? I mean, have you always lived in Cheyenne?"

Sara nodded. "Born and raised. We both were."

Jane pointed to a photo with her chin. "Married?"

"Ten years," she answered proudly.

"And where's your husband now?"

As if on cue, the door opened, and a giant of a man entered. Sara immediately stood and went to his side. She kissed him on the cheek before saying, "We have visitors from Beybeck. It's about Robert."

He hung up his coat and filled the living room with his presence. He looked at both Jane and Maura, and bowed his head in greeting. "Walter Guildcrest." The women introduced themselves in return. "Nice to meet you. We're thankful to you for handling this so quickly."

"Truth be told, we were unsure of what your brother would have wanted done," Maura said.

"And it is a murder, after all."
The Guildcrests turned ashen at Jane's words.

"Wh-what?" Sara stammered.

Jane mentally kicked herself for the oversight. Maura stepped in and said, "Based on how we found him, there's evidence to suggest it may have been foul play."

Walter visibly swallowed. "'May'?"

"Although there was a gun by his side, based on the trajectory of the bullet as well as-" Maura stopped at Jane's non-verbal cue. "In layman's terms, it appears he was shot while in his bed."

"So we're here not only to find out what arrangements you'd like to make for your brother, but to find out if you know of anyone who might've wanted to see him dead."

Walter looked at Jane and choked out an empty laugh. "He was a man of the cloth. Who in the world would want to murder him?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. When he visited, did he ever mention having any difficulties with anyone? Maybe he tried to convert the wrong person? Got in the middle of a land dispute or gambling debt?"

"You'd most likely know more about that than we would, Sheriff."

"Did he have any family outside of you and Mrs. Guildcrest?" Maura asked. "Other siblings? Parents? Children?"

The last word dropped an uncomfortable blanket on the room that didn't go unnoticed by either Jane or Maura.

Sara, still shell-shocked, replied, "I am- was his only sibling. Our parents passed over 15 years ago."

"And he couldn't have children," Walter scoffed. "His faith didn't allow it."

"Technically, that's not entirely true," Maura corrected. "Celibacy is a religious law, not a doctrine, and anything he did before becoming a priest wouldn't have been considered a violation. He could have even married, as long as it was done before entering the priesthood."

“Well, he wasn’t married and he didn’t have any children,” Walter firmly replied.

Jane stood and lazily walked towards the wall that doubled as a gallery of photos. With her hands clasped behind her back, she nonchalantly scanned the pictures. They were a collection of serious faces, some individuals, some pairings and a handful of family gatherings. She gently tapped one. “Is that Robert?”

Sara came to stand by her side, and the wave of nostalgia brought a smile to her face. “Yes. He was 8.”

Jane squinted. “So that’s… you?”

Her smile grew broader. “I was 2. We’re very close.”

Jane didn’t have the heart to correct the tense. Returning her attention to the wedding photo she had seen earlier, she said, “That’s a lovely dress.”
“Thank you. Walter’s sister spent weeks doing the embroidery.”

“That’s amazing work. Wow.”

“Pardon me for interrupting,” Walter said, “but is that it? You came here to tell us Robert’s been murdered and you’re only interested in a wedding dress?”

“I may need one, one day,” Jane replied, ignoring the sharp cough from Maura. “Where might I find her?”

The pause between the husband and wife was heavy and long. “She’s not interested in doing work outside the family.”

She shrugged. “Too bad. Anyway, the other reason we came was to find out what you wanted to do about Robert. Will you have him buried in Beybeck?”

Sara immediately shook her head. “No. He’d want to come home.”

“We can make arrangements for travel if you’d like,” Maura offered.

“That would be very kind of you,” Walter said, his voice softening towards her.

“The house belongs to the territory,” Jane explained, “but he does have some other possessions we couldn’t bring with us. A horse, for one thing. I’ve got a man in Beybeck who would give you a fair price for it, if you trusted me to handle it.” The couple looked at each other and nodded. “I’ll get that done as soon as I can,” she promised.

“And finding Robert’s murderer?” Walter asked.

“I’ll admit, we don’t have much to go on, but what we do have is promising.” Glancing at the clock on the mantel, Jane said, “We’ve kept you long enough. We’ll let you get to your dinner. If you need anything, just ask.”

Maura stood. “I’ll be sure to start the moving process as soon as we get back, and I’ll reiterate what the sheriff just said: please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Walter guided them to the door, with Sara close behind. “It’s all been so strange,” he said, “but we do appreciate all that you’ve done.”

“And all that you will do,” Sara said.

They were halfway out the door when Jane suddenly turned. “Just one more thing.” Reaching into her breast pocket, she pulled out a small photo. “This fell out of the box when I was packing.” She glanced down at it, and feigned surprise. “They look like a happy family.”

Walter quickly snatched the picture from her hands. “That’s my sister’s boy.”

“And Robert,” she added. “And...your sister?”

“No. Not my sister.”

Jane pressed her lips together and hummed thoughtfully. “Okay. Again, thank you for your time.” The door closed in her face before she could say anything more. She turned to Maura to gauge her thoughts on what had transpired, and was met with a huge grin. “What?”

“You!” Maura beamed. “You were like Sergeant Cuff! So calm and disinterested, then you
presented the photograph, as if you didn’t have it all along! They were suitably caught off-guard.”

She tapped Maura’s backside to get her moving down the stairs. “Who the hell’s Sergeant Cuff?”

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“So what is the significance of this picture?” William McMurty asked, sitting back to nurse his whiskey.

The train to Beybeck wasn’t due to leave until shortly before midnight, and though Jane had been to Cheyenne on several occasions, she wasn’t going to take Maura to the places she’d frequented. Fortunately, McMurty had insisted on meeting for dinner and drinks after their visit with the Guildcrests, and the two old friends whittled away the time with shoptalk. The first subject, of course, was the murder of Robert Hess. Maura retold the story in animated pride, much to the man’s delight and Jane’s embarrassment. Though she tried to deflect the curiosity, Jane finally relented.

“I found the photo when I first went through that small box we found. It’s where I got Sara Guildcrest’s name and address. Anyway, it was an older picture, but I knew it was Robert Hess. He had a real distinctive scar on his lip.”

“That’s right!” Maura agreed. “On his top lip.”

“Right. But he wasn’t the only one in the photo; there was a woman and a boy, no more than 5. Then I remembered what you said - ‘Past transgressions might have led him down that path’. When you mentioned that bit to Walter about priests not having to be celibate before they’re actually priests, I started wondering.”

“You think maybe he had a family before he had God?” Will asked.

Jane shrugged a shoulder. “Who knows? Could be. How do you tell your son you’re giving him up for God?”

“An’ why give him up? If what the good Doc is saying is true,” he smiled at Maura, “a family would have been perfectly fine.” He blew out a puff from his cigar and admired the smoke ring as it drifted away. “The real question is, how you gonna find out?”

“We need to find the sister,” Maura piped up. “She’s the key to the entire mystery.”

Will jerked his thumb at Maura, but spoke to Jane. “You gonna deputize this one?”

Jane slapped his arm. “She’ll probably have the damn thing solved before I get around to it.”

He roared with laughter. “Ah, Jane, I miss you.” Pulling out his pocket watch, he checked the time and suggested, “One more bend of the elbow?”

“Only if you’re buyin’.”

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“So how did you two get to know each other?” Maura asked.

He reached out his weathered hand and clasped Jane’s forearm. “This one here? She’s the best lawman in the area, hell, maybe the territory! Barrin’ me, o’course.”

“You’re drunk,” was all Jane said.
“Ha! Anyway, we had a real bad time with cattle thieves ‘bout five years ago. Right around the big boom.”

Maura nodded. “The more cattle there were, the more thieves they attracted.”

“Exactly. There’s always been big money in cattle, and in ‘78, it was 5 dollars per hundredweight!”

“I got in the wrong business,” Jane lamented.

“Yup,” he agreed. “Cattle or gold, and I missed them both.”

“The cattle thieves?” Maura prodded.

He chuckled. “They got as far as Beybeck with 200 head of cattle. I was hot on their heels, but got outrun by this one here and her dark-skinned fella.”

“Barry Frost,” Jane corrected.

“He could ride like the wind,” Will said. “I’d never seen someone ride so fast. You, too. It was somethin’ else! Got them sons of bitches cornered in the Devil’s Dip. Turns out, they were hired by a fella in Idaho Falls, so we all headed on up there and helped the local men make the arrest.”


“Got no sympathy for a man who tried to steal another’s livelihood,” McMurty shrugged. “Live by the sword, die by the sword.”

“Not sure that’s right.”

“Probably not,” he conceded, “but it’s justice.”

Rather than replying, Jane downed her whiskey.

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Historical notes: The Cheyenne Club was a “Gentlemen’s Club” built in 1880. You can see a picture here- http://www.wyomingtalesandtrails.com/cheyenne4a.html

:By 1883, photography was in existence for over 40 years, in case anyone was wondering about the Guildcrests having photos on their wall.

:Maura’s comments about a man having a family before becoming a priest is accurate, according to the Western Catholic Church (which, while I didn’t mention it outright, would be the denomination of Father Hess).

:Sergeant Cuff was the detective in Wilkie Collins’ mystery, “The Moonstone” (1868). My first instinct was to use Sherlock Holmes, of course, but his first appearance wasn’t until 1887, 4 years after “Possum” is set.

:McMurty talks about the cattle boom. Google “Wyoming Cattle Boom” for a lot of info on this time period. What they don’t know is, by 1885, due to weather and an influx of settlers given free land (thus limiting cattlers from letting their stock roam wherever they want), the bubble will burst. But it was a good time to be a cattleman from about 1867-1882!
They had shared a few more stories, but after Will’s reminder of the lynching, the night wasn’t quite the same. Fortunately, the lawman was too drunk to realize the mood had soured, and Maura was too polite to say. When Jane finally got him strapped to his horse and on his way, it was just shy of 11, and they were able to hire a carriage well in time to make the midnight train. The ride was a quiet one, both lost in a collection of thoughts and feelings. As it was with their trip into Cheyenne, they were greeted by a porter who was pleasant and exuberant even at the late hour. He took their bags and guided them to the car.

“The night train doesn’t get the same amount of customers we do in the day,” he said, “so you’ll have a nice quiet ride. Only two of the eight compartments are taken this evening, and Mr. Preston has requested the one closest to the men’s latrine, for health reasons. The women’s is one compartment down, to your left. Shall I prepare the beds?”

“No, thank you,” Maura replied. “We’ll see to it later. I’ve done this many times.”

“What’s your name?” Jane asked. “Your real name.”

He smiled. “My name is Naquay, miss. If you need anything, just ring the bell.”

“Thanks, Naquay,” Jane said, dropping into the seat.

The porter left with a final dip of his head to Maura, and she pulled the privacy curtain across the compartment. She sat across from Jane and watched her examine her fingers. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She threw her hands up and shrugged. “Sometimes… you talked about how we’re all on the cusp of a new century. I wonder if I’m going to get left behind.”

Maura frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, as a lawman. Sometimes I feel like I’m holding on to traditions that are outdated.”

“Because you think lynching is wrong.”

“Violence and vengeance; it’s how the west was built, you know? I’ve never even shot a man.”

Maura shook her head. “Killing someone isn’t justice. The west might have been built on violence, but that’s not how it will be developed. Did you know the population in Wyoming has more than doubled in the last 10 years? There are over 20,000 people living and working in this territory. They expect it to triple by the turn of the century.” Her eyes lit up. “The possibilities seem endless, Jane, but those numbers can’t grow if the law turns a blind eye. Don’t you see? You’re needed now, more than ever.”

The logic cut through her self-doubt, though it didn’t stop her from admitting one final fear: “If there’s no law, what do I have?”

A long silence stretched out, with only the train’s low rumble between them. Maura stood and...
turned the oil lamp until all that was left was a soft glow. Pulling the window curtain aside, she looked out into the night. The moon illuminated the darkness, assisted by the millions of stars that pinpricked the black sheet that covered the land. She sighed contentedly.

“I’m going to get ready for bed,” she said.

Jane nodded. “Good idea. It’s been a long day.” She hesitated when she stood, unsure of what was expected.

“Turn around. I won’t be a minute.”

“Okay.” Shifting her body, she found herself studying the compartment’s craftsmanship while trying to forget the day. Reconnecting with McMurty, though a happy coincidence, left her feeling unsettled, and by not getting a clear cut suspect from the Guildcrests, the trip felt like wasted time.

“I’m ready.”

When Jane turned, whatever she thought of the trip was flipped on its head. Standing before her, covered in nothing but the moon and the lamp, was a smiling Maura Isles. Jane’s throat constricted and her mouth went dry.

“Too forward?” Maura asked.

“I… uh… wow.” Whatever moisture she had was expended when she licked her lips. “No. Not too forward at all.”

“Good.” She took a step towards her until they were mere inches apart. Bringing a hand up, she slowly brushed the star that was pinned to Jane’s vest. A line of concentration formed vertically between her brows as she outlined each point with her fingertip, each stroke a caress that made Jane’s heart stutter. “The way you wear this is one of the many things I find attractive about you.”

“Yeah?” Jane asked, having just enough air in her lungs to form the single word.

“Yeah,” Maura mimicked with a grin. “You know what else I find attractive, in the most puzzling way?”

“No.”

“These.” Maura curled her hand around Jane’s breasts.

“Why… uh, why ‘puzzling’?” Her head was swirling.

“Because I’ve never been with a woman before,” Maura answered. “I’ve never looked at a woman the way I look at you.” Her breath was hot against Jane’s neck. “I can appreciate a woman’s beauty, but I’ve never wanted to do the things I want to do to you.” She punctuated her sentence with a light but firm squeeze that drew out a long moan from Jane. “I like doing this.”

She covered Maura’s hands with her own and pressed them tightly to her. “I like it, too.”

They grinned and began hurriedly undressing Jane, their limbs and heads bumping into one another despite the compartment’s size. At long last, they stood facing each other, naked and wanting, but before Jane could close the space between them, Maura had one more request. Reaching around Jane’s neck, Maura slowly released the thick tail of hair from its tie, and ran her fingers through the dark tresses.
“Will you always wear your hair down when we’re together?” she asked, as if the request meant the world to her.

“Always. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“You. Just you.”

The words propelled Jane forward, her hands seeking a home in Maura’s hair, her mouth finding comfort against Maura’s lips. A light touch on her elbows drew her even closer, until their bodies brushed against each other, setting nerve endings on fire. If Maura meant to smother the flames by pulling them tightly together, she misjudged, because the feel of skin-on-skin only fed the inferno. The kiss was broken by a soft moan—from whom, it was hard to tell. Jane bent her head to find other places for her mouth to explore, but Maura pulled back.

“Wait.” Jane’s heart dropped. “No, that’s not what I meant,” Maura said quickly. “I just mean, wait your turn.” Jane’s confusion lasted as long as it took Maura to flick her tongue over a hard nipple.

“Jesus!” she hissed in pleasure. “I’ll wait. I’ll wait.” Maura’s amusement vibrated across the sensitive nerves and made her jump again.

Handing over the reins seemed to give Maura extra confidence, because she replaced her tongue with her mouth and eagerly lavished attention to Jane’s left breast, then the right, while her hands roaming freely over the angles and planes of Jane’s body. A deliberate bite got her attention, and Jane wasn’t sure there was anything more erotic than looking down into hazel eyes clouded in desire and intent. She shifted her stance, enough to make the invitation obvious. The air that brushed against her did little to cool the need between her legs, but there was promise in the hand that pressed against her.

She wet parched lips. “Is this… is this one of the things you wanted to do to me?”

Maura left a hot trail from Jane’s breast to her ear, where she latched onto the soft skin. Jane was beginning to wonder if the question had been heard, when Maura whispered, “You have no idea.” Without warning, Maura passed a teasing thumb over Jane’s clit, eliciting a sharp intake of breath. “I think of all the ways I please myself,” Maura continued, as if she hadn’t just sent Jane through the roof. “How I touch myself. How I know all the right places. I want to have that with you, Jane.” She trailed her lips along Jane’s jaw line. “I want to know how to touch you. I want to know all your secret places.”

Even though hazel eyes told Jane what was coming, there was no way she could have ever been prepared for Maura’s fingers finding one of those places, deep in her warmth and wetness. Jane’s grip tightened in Maura’s hair, partly in encouragement, partly to keep herself standing. Shamelessly, she ground down into Maura’s hand, meeting each thrust, forcing them deeper. Maura watched her, their mouths so close that she inhaled every stilted moan that slipped past Jane’s lips. Her knees began to buckle and Maura mercifully removed her hand, only to push Jane onto the seat. For a moment, Maura invited her gaze, her body luminous in its beauty.

“I want to know all those things, too,” Jane said in breathless conviction. When she reached out to touch her, Maura took her hand, straddled her lap, and led Jane’s fingers to her own aching need.

“No secrets between us,” Maura promised, before her fingers found their home again.

The angles were tight and the movements were short, but neither woman seemed to care. Though they were one of only two compartments being used in the car, they stifled their moans with graceless kisses. Jane wanted her hands and mouth to be everywhere and yet they seemed perfectly
content to have one focus, and there was no complaint from Maura who met her thrust for thrust.

It was a slight stutter in Maura’s rhythm that foretold the end, and Jane dragged herself from her own haze long enough to curl her fingers and whisper, “No secrets.”

Maura’s body went rigid, and Jane clasped her free hand over Maura’s mouth in time to smother the guttural moan that escaped her lips. Jane imagined what it would sound like in the openness of her cabin, where Maura would be free to let go without restraint. Even now, the stifled whimper of Maura’s release was enough to send Jane over the edge.

Maura collapsed forward, her soft body moulding around Jane’s angles. Their hearts pressed together, erratic and racing, until at last, they synchronized into a slow beat. The train whistle blew, making them both jump. Maura laughed into Jane’s neck, and she thought it was the best sound in the world.

“We should’ve gotten Naquay to set up the bed,” Jane grumbled.

Maura lifted her head and kissed her soundly. “Would you like me to ring the bell?”

Jane’s hands had already begun to wander again. “Don’t you dare.”

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Chapter 12

A/N: I don't think there's any historical reference in this chapter that needs to be explained, but if there's something I've missed that you'd like to ask, by all means do so!

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Her bed was moving.

The low vibration under her mattress rustled Jane out of her slumber and straight into confusion. Her dark hair partially obstructed her view and the tendrils of sleep didn’t quite want to let her go. The sunlight shifting through the window brought her back to reality.

The train. The bed wasn’t moving; it was the train on its way to Beybeck. Now having a handle on clarity, memories of the night before flooded through her and she dropped back into the pillow with a grin. Maura. The smile immediately fell. Sitting up, she brushed back her hair and looked around the small compartment. She was alone.

The curtain parted slightly, introducing Maura’s bright smile. Seeing Jane’s expression, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Hey!” Jane exclaimed, pulling the sheet to her chin. “How do you sneak up on me like that?” Maura opened her mouth to object, but Jane reached out and pulled her to the bed. “I woke up and you weren’t here. Makes a girl worry.”

“The girl should stop worrying,” Maura replied, kissing her softly. “We’re 40 minutes outside of Beybeck. Breakfast is over, but I asked Naquay if he’d bring us some coffee.” She kissed her again. “So you’d better get up and get dressed before he comes.”

Not willing to relinquish her hold, Jane curled her arm around Maura’s waist and drew her closer. “You think he’ll have a problem seeing a woman in a state of undress?” she teased. “No, but I might have a problem with him seeing you in a state of undress.”

Jane’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh? Jealous already?”

“I am not jealous.”

Her chuckle vibrated into Maura’s neck, drawing out a moan. “You shouldn’t be. I mean, you’re clearly the beauty of this relationship.” She pulled back and narrowed her eyes. “You’re the brains, too. What does that make me?”

Maura slowly ran her fingers through the thick dark hair, carefully unravelling determined tangles. “That makes you the brave one. The strong one. The protective one.” She punctuated each sentence with a kiss.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you didn’t deny being the beauty and the brains,” Jane said, feigning scorn. It lasted all of 10 seconds before her grin broke free. “Fine, fine. Let me up.”

Maura stood and helped her to her feet; the close proximity of their bodies made putting her clothes on a much longer process than necessary. More than once, Jane slapped at Maura’s wayward hands. With an exaggerated sigh, Maura turned her attention to setting the bed back into seats while Jane finished dressing. She had just pulled back the curtain when the light rattle of Naquay’s
beverage cart greeted them.

“Good morning, ladies,” the affable porter said. “I trust you slept well.”

Considering the majority of their night had consisted of things other than sleep, Jane’s lips twitched. She was just about to speak when Maura jumped in.

“As always, the sleeper car was wonderful.”

He looked at Maura, then to Jane, and back again. The eyebrow raise was so imperceptible that Jane almost missed it. Almost. Rather than call the amused man on his suspicions, she gestured to the cart. “Am I going to have to sell my horse to afford a cup of coffee?”

“No, Miss,” he replied with a smile, returning to his duties. After asking each one their preference, he handed Maura her cup, then Jane. “You missed breakfast, Miss,” he said to Jane, “but I could put something together if you required it.”

“No, I’m good, Naquay,” she replied. The hot coffee burned a delicious path down her throat and she sighed. “You know, I might sell my horse for this.”

A bell lightly chimed from the end of the car. “That would be Mr. Preston. If there’s nothing else…” Both women shook their head. “We should be pulling into Beybeck within the half hour, but if there’s anything you’d like before we arrive, please ask.”

As he made his way down the aisle, Jane leaned forward and whispered, “He knows.”

Maura looked around. “Knows what?”

“You know? Us. Not using the sleeping car to sleep.” She wagged her eyes suggestively. She burst out laughing at Maura’s reaction. “Relax. If anything, we gave him something to talk about.”

“So… it doesn’t bother you?”

The trip had been the first time they had spent more than a few hours in each other’s company, but spending it away from Beybeck was the real issue. The train gave them a chance to be alone, shielded from the demands of their friends and their jobs; it created a safe little bubble, even if only for a few hours. Looking across at Maura, Jane realized the unspoken concern.

Taking Maura’s hands in hers, she said, “This doesn’t change when we get back. You and me.”

“You’re not worried about…” Her voice trailed off, as if unsure of what she wanted to say.

“Worried about what people might think?” Jane finished the question.

“Well, yes.”

“What did Phineas say to you?”

“What do you mean?”

Jane smiled. “C’mon. Before you kissed me in the barn. I would bet my horse you two had a little talk. About me. About us.”

“If memory serves, we kissed each other in the barn.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied. “What did he say?”
She lowered her eyes. “Just because I don’t want to change doesn’t mean I can’t. And if you live your life waiting for the people who won’t change, it will be a very unfulfilling life.”

Jane drew her breath in sharply at Maura’s words, hearing Phineas’ voice as if he were there with them. She bowed her head and nodded. “That was him. That was definitely him.” She sniffled before looking at Maura. “He told me we needed to be less lonely.” The way he simply insinuated himself into her love life and casually dropped that order whisked away her tears and left a smile in their place. “Nosy old coot.”

Maura joined in with a smile of her own. “He certainly wasn’t afraid to speak his mind. About anything.”

“Nope. And I wouldn’t put it past him to somehow still be prying into my personal life, so we’d better listen to what he said, huh?”

Maura looked down at their joined hands. “You’re right. And he was right. People will always find something to talk about. I’m just not used to being that ‘something’.”

Jane shifted to sit beside Maura. “I’m not saying it’s always going to be nice. But we’ll play it by ear and take it as it comes. Together.”

Gazing into her face, Maura nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay. Now, let’s talk about other things we need to deal with.”

“Like finding out if Walter Guildcrest has a sister in Beybeck.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I’ll stop by the post office to see if the Guildcrests sent a telegram while we were away. I didn’t get a chance to ask Zeke at the-” The word ‘funeral’ stuck in her throat. “-yesterday morning if he’d found anything in those files. So I think I’ll ride out to the Blacks. You can come with me, if you want.”

Maura laced her fingers with Jane’s. “That’s thoughtful of you to ask, but I have a few things of my own that need to get done. I told the Guildcrests I would start the arrangements to get Robert’s body back to Cheyenne.” Jane nodded at the reminder. “And if Ezekiel didn’t find anything, I should start on whatever he didn’t finish.”

“You really think it’s going to come down to finding someone with extra teeth?” Her question was a playful one, but full of interest.

“I don’t know, in all honesty,” Maura admitted. “In the end, it might just be corroborating evidence. I think our best bet is finding the sister.”

“I love how it’s always ‘our’ and ‘we’,” Jane said.

Turning in her seat, Maura lifted her eyes to Jane. “That’s what we are, isn’t it? A team?”

Jane glanced around the empty compartment before placing a soft kiss on Maura’s lips. “We sure are.”

…..

They stood on the train platform, feet firmly back in Beybeck. Though she had only been gone for a day, she felt her heart and mind return to calm; the anxiety and bustle of the big city swept away by the cool country air. She hoisted her bag over her shoulder and took hold of Maura’s.
“What are you doing?”

Jane looked down as if it was obvious. “I left my horse in the barn behind your building. So did you. We walked here, remember?”

“Well, yes,” Maura replied. “I just meant, why are you taking my bag?”

“I thought I was the brawn in this relationship?”

Maura shook her head. “That’s not what I said! I said you were the strong one. That isn’t limited to physical- you’re amused by this.”

“A little, yeah. C’mon, let me be in charge of one thing, okay?”

She seemed to ponder this point before giving in with a relenting shrug. “I suppose.”

“You suppose,” Jane snorted. “Let’s go.”

The office was only two streets over from the station, but Jane received more than a handful of warm welcomes and soft condolences as they covered the short distance. She returned the greeting or tipped her hat, but made no further effort to start a conversation. They had nearly made it to the building when they were stopped dead in their tracks.

“Mrs. Murphy!” Maura exclaimed, holding a hand to her chest.

Jane was about to make a joke about specters appearing out of nowhere, but thought better of it. Instead, she said, “Mrs. Murphy.”

“Dr. Isles. Jane.”

The tone attached to her name was painfully obvious. Biting her tongue, Jane asked, “What can I do for you today?”

“For me, nothing. But I expected more from you for Phineas. First, you give him that paltry excuse for a service out in the cemetery of all places. Then, you run off to Cheyenne for no other reason it appears than to get away.”

Jane’s jaw clenched and only a compassionate look from Maura made her rein in her response. Rather than unleash a tirade against the judgmental woman, she chose a different path. “Can I ask you a favour?”

The question startled both Maura and Mrs. Murphy, the former worried what could come out of Jane’s mouth, the latter unused to having Jane in her debt.

“Well, I… I suppose, yes.”

“We were in Cheyenne to talk with Father Hess’ sister.” She laced the statement with just the right amount of acid. “We were led to believe her husband might have a sister here and I can’t think of a better person to ask when it comes to the people of Beybeck.” Jane gazed at Mrs. Murphy with nothing but innocence and interest, even as Maura pressed her lips together and looked away to shield her smile.

The older woman narrowed her eyes, as if trying to divine the sincerity of the request. Seemingly finding no fault, she said, “Of course I will do anything I can to help. What is the surname?”

“Guildcrest. The husband’s name is Walter.” Despite the teasing reputation the school teacher had
for knowing everything about everybody, Jane assumed the majority of that opinion was exaggerated, so she was surprised when Mrs. Murphy replied almost immediately.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Patricia Vernon. Married to Peter. She does wonderful embroidery.”

“That’s right,” Jane said, snapping her fingers. “She won the embroidery contest last year at the festival.”

“Most likely will win it this year, too. She did the most intricate work on my new dress.

“Thank you, Mrs. Murphy. I really mean that.”

She scrutinized Jane for the second time and still found no fault in the comment. Flustered slightly at the attention, she waved off the thanks. “I am more than happy to help where I can,” she said. “You know what Paul said to the Philippians.”

“‘Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others,’” Jane quoted, much to the surprise of both women.

“Why… yes,” she stammered.

“Thanks again, Mrs. Murphy, and I can’t wait to try your apple pie at the festival tomorrow.” Before the gobsmacked woman could say any more, Jane tugged Maura’s arm and pulled her towards the building. Once safely inside, Jane leaned against the door and released a theatrical sigh. “She didn’t come after us on her broom, did she?”

“Jane!” Maura chastized, though her laughter betrayed her tone.

“Yeah, I suppose I should be nicer. She may have given us the biggest clue to solving Father Hess’ murder.”

Maura looked at the pile of folders stacked neatly into two piles on her desk. Picking up a small note from the smaller stack, she read out loud, “‘Done’. He went through them alphabetically,” she said, leafing through the folders.

“Which is why he didn’t pull the Vernon file,” Jane walked over to the desk, and when Maura didn’t move, she asked, “Well, aren’t you going to pull the Vernon file?”

“I like a bit of anticipation,” Maura replied. “You know, it heightens the excitement.”

“Says the woman who disrobed behind me faster than I could say ‘anticipation’.”

The red blush coloured her face from cheek to forehead. Even so, she lifted her chin proudly. “I calculated the time between our kiss in the barn and our time on the train to be a sufficient build-up of anticipation.”

“I’m trying to listen to all those words coming out of your mouth, I really am,” Jane said, moving in closer. “But I gotta tell you, all I want to do is this-” She covered the aforementioned mouth with her own, softly but with the confidence that came with having done it all before, and then some. Her hand curled around Maura’s small waist and daringly moved lower until Maura jumped.

Slapping the errant hand, Maura stepped back and shook her head. “You can’t do that here!”

Jane looked around. “Why not?” She lowered her voice to match Maura’s. “And why are we whispering?”
“Because…” Maura’s eyes glanced towards the barn. “Father Hess.”

“Is dead,” Jane finished in a normal volume.

Maura seemed to realize the ridiculousness of her concern, because she chuckled. “That was silly, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe, but it’s probably for the best. I’ve got things to do today and so do you.” Jane gestured to the folders with her chin. “You gonna take a look?”

A minute passed quietly as Maura rifled through the papers until she came to the ‘V’s. “The good news is, they’ve been here enough times to warrant a file.” Flipping it open, she laid out the handful of notes on the family: the mother, the father, and one son. Jane leaned over Maura’s shoulder to take a look. It didn’t take long for them to find it, printed in big block letters under Gabriel Vernon’s name. Maura tapped the note.

Hyperdontia.

It caught Phineas so off-guard at the time that he had circled it three times and underlined it.

Jane bumped the desk with her fist. “Yes!”

The euphoria quickly wore off when Maura asked, “But, in terms of finding his murderer, what does it mean? If there had been a bite mark on Father Hess, perhaps this would be incriminating evidence. As it stands, I’m not sure how much it helps us.”

“It gives us something to investigate, if nothing else,” Jane said. “Listen, I’m going to get started on the things I have to do today. You should do the same. The festival’s tomorrow, so why don’t we leave all this,” she pointed at the paperwork, “until Sunday. The Vernons aren’t going anywhere.”

“I do have to get Father Hess ready for travel,” Maura admitted.

“So why don’t you get to it? On top of everything else, I need to talk to Frost about Father Hess’ horse. Maybe we could meet there? He’s got a great mind and I’d love to hear what he thinks about all this.”

Maura glanced at the wall clock. “How does two o’clock sound?”

“Sounds great.” She bent her head for another kiss, which Maura gladly returned. “I guess I have to stop doing this if I’m gonna get going.”

“There doesn’t seem to be a way to have both,” Maura agreed.

“Hmm.” She kissed her again. “Okay, okay.” Reluctantly, she pulled away. “I’ll see you at Frost’s around 2.”

Their gazes held for eons until Maura grabbed Jane’s vest and pulled her in. “Let’s make it 2:30.”

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Chapter 13

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Autumn might have been cooling off the mornings, but the sun still warmed a rider, as if not quite willing to give up summer just yet. Though her plan was to visit the Blacks, Jane’s first stop was home to drop off her bag and to check on her dog.

He cracked open an eye and stretched on the porch at her arrival. “What kind of hello is that?” she asked indignantly. If he was shamed by her question, he hid it bravely behind a disinterested yawn. “Uh-huh.” Dismounting, she untied her bag and said to Nohóo, “I’ll be right back.” Her boots thudded on the wooden steps and she reached down to scratch behind Patches’ ear. “Did Frost bring you that ham bone, huh? Did he? That was nice, wasn’t it?” The dog reveled in the attention, rolling onto his back and smacking his tail on the porch. “Spoiled!”

The house was the same as she left it; she didn’t expect anything different. Her position, her location, and Beybeck’s close-knit community ensured she wouldn’t have to worry. Didn’t help Father Hess, though, she thought as she cleaned out her bag. She remembered what Maura had said and wondered if the teeth would turn out to be any kind of evidence. Unwrapping a piece of meat, she kicked the door shut behind her and stepped out onto the porch. “Don’t say I never gave you anything, you ungrateful mutt.” The treat was gone before it hit the wood. “You might want to taste it next time, you know.” The dog gruffed and and licked his lips. She couldn’t resist bending down to ruffle his ears. “See you later, boy.”

Back in the saddle, she set out on a steady canter, the wind cool on her face, the horse happy to be given something to do. Not for the first time, she marveled at life. In less than a week, both her professional and personal lives had been turned upside-down, and yet, everything around her went about its business. A part of her held an angry edge at how easily life went on, but a larger part - the adult part - knew it was the same for everyone, and she tried to remember that whenever things seemed unfair. Life isn’t unfair, Possum, her father once told her. It’s just life.

The Blacks’ home appeared over the slope, and after a deep breath and a quick command, Nohóo broke into a run.

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“Do you get paid to greet people?” Jane asked with a grin, dismounting and handing the reins over to a beaming Isaiah.

“Nah, but maybe you could ask Ma!”

Jane reached into her pocket and performed the same trick she had done to his sister. Pulling a coin from behind his ear, she said, “You haven’t been cleaning behind your ears lately, have you?” His mouth dropped open and his eyes went twice the size of the coin. “Can you go find Ezekiel for me?”

“Can you do that again?”

She ruffled his hair. “Git.”

Her life might change but the comforts of home would always be there. When she stepped inside, she was greeted with mouth-watering aromas and the warmth of a welcoming hug.
“Jane,” Susan smiled. “You’re back from Cheyenne.”

“Yeah, got in on the morning train.”

Looping their arms, the matriarch led them to the big table. Jane sat and Susan went about making coffee. “How was the big city?”

Jane snorted. “Still big.” Shrugging, she added, “Not much has changed.”

“You met up with Father Hess’ sister, is that right?”

“Yeah. Gave her his possessions. Made some arrangements to transport his body.”

“Oh. He won’t be buried here?”

“No,” she replied, tilting her head in thanks at the large steaming cup Susan had placed before her. “Maura’s getting him ready to move.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t even want to imagine.” Sitting with her own cup, Susan’s eyes roamed over Jane until she wiggled in her seat.

“What?”

Rather than answer, she asked, “How was the trip?”

Jane’s brow furrowed. “Didn’t I just answer that? City. Big. Same.”

Susan’s mouth twitched at the reply. “But you’re not the same.”

It took everything for Jane to not choke on her coffee, and she was saved from further embarrassment when Ezekiel walked through the door. He slipped the bandanna from around his throat to wipe his forehead.

“I wish the weather would decide if it’s gonna be hot or cold!” He said, dropping into the chair beside Jane. “How was the trip?”

For the second time, Jane swallowed a choke. She shot a glare at Susan who shrugged and laughed.

“Like mother, like son,” Susan quipped. “I’ll let you two talk about your sheriff business.”

“Is there sheriff business?” Zeke asked, his voice hopeful. “I wasn’t able to find anything in those files, though I didn’t get a chance to finish them. I’m sorry.”

Jane shook away the apology. “It would have taken you a long time to get to the name we needed anyway.” She held on to the last piece of information until it looked like he would burst. “Vernon. Father Hess’ brother-in-law has a sister in Beybeck. Patricia Vernon.”

“She’s got the hyperdenture thing?” he asked.

“Hyperdontia,” Jane corrected with a smile. “No, she doesn’t have it. But her son, Gabriel, does.”

Zeke sat back, and she could tell he was trying to piece everything together. “Why did Dr. Isles want me to look for that in the first place?”

“Father Hess had the same thing. According to Maura, it’s like finding a white buffalo.”
Zeke squinted. “So… it’s gotta be something passed down, right? Something in the family.”

“That’s what we’re thinking.”

“So Father Hess and Gabriel Vernon are related.”

“Looks like it.”

He bolted to his feet. “What are we doin’ here? We gotta arrest him!”

Susan spun around from the sink. “You are going to give me a heart attack! Sit.” He hesitated to follow her order and she said it again, with a sternness only a mother could employ. “Sit.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he quietly grumbled.

She came back to the table and sat. “What is all this, Jane?”

“We think,” she began, “that Gabriel Vernon and Father Hess are related. But,” she looked at Zeke, “we have no proof right now that Gabriel had anything to do with the murder. That’s why, once the festival is over, we’re going to sit down with the Vernons and find out their story and how Father Hess fits into it.”

“After the festival??”

“Hold your horses, boy,” his mother said. “I think maybe what Jane’s tryin’ to say is, the town’s been through a lot this past week. Let’s give the people something to smile about for a day.” She looked at Jane who nodded.

“The Vernons will still be here on Sunday,” she said. “There’s no rush.”

The young man’s shoulders sagged. “I guess. I mean, we don’t even know why he’d do it, do we?”

“Exactly. Which is why me and Maura are heading over to Barry Frost’s later. Thought maybe bringing someone new into the situation might give us a different perspective; maybe we can figure out why Gabriel Vernon did it. If he did it. You’re more than welcome to come along, if your mother can spare you.”

Zeke contemplated her words. “An’ what if he didn’t do it?”

“You’ll notice he didn’t bother asking if I could spare him,” Susan drolly noted.

Jane grinned at Susan, but replied to Zeke. “Then… we start all over, I guess.” Though her words were light, she dreaded the thought of being wrong.

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The barn smelled of hay, horse, and manure, but to Jane, it was like a second home. The ranch hand pointed to the stall on the end, and Jane and Zeke made their way down, pointing out a few of the stately thoroughbreds along the way. Jane leaned against the stall door and signalled for Zeke to remain quiet.

“There you go,” Frost cooed to the horse. “Brand new shoes. Don’t you look pretty now? Yeah, you’re going to get everyone’s attention, aren’t ya? You sure are.”

“I don’t know why you’re single,” Jane said.
Frost spun around to her voice. “Why you gotta sneak up on people like that?”

“Just picking up some tips,” she replied innocently.

“For horses or women?”

Jane quickly shot a glance at Zeke, but he appeared nonplussed by Frost’s implication. “Whatever, Romeo,” she said. “You got a minute or 30?”

“Sure, sure,” he said, picking up his farrier’s tools and giving the horse a slap on the hip. “Come on in the house.” They were halfway there when he spotted another visitor. “Must be my lucky day.” Tipping his hat back, he greeted, “Dr. Isles.”

“Mr. Frost,” she said from her saddle.

He gestured for her to dismount and stroked the horse’s nose. “Let me take care of that for you.” Whistling for a ranch hand, he passed the reins over before leading them the rest of the way to the house. “Autumn’s here for sure,” he said, “so why don’t we sit inside?” With the door closed and everyone settled, he asked, “Not that I don’t appreciate the company, but what brings you all out here?”

Ezekiel and Maura both looked at Jane who took the lead. “We found a couple things about Father Hess that we thought we’d run past you.”

“What?” he asked. “All right.”

“Well,” she explained, “sometimes it’s good to get a different perspective on things, get a fresh set of eyes.”

He pursed his lips together and nodded. “I appreciate it. What’ve you got?”

She shared everything they had, from the hyperdontia connection to the Guildcrests’ odd behaviour to the unidentified photo. He listened carefully, thoughtfully nodding here and there, but didn’t comment until she was finished.

“Pretty obvious that the Father and Gabriel Vernon are related. I mean, that teeth thing - that’s the whole thing right there.”

Zeke quickly nodded. “That’s what we think. Gotta be father and son, right?” He looked at Maura for confirmation.

“Though I’m inclined to wait until further evidence presents itself, I do think this is the most likely scenario.” She held up a hand. “But we don’t know for certain.”

“Okay,” Jane said. “For now, let’s go with that one. So where does the murder come in?”

Frost shrugged. “I’m guessing Gabriel didn’t know the Vernons weren’t his real parents. Somehow he found out, didn’t like the news, bang.”

“Why Father Hess and not the Vernons?” Zeke asked. “Or why not all three? I think I’d be pretty darn angry at the people who were lyin’ to me all my life.”

“I didn’t know I was adopted until I was 12,” Maura said. All eyes turned to her. Though her adoption had been revealed to Jane and Zeke at the dinner two days prior, it was news to Frost, whose eyes widened. “I’ve never known my real parents,” she told all three.
“Does it… does it bother you, Miss?” Zeke asked.

She sat quietly for a moment, and Jane watched a palette of emotions brush across her face. “I suppose on some level, it does. No one wants to think they’re not loved, especially by their own parents. But I grew up thinking my adoptive parents were my real parents. They gave me the same love and attention any parent would. At least, I think so. My inexperience with real parents limits my knowledge.”

Jane offered a supportive smile. “I bet they loved you even more.”

Frost agreed. “They wanted you enough to take you in and call you their own. You don’t need blood to love like that.”

Zeke spoke up again. “Did you never want to find your real… I mean, your…”

“My birth parents?” she supplied helpfully. When he nodded, she smiled. “When I was about your age, curiosity got the better of me and yes, I did question my parents. Did they know my mother and father? Where were they? What were their names? They knew, and they were willing to tell me. It was their willingness that made me decide I didn’t need to know.”

The young man’s brows pulled together. “Miss?”

“They were willing to risk losing me to make me happy. I realized I had gone that long in life without knowing and never felt anything but loved. What more did I need?” Maura snuck a glance at Jane, then back to Zeke. “That’s not to say Gabriel Vernon felt the same way.”

“How would you feel, Zeke?” Jane asked. “You’re both around the same age; if you were in his boots, how do you think you’d react?”

He pulled at his lower lip and gave the question its due diligence. “S’hard to say. Hard to imagine Ma and Pa not bein’, well, Ma and Pa.”

“That’s probably how Gabriel felt,” Frost said.

“Now imagine finding out your real dad is living in the same town,” Jane added.

“You know,” Maura said, “that’s the one thing that I find the oddest - you said Father Hess had only been in Beybeck for a decade. But Gabriel is almost 17. Why go through all the trouble to get placed in Beybeck if he wasn’t going to reveal himself?”

“Maybe he saw the opportunity and couldn’t resist,” Frost guessed.

“He had photos,” Jane said. “Which means he was keeping in touch from the start, even if it was from a distance.”

“You think your parents keep track of you, Miss? Your birth parents, I mean?”

Maura blinked. “Well, I… I never really thought about it. I suppose… I suppose they could.”

Jane could tell the question unsettled Maura. Quickly interjecting, she said, “The real key is getting the Vernons to confess the truth. If it is the truth.”

Frost shook his head. “No, the real key is to proving Gabriel killed his own father.”

The unspoken “how” hung in the air between them, but no one had an answer.
Chapter 14

A/N: This chapter leans towards an 'M' rating.

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They hung around a while longer, talking about Cheyenne and sharing festival stories with Maura. Jane and Frost made a deal regarding Father Hess’ horse, and Zeke sat back, enthralled by Maura’s description of the train. But, soon the sun began to set and, after agreeing to meet at the festival tomorrow, everyone went their separate ways. Zeke went West and Jane accompanied Maura in the opposite direction. Their horses were in no rush, so they ambled silently side by side for a distance until Maura finally spoke.

“You’re awfully quiet.”

Jane smiled and looked at the ground. “I was just thinking.”

“Yes…” Maura prodded.

“You’re amazing. I mean, to find out you were adopted, to travel the world, to go to medical school. It’s all really…” she glanced at Maura. “It’s amazing.”

Maura bowed her head at the compliment. “First, Paris isn’t the world. Second, while I am thankful for the opportunity Harvard gave me, I would have found a way to become a doctor without them. As for being adopted,” she gave a small shrug, “I wasn’t lying when I told Ezekiel how I felt - curious and yes, there were times when I was confused, but I never felt unloved. My parents were always there for me. If anything, you’re the amazing one.”

Jane pulled back her chin. “How so?”

Maura’s eyes found a place on the horizon. “My relationship with my mother has strained over the years, whether it’s distance or time, I don’t know. She wanted me to marry the son of a Parisian artist she knew, and I’m not sure she’s ever forgiven me for moving back to America. But, some of my fondest memories are with her, sitting in her studio, getting my fingers in her paints and hearing her laugh. I don’t know if I would be the person I am today without her.” Her gaze returned to Jane. “You never knew yours, and yet you turned out to be a remarkable woman. Don’t roll your eyes at me.” Maura laughed at her exaggerated expression. Turning serious once more, she said, “And you lost your father so early. I just… I don’t think I could have done what you did.”

The words warmed Jane and gave her courage to admit, “There were times when I didn’t think I could- do it, I mean. You just have to find the strength to move on.”

Maura considered the words. “We all have our crosses to bear.”

With a sideways glance, Jane said, “You need to stay away from Mrs. Murphy from now on.” The jest swept away the sadness, just as she had intended. Maura’s house was now visible in the distance; she glanced at Maura, then to the house, and back to Maura again. “Race you!” She dug in her heels and Nóhoo took off like a shot.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Without instruction, Yeino followed in hot pursuit, and Maura’s laugh was lost in the wind.

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To her horse’s delight, it didn't take much to convince Jane to stay for dinner; what she might do afterwards lingered easy between them. Though she had been to the house before, Jane hadn’t been inside for any length of time, and now, as they stepped into the kitchen, she took off her hat and openly marveled at the size.

“It’s a bit much, I know,” Maura said in obvious discomfort. “I love your house.”

Jane did a double-take. “My house? Yeah, no electricity, no indoor plumbing, two rooms and a mangy dog. What’s not to love?”

Lifting on tip toes, Maura pressed her lips against Jane’s. “It’s warm. It’s you.” Their mouths hovered, reacquainting like old friends, but with the lingering shyness of new. She swept her tongue across Jane’s lower lip and they moaned. “Is this okay?” Maura asked.

Linking her hands behind Maura back, Jane lazily pressed their bodies together. “I’m not sure what you mean, because all of this is more than okay.” When Maura cast her eyes down, Jane raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on in that amazing brain?”

“Well, I… Let’s just say I’m not-” she paused to find the right word, “unaccustomed to attracting a sexual partner.” Jane’s ears tipped red at the term. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong in seeking out physical pleasure, though perhaps I’ve been single-minded in…”

She waited for more, but the blonde seemed to be floundering. Glancing upward, she looked for an answer in the ceiling. “Ah,” she said, beaming as it came to her. “When Dr. Isles wants something, she goes out and gets it. And she’s used to getting what she wants, especially in bed.”

“Jane!”

“What? You used ‘sexual partner’. My ears got all hot.”

“The point is,” Maura went on, ignoring Jane’s grin, “I realize I’ve initiated much of our physical interaction.” Jane wrinkled her nose. “But I’ve also realized for the first time in my life, I care about- I’m not saying this right at all!”

Jane took some pity on her. “You’re saying sex has only been physical for you before, but now it’s intimate.”

Maura shook her head in wonderment. “You say the most perfect things, but your ears turn red at ‘sexual partner’.”

“Because it’s horrible. ‘Hello, I’m Jane Rizzoli, and I’m her sexual partner.’”

Maura threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, I do love you.” They both froze when they heard the words, breaths held and eyes locked. A nervous tongue wet lips that were suddenly dry. “I should make dinner.”

Jane’s grip tightened, preventing Maura from running from her embarrassment. “I think you should stay.”

She punctuated the thought with a kiss that brought Maura flush against her. A gentle nudge bumped them into the table and the kiss was broken by Maura’s laugh. Jane’s eyes were drawn to Maura’s mouth, and the laugh died on her lips when faced with Jane’s unguarded want. Eyes trailed to the hollow of Maura’s throat where a pulse beat hard and frantic, then down to the bodice’s square neckline. Boldly, Jane traced the stitching, from the edge of Maura’s collarbone,
across the dip between her breasts and back up to the other side. The catch in Maura’s breath brought Jane’s attention back to her mouth which she promptly covered with her own. Freed of the restraints of the train and their surroundings, they responded to each other with a simmering intensity that was suddenly released.

Maura pushed and clawed at the leather vest until it fell to the floor, eliciting a low growl from Jane. If their hearts were a drumbeat in the quiet room, the sound of the dress being unbuttoned was like a gunshot. Though working blind, Jane’s nimble fingers released the fasteners on the back of the dress, and she wasted no time in pulling the garment off Maura’s shoulders, unsatisfied until it lay at their feet. Holding Maura’s gaze, she dragged her fingernails over the silk combination until Maura’s breasts pressed into her palms. Both women closed their eyes at the sensation.

“I like doing this,” Jane said, echoing Maura’s comment on the train.

Maura chuckled, the moment not lost on her. She covered Jane’s hands and completed the refrain. “I like this, too.”

“Good. I’m hoping to find many more things you like.”

“Are you?” Maura asked, her voice catching as Jane began undoing the buttons of the undergarment. “Well, I’m confident you’ll find something.” Jane’s chuckle was low and dangerous against her throat, and it made Maura shiver in its promise. She reached for Jane’s belt buckle, but was rebuked.

“Later,” Jane said. “There’s something I didn’t get to do last night.” Her lips and teeth marked a trail to Maura’s breast before capturing a hard nipple between her lips.

Maura drew in her breath and gripped the edge of the table with one hand. “I… you did that.” Jane bit with just enough pressure to make Maura shriek. “Okay, okay!” She glanced down and the glower that met her made her smile.

Jane went to her knees, her hands pulling the garment down with her. As her tongue skimmed over the expanse of soft pale skin and began to trace the crevice between pelvis and thigh, she felt a halting hand in her hair. Looking up from her knees, the hesitancy in Maura’s eyes was worrying.

“What’s wrong?”

The blush on the woman’s cheeks was evident even from Jane’s position. “I’m a doctor. I can say this,” she said almost to herself. Drawing in a deep breath, she plowed ahead. “This. Cunnilingus. I’ve never…” The embarrassment seemed to steal her words.

Rolling back on her heels, Jane frowned, and she appeared to roll the word around in her mouth until the pieces fell into place. “You’ve never had someone do this to you before?”

“I know,” she replied, eyes downcast. “I’m 36 years old and I’ve never done this. For all my talk about sexual partners—”

“What did I say about that?” Jane wrinkled her nose, bringing a soft smile to Maura’s face. “I just find it hard to believe no one wanted to do this. Wanted to kiss you like this.” She pressed her lips just above the hairline. “Wanted to taste you like this.” Her tongue drew a short path between skin so soft it took Jane’s breath away.

Maura’s halting hand became a clenched fist and her hips jerked forward. “Oh!”

Jane’s mouth began to wander; hot, wet kisses peppered the inside of Maura’s thigh, down to her
knees, and calloused hands followed, sending sparks wherever they travelled. Jane’s mouth was a cartographer, mapping out the valleys and plains of Maura’s body, claiming territory with possessive nips and welts. There was one peak left to crest, and when the tip of her tongue touched Maura, the submission was quick, the conquest complete.

Maura gripped Jane’s hair so tightly she winced, but her focus remained resolute. Her mouth never broke contact, her hands framing hips that twitched and thrust as if independent from their owner. Maura’s back was bowed, her left hand curled around the table’s edge, and Jane wondered if she had seen anything more beautiful in her life.


It wasn’t the unbridled shout of pleasure she had imagined on the train; it was a spontaneous whispered mantra that set Jane’s heart ablaze. A tug brought her to her feet and she wrapped her arms around trembling shoulders. She burrowed her nose into golden hair and inhaled deeply. Maura moaned into her neck.

“The first time’s always the most intense.”

There was no immediate reply, but finally, Maura replied, “So, in the future, I shouldn’t expect to nearly lose consciousness?”

Jane chuckled. “I didn’t say that. I’m just saying, I might have to work a little bit harder next time.”

“Can next time be now?”

Jane dipped her head and found eyes that were cloudy with want and desire. “I may have created a monster.” When Maura’s head tilted downward, Jane lifted her chin with a gentle finger. “I’m not complaining.” She took a moment to let her eyes wander over Maura’s body. “God, I’m not complaining.”

“Then what is it?”

“I dunno,” she shrugged. “It’s 5 in the afternoon. I thought you were going to make dinner.” She said it with such seriousness that for a brief moment, she could tell Maura didn’t know how to respond...and it was that reaction that caused the corner of her mouth to twitch. It also got her a pinch in the ribs. “Ow!”

“I can either make dinner in the nude or you can take me to bed.”

“Shouldn’t one of those choices be a bad one?” Deftly avoiding another pinch, she said, “I would love to take you to bed, Miss Isles. Can you make it?”

Maura slipped off the edge of the table and gingerly found her footing. “I think I can manage.”

“Good, because as much as I’d love to carry you upstairs, my knees are shot!”

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Historical note: The only one here is the use- or rather, the fact that I didn’t use- the term “out of body experience”. (Maura instead says “nearly lose consciousness”.) I wanted to, but the term didn’t come into use until 1943, introduced to the language by George N.M. Tyrrell in his book, Apparitions. (My beta caught that one!)
Chapter 15

A/N: I was going to have a gay parade in this chapter, but a reviewer spoiled it. :p Besides, nipple pasties weren’t invented until the 1920s. More historical notes actually mentioned in this chapter are included at the end.

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Night struggled to hold on, but was losing the battle to a rising sun. Jane rolled over, her limbs creaking as she stretched languidly in the large bed. The quilt was heavy and warm, and she burrowed deeper. The tranquility was broken by the loud rumble of her stomach.

“Looks like I came back just in time.”

Propping herself on her elbows, Jane grinned. Her eyes took in every inch of the woman who stood in the doorway with nothing but a smile and a tray laden with food. “Are you bringing me breakfast in bed?”

Maura approached and placed the tray on the bedside table. “Based on the sound coming from your stomach, yes, we’re breaking fast. However, considering it’s only 4AM, it may not be what you’d call ‘breakfast’.”

“What are you talking about? I get up this early all the time.” She ignored Maura’s cough and reached for the bacon. “If this what waking up at 4 in the morning gets me, I’m all for it. Is that coffee?”

“Mmm-hm.”

Her hand was halfway to the steaming cup when a thought occurred to her. Glancing around the room, she said, “Wait. Didn't we go back downstairs to eat? After?”

Maura slipped back under the quilt and carefully handed Jane the coffee. “Jane, we barely made it up the stairs.”

It took a moment for the meaning to become clear. As the memories came back she smirked with satisfaction. “Right. Well, if someone hadn’t ripped my clothes off before we got to the landing, we might have made it to the bedroom.”

Maura nodded. “Yes, and if someone had been able to keep her hands to herself for more than two minutes, we would have made it to the actual bed.”

She snuck a glance at Maura and laughed. “Guess that explains why I’m so tired.”

“Guess that explains why I’m so sore.” Seeing the look of concern, Maura shook her head. “Only in the best way possible.”

Appeased, Jane said, “It’s probably for the best - getting up early, I mean. We open the festival at 9, and I’ve got a few things to do before then.”

“I have to be in town by 7:30. Hector Andrews is going to help me get Father Hess’ body on the train. He’s contacted a mortician in Cheyenne to be at the station when it comes in. Then I have my own preparations to do for the festival.”
“Oh?” Jane asked. “I didn't know you were taking part.”

“The school children have their science projects that I promised to judge, for one thing.”

“Their little plant experiment, right?”

Maura smiled. “Yes.”

“What’s the second thing? You said, ‘for one thing’.”

Reaching for the tray, Maura settled it on her lap and fed Jane another piece of bacon. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Hmph,” she muttered around the food, but gave no further protest when Maura snuggled into her side and they settled into watching the sun come up together.

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The promise brought by the early morning sun was kept as it blazed warmly over the crowd that gathered in front of the post office. The women’s society club had taken the time to decorate the building with intricately folded paper flowers and ribbons, and the students of the town's only school worked together to create the welcoming mural that hung from the building’s upper balcony. Faces, new and old mingled freely, anxious to get the festivities started.

Shortly before 9, the mayor stood on a makeshift platform and opened the festival with a warm welcome and genuine thanks to those who had taken the time to put it all together. As was custom, he called Jane up to the stage.

“I’ll make this short, because I know you’re all here for Warren Copeland’s whiskey booth and the apple pie contest.” There was a roar of approval from the crowd. “Most of you know who I am, but for those who don’t, I’m Sheriff Rizzoli. I hope there’s no other reason for you to know me better today, if you get my meaning.” Several heads nodded. “We're all here to have a good time. In light of things that have happened over the last few days, the Lord knows we could use it.” Even more heads agreed. “So let’s not cause any trouble, okay? For all the indoor events, check the signs outside the businesses. The outdoor events are marked with booths and flags. Good luck to everyone who’s competing today, and don’t forget to try Daniel Lloyd’s pulled pork- it’s the best in the territory.” The town clock chimed the hour. “All right, ladies and gentlemen. Enjoy the festival!”

The crowd dispersed under an excited hum. Jane stood for a moment, enjoying the view with pride. She scanned the crowd and was met with smiling hazel eyes. Hopping down from the platform, she went straight for Maura.

“Hey,” she said, leaning ever-so-slightly into Maura.

“Hey.”

They gazed at each other, the only two people in the world, until the moment was broken by a drawn out “Jaaaaaaane!” She swiveled her head, searching for the source that was growing increasingly louder as it got closer. She saw the pale yellow dress just in time to catch the squealing 5-year old.

“Ooof,” Jane grunted, lifting Cat into the air. “How’s my girl?”

The child giggled. “I’m not your girl; I’m Momma’s girl.”
“You sure are,” Jane agreed. “Speaking of your mom, where is she? You shouldn’t be walking around all by yourself.”

“I’m not. I’m wif my brother.” Shyly, she looked at Maura. “Hi.”

“Hello, Miss Black,” Maura replied with smile.

“You’re with your brother, huh? That narrows it down.”

Maura lightly slapped Jane on the arm. “Don’t be smart - she’s five.”

“Yeah, don’t be ‘mart,” the child repeated, slapping Jane’s arm.

Jane’s eye widened. “Did you really just do that?” she asked her. Jane’s exaggerated expression made Cat laugh and her blonde curls bounced when she nodded. “You know I punish little girls with tickles, right?”

Maura watched in delight as she wiggled and squealed at Jane’s punishment. A familiar face stepped out of the crowd and shook his head.

“That screeching sure makes it easier to find you.”

“Hello, Ezekiel,” Maura said.

“Dr. Isles,” he said in return.

“Help!” Cat pleaded to her brother.

“All right, all right, c’mere.” He pretended to wrestle her away from Jane, then slung her up to his shoulders. “You’ll get a better look from up there, an’ maybe you’ll stay out of trouble.”

“Where’s the rest of the brood?” Jane asked.

He rolled his eyes. “Only the Lord knows. I think a couple of them are learnin’ how to hog tie a calf, and I’m pretty sure I saw Mr. Cooper sneaking a candy to Nathaniel over at the sweets booth. How about you? I mean, this is your first festival here, Dr. Isles. Are you lookin’ forward to anything?”

“I can’t wait to try the apple pies,” she said. “And Alice Primrose is selling some beautiful quilts. I’m also in one of the competitions later, so I’m very excited.”

Zeke smiled in surprise. “Are you? Which one?”

“She won’t tell me,” Jane replied.

“Well now, maybe we can figure it out through process of elimination,” he said to Jane. “Can’t be the apple pie contest because she said she wants to try them.”

Jane nodded. “I’ll go out on a limb and say it’s not the steer roping.”

“But it might have something to do with horses,” Zeke offered. “She has a great horse.”

“If it’s not baking or horses, then it’s embroidering. She’s got talented hands.” Jane heard the words as they came out of her mouth and she felt her cheeks redden. Maura’s abrupt cough didn’t help matters. “I mean…” she quickly stammered, “you know, a doctor would have to have good hands.”
She was saved from any further embarrassment when Cat blurted out, “I hafta pee!”

“You heard the boss,” Zeke said. “C’mon, Chickabiddy, let’s go.” To Jane, he asked, “You’ll come to see the shooting?”

“Of course.”

“All right, see you then.”

“When is the contest?” Maura asked her.

“It’s the last one of the day, so around 3. When’s your contest?”

Maura smiled. “Not for a while.” Looping arms with Jane, she leaned into her shoulder and said, “Why don’t you show me your festival?”

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“So have you guessed?”

The midday sun sat high in the sky, making it a day to enjoy for everyone. Jane and Maura had strolled along the main street, first up one side and then the other, stopping at booths to sample the food and drink, or to examine the tables of preserved goods and homemade knick knacks.

“I’ve got an idea.”

Maura pressed against Jane’s arm. “Do tell.”

“You’re not in the steer roping, right?”

Maura laughed. “No, I am not.”

“Had to ask. And you’re not in the shooting contest.”

“You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“I saw you at the Blacks when those little kernels set up the targets. You were all wide-eyed.”

Maura hummed. “Maybe I was simply impressed at my competition.”

Shaking her head, June replied, “Nope. You jumped when I fired. No shooter worth their salt would do that.”

Maura craned her neck and whispered into Jane’s ear, “You’re very clever.”

She valiantly resisted the shiver of delight that ran up her back. “And you’re too damn tempting,” she said, much to Maura’s amusement. “Anyway… you’re in one of the horse contests. I’m going with the barrel race.”

Maura’s devilish mouth broke into a wide smile. “How did you guess?”

Jane shrugged. “I guessed the horses because there wasn’t much left,” she admitted. “And you ride Tomato with a skill that comes with practice.”

The translated name brought a pout to Maura’s face. “Yeino,” she stressed the word, “is a very skilled horse. Yes, we’ve entered the barrel race.”
A trio of men caught her eye and waved her over. Guiding Maura in that direction, she tsked, “Poor Frost. First year he’s entered the contest and he’s going to get beat by the one person prettier than he is. Afternoon, gentlemen,” she said, approaching the group.

“Sheriff,” one man replied, tipping his white hat. The two others fell in line. Looking at Maura, he flashed a set of pearly white teeth. “Miss.”

“Rein it in, Gary,” Jane groaned. “Maura, I’d like you to meet Gary Winslow, Christopher Higgins, and Hank Leonard. Gentlemen, Dr. Maura Isles.”

“It’s a pleasure,” she said, offering each man a firm handshake. “Pardon me for saying, Mr. Winslow, but you have a wonderful smile.”

“She’s also the town dentist,” Jane added.

He laughed and rocked back in his heels. “Thank you, Dr. Isles. And the pleasure’s all mine.”

“It sure is,” Jane said, garnering a boisterous laugh from his friends. “How are things at the Fort? I heard the infantry rode out.”

He nodded, the mirth leaving him. “Only the cavalry left. You know, finding gold in Black Hills was the worst thing that coulda happened. Escalated a whole heap of trouble with the Sioux.” He shook his head. “It’s calmed down somewhat, but I don’t see much future at the Fort.”

“At least you’ll always have work,” Jane said. “Someone’s always looking for a good man with a gun.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Eh.”

“Don’t play coy, Gary.” She nudged Maura. “Mounted Riflemen, the three of them.”

Christopher and Hank bowed their heads at the praise, and it brought the smile back to Gary’s face. “That’s why we’re all headin’ West.”

“California?”

“Maybe. Or Nevada.”

“Somewhere a sight warmer than here,” Hank said.

“Are you gentlemen in the shooting contest?” Maura asked.

“Oh, are they having one today?” He winked at her, then covered it with a cough after seeing Jane’s glower.

“You boys are outta luck,” Jane said. “I heard Oakley’s in town.”

“Ah, shit!” Christopher spat. Remembering his company, he quickly said, “My apologies, Miss.”

Hank had no such reservations. “Dammit!”

Jane could only maintain the charade for so long before she burst out laughing. “I’m just pulling your leg. Last I heard, she was in Nebraska with Cody doing some show.”

“Besides,” Gary said, “it’s not Annie that’s beat our ass three years runnin’.” He begrudgingly
jerked his chin towards Jane. “Beat Annie, too!”

Maura turned to Jane, her mouth dropping open. “You beat Annie Oakley in a shooting contest?”

Jane shuffled from foot to foot, suddenly uncomfortable at the attention. “It was only pistols. No one can touch that girl with a rifle.”

The three men nodded as one. “She’s a damn whip,” Hank agreed.

Gary chuckled at Jane’s discomfort, but let it slide. “I hear you’re not in it this year, either. So one of us has got a chance, even if you’ve rigged it to only allow pistols.”

Thankful for the change in topic, she smirked, “Well I wouldn’t be very smart to set up a shooting contest that involved rifles with Oakley and the territory’s best rifleman around, would I?”

Gary tsked. “And here I always saw you as one of the most scrupulous people around.”

Maura squeezed Jane’s arm and smiled, “She is.”

Gary pursed his lips in amusement, and his twinkling eyes met Jane’s. Before he had a chance to reply, she quickly butted in. “I’d worry more about the competition I have than someone who graciously pulled herself from the contest.”

Christopher leaned forward. “Got a name, Sheriff?”

“Ezekiel Black,” she replied.

He narrowed his eyes as if running the name through his memory. “Don’t know ‘im.”

“You will after the contest,” she said.

Gary whooped with laughter. “Ah, Jane. I always liked you, you know.”

She brushed aside the compliment. “Must be why you turned down the offer to be my partner.”

With a deliberation that was missed by no one, he held Jane’s gaze, flicked his eyes quickly to Maura, then back again. His smile was saucy and sly. “Oh, I’m not sure I’m the right person for that.” The comment lingered in the air until it was broken by Hank’s good-natured snort. “Anyway,” he continued, “if memory serves, Beybeck still has the best pork in the territory. Gentlemen?” Holding out his palm to Maura, he took her proffered hand and kissed her knuckles. “An honour.”

Jane rolled her eyes. Touching the butt of her gun, she said, “Get going.” The men, completely nonplussed by her threat, laughed as they walked away. “Bastards,” she muttered, though she couldn't hide her smile.

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Historical notes:

- “The Fort” is Fort Laramie.
- Gary talks about finding gold in the Black Hills, which started the Great Sioux War of 1876-77. It’s why the cavalry were still in Laramie. However, an abandonment order was issued in 1889, and most of the cavalry left for Colorado. The last soldiers left the fort on April 20th, 1890.
- I’m sure most know who Annie Oakley (1860-1926) is. She would have been 23 at the time of this story and possibly travelling with the Sells Brothers Circus which she joined in 1881. Her
expertise was with the rifle, which is why they use revolvers in the contest. I don’t think even Jane Rizzoli could have beaten Annie Oakley in a rifle contest!
A/N: A slightly short chapter, as it went on quite a bit and I had to chop it into 2 sections to give my beta reader a break. :p

.....

“I should get ready.”

They stood outside the building and watched the bustle of the festivities surround them. Though Maura was doing nothing more than changing for her contest, Jane was reluctant to let go. The doctor seemed to recognize this, because after a quick look around, she lifted on tiptoes to leave a chaste kiss on her lips.

“I’ll only be a minute,” Maura promised. “Wait right here.”

Jane watched her dart into the building, and wondered how in the world she had been taken in so quickly by a simple touch and a bright smile. It seemed to have happened in the blink of an eye, and yet the depth of their connection made it feel like years. They had known each other less than 6 months, and known each other - Jane felt her cheeks go red - less than 6 days. But she couldn’t imagine life without her. Chuckling, she turned to face the street and immediately saw Fred Langley walking in her direction. She raised a hand in greeting.

“Sheriff,” he said.

“Mr. Langley. Are you enjoying the festival?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful, isn’t it? Gets bigger every year. Great for the town!” Pulling a piece of paper from his back pocket, he got right down to business. “Thought I’d show this to you before I pass it along. You wanted to know if anything came in for either of the Vernons.” He held up the paper. “Telegram from Patricia Vernon’s brother in Cheyenne.”

“Walter.”

“That’s right.”

“May I?” The postmaster handed over the telegram without hesitation.

Patricia

Please come to R’s funeral which will be on Tuesday. It’s very important.

-Walter

Jane read the words and tried to stave off a feeling of disappointment. She knew the likelihood of a confession or final puzzle piece was almost none, but a small part of her had hoped for it anyway. She handed the paper back to Langley.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Sheriff. I’m assuming I can pass this along now?”

She nodded. “And I know it goes without saying, but-”
He mimed buttoning his lip. “Not a word.”

She was about to thank him again when the words caught in her throat. Around the corner, two familiar sights appeared, a horse and rider she had come to know well. But it was the rider who stole her voice, and if the intake of breath by the man at her side was any indication, she wasn’t the only one affected. Sitting tall in the saddle was Maura Isles, though not the same Maura who had left only minutes earlier. In her place was a woman not only regal in image, but also in-

“Pants,” Fred whispered approvingly. “Fitted pants.”

The clarification was an important because, though seeing a woman in pants wasn’t entirely uncommon, seeing a woman in fitted pants, complete with long overcoat, was something else entirely.

“Do you like it?” Maura asked from the saddle.

Jane could only nod dumbly. It was the postmaster who said, “Is it Madame Jane Dieulafoy?” When Jane blinked at him, he shrugged unapologetically. “I may have read a magazine or two that came from Boston that may have come from Europe.”

She looked at him with newfound appreciation. “You old dog.”

Maura’s reply had a sweeter tone. “You’re very well read, Mr. Langley! Yes, I have gotten an inspiration or two from her, though I could never cut my hair.” She gestured to her horse. “And while I don’t mind wearing a dress for general purposes, it can be quite intrusive for technical riding.”

“Yes,” was all Jane could finally utter.

“Are you in the barrel races, Miss Isles?” When she nodded her answer, he smiled. “Then I think your outfit is very appropriate. I’ll be cheering you on.” Looking at Jane, he said, “I should get this to Mrs. Vernon. I’ll be sure to let you know if anything else arrives.”

Jane gave a half-nod in thanks, though her attention was directed solely at Maura. She walked up to the horse and stroked her jaw. “I’m trying not to be jealous,” she whispered into her ear. Taking the bridle with a gentle hand, she asked Maura, “Can I?” Maura nodded, and Jane led the pair down the street. Heads turned and mouths dropped, and Jane couldn’t remember a time when she had felt prouder. The horse swayed side-to-side, its walk leisurely and sure, while its owner sat in the saddle as if she had been born on it. Many men tipped their hats or bowed their heads in greeting as they passed, and Jane returned the acknowledgement with a tilt of her chin.

The contests were set up behind the saloon, both because of the large unused space and to give the crowd a chance to watch while enjoying a whiskey. There was no bull riding, thanks to a few inebriated patrons getting more than a dash of liquid courage last year, but the steer wrestling remained, along with some events less likely to cause injury. With the wrestling and the roping out of the way, all that remained was the barrel race and the long distance contest. While a few cowhands set up the obstacles, the Brighton brothers entertained the crowd with their roping tricks.

“I’ll need to sign in,” Maura said. “Would you mind looking after Yeino for a minute?” Dismounting, she handed the reins to Jane.

“Sure,” Jane said, the aftershocks of her surprise still evident in her one word reply.

“You know,” Maura whispered, leaning in close, “I can wear these pants inside, too.” Jane’s mouth dropped open, and a grinning Maura gently cupped it closed. “I’ll be right back.”
“Sure,” Jane repeated, revealing the full extent of her vocabulary when in the presence of Maura Isles and fitted pants.

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If there were stares on her way to the booth, Maura didn’t take notice. It was only when she saw a friend that her eyes brightened and her smile grew. “Mr. Frost!”

He turned at his name. Seeing the voice’s owner, he took off his hat and waved it in front of his face. “If you don’t mind me saying, Dr. Isles - my goodness!” His smile was broad and brilliant and infectious.

“Thank you,” she said, standing beside him.

When she picked up the pencil to fill in her name, he raised an eyebrow and frowned. “You’re not going to tell me you’ve entered this contest, have you?”

She entered her name in neat cursive strokes, then put the pencil down with a small flourish. “I certainly am.”

“Well, dang it,” he said, slapping his leg with his hat. “You didn’t enter the long race too, did you?”

“No.”

“Alright. At least there’s one thing I can win today!”

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Sure enough, he was right, for while he later won the long race by a good five lengths, he didn’t have a chance in the barrels. The crowd gathered to watch the contest, a balance of brute speed and delicate maneuvering. Leaning over the fence that circled the course, they shouted and praised each rider who found the ability to bring out both in their horse. But it was clear there would be only one winner today: the doctor who had caused a stir with both her clothes and her riding.

Nathaniel perched on Jane’s shoulders and bounced in delight every time Maura circled a barrel. “She’s good!” he cheered.

The exuberant child would be the cause of sore shoulders tomorrow, but Jane’s pride felt none of it today. “She sure is.”

Prizes were given out to the winners at the end of the festival to keep the events moving, so as the crowd began to disperse, Maura brought her horse over to Jane.

“You’re good!” Nathaniel repeated. “Down,” he said to Jane, clamoring off her shoulders before scurrying away.

“Wait! Where are you-” But it was too late; he was long gone. Jane sighed. “I guess it’s a good thing they have 11. If one runs off the face of the earth, they’ve got 10 left.”

“Jane!” Maura said, gracefully sliding off her horse. She patted Yeino’s flank and whispered some words into her ear before looking at Jane. They faced each other for several minutes until Jane shook her head.

“C’mere.”
It was the only encouragement Maura needed to step into Jane’s arms. When Jane lifted her off her feet, a squeal escaped.

“Put me down!” Maura laughed.

She did as she was told, but didn’t let go of the blonde. Glancing around, she was torn between her status as sheriff and her desires as a woman.

Maura noticed the struggle and whispered, “Can I stay at your place tonight?”

The blush swept across Jane’s face, having her thoughts read so easily. Rather than give the answer they both already knew, she said, “We’ve probably missed the race, but if we don’t see the shooting contest, Zeke will never forgive us.”

“We can’t have that,” Maura agreed. Bending her elbow, she offered it to Jane. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Her eyes roamed over Maura with a rawness that heated them both. “Oh, we shall.”

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Historical note:

-Madame Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916) was a French archaeologist who had a penchant for wearing men’s suits and her hair short.
“Any last advice before we start?” Zeke was clenching and unclenching his hands as he took stock of his competition.

“Yeah, relax,” Jane replied. “You’re wound up tighter than Matthew’s chronograph.” She stood in front of him, and placed her hands on his shoulders. She wondered when he had grown so much. “Listen to me. You’re the best shooter in this competition. The best.” When he snorted, she shook him once. “You think I’m the kind of person to just throw around praise to make someone happy?” She waited for a response.

“No, Sheriff,” he said. “You’re the most honest person I know, outside Ma and Pa.”

“Okay. Don’t worry about the Riflemen; they’re auger with the long gun, but can’t make the adjustment for the short barrel. Have you been practicing?”

“Yes, Sheriff.”

“So what’s the problem?” Her smile offered confidence, and he smiled back. “You want some advice? Okay. Press the trigger with the tip of your finger, don’t pull it with the fleshy part.” She demonstrated with her hands. “Just before you shoot, hold your breath. It’ll steady your aim.” He watched in rapt attention and she couldn’t help but smile again. She had seen him grow from a boy to a man, and despite not being his parent, she felt a certain amount of pride in being a part of that growth. “And one more thing - you should start calling me ‘Jane’.”

His eyes grew only for a moment until an understanding seemed to drape over him. Nodding, he said, “I heard all of that, and I promise I’ll make you proud. Jane.”

She clasped her hand on his shoulder. “I know you will.”

“Okay. Don’t worry about the Riflemen; they’re auger with the long gun, but can’t make the adjustment for the short barrel. Have you been practicing?”

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She clasped her hand on his shoulder. “I know you will.”

“What?” Jane asked, taking her place at Maura’s side. She hadn’t said anything when Jane returned, but it was clear there was something dancing around in her head.

“Nothing. You’re just a remarkable person.” Before Jane could protest, Maura laced her fingers with Jane’s and she turned to the open range. “Now tell me how this contest works.”

“There are 6 cans at 10, 25, and 50 yards. Matthew will time each shooter. Fastest shooter wins.”

Maura nodded. “Based on what I saw of your shooting, I know why you won last year.”

“The trick is finding your aim and your patience,” Jane warned. “Every target you miss is an extra 10 seconds. And let me tell you, even though the cans get bigger at the longer distances, at 50 yards, they look smaller than a quarter in your hand. You can shoot those cans at 10 yards like that,” she snapped her fingers. “But you want to take your time with the longer targets. A patient shooter should be able to do all of them in three minutes.”

Maura looked off to the side, estimating the formula. “30 seconds, 60, then 90?”

“20, 40, and 60. Don’t forget the reload time. See how most of them have one of these?” She pulled
out her gun. “Smith & Wesson Schofield. Ejector pushes out all the cartridges at once. Takes about 30 seconds - half the time it takes to empty and reload a Colt.”

Maura absorbed the information. “A patient shooter should be able to do all 18 targets in three minutes,” Maura echoed. “What was your time?”

“2:18,” she replied. “Would’ve been less if I hadn’t run out of breath at the end. Missed the last target.”

Shaking her head in amazement, Maura asked, “And Ezekiel?”

“2 and a half,” Jane replied proudly. “Was so nervous, he couldn’t pull down the barrel hard enough to pop out the shells on the second reload. Finished 3rd behind me and Annie Oakley. I think he could’ve beat her, I really do.”

Maura hugged Jane’s arm. “I bet you’re right. Oh, they’re starting!”

…..

Unlike the horse competitions, the crowd was directed to stay a fair distance from the action. For extra safety, it also meant standing behind the shooter, so the targets looked even farther away. Jane handed Maura a scope.

“This will help.”

Maura took it with gratitude. Holding it to her eye, she scanned the targets. “Those are incredibly far.”

“Fifty yards looks like a mile when you're trying to knock a can off a post,” Jane agreed.

Maura gestured to the group of men gathered at the booth. “No women.”

“With Annie busy and me out, no. Maybe you should start practicing.”

“I just might,” she said, ignoring the teasing tone in Jane’s voice. “Who would be my biggest competitor? After you and Ezekiel, of course.”

Jane’s mouth twitched at the bravado. “Gary Winslow’s the one to watch. He’s practically salivating over the fact it’s only Zeke standing in his way.”

“The other two Riflemen?”

She shrugged. “Hank and Christopher are good enough, but I think they really come for the whiskey and pork.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, can I have your attention, please?” Matthew stood in front of the crowd and waited for the chatter to die down. “For all the new folk, here’s a quick rundown of what you’re going to see today. Ten of the territory’s top shooters are here to find out who is the best of them all. Targets will be set up at three distances, and the shooter will be timed.” He showed his chronograph. “The can must be knocked clean off the post in order to count. Any misses will add 10 seconds to the final time. If you can’t do it in less than four minutes, you’re disqualified. No arguments.” He gave the men a glaring warning. “Winner receives this brand new Winchester, donated by yours truly and Sheriff Jane Rizzoli, who was also kind enough to withdraw from the competition this year.” The shooters clapped.
“Yeah, yeah,” she grinned.

“That’s it, folks,” Matthew finished. “For your own safety, please stay behind the line, and whatever you do, please keep an eye on the little ones. These are the best shooters around, but I’ve heard John Swanson forgot his glasses.” The aforementioned man pretended to be blind, much to the crowd’s delight.

“Less talking, more shooting!” a voice yelled out.

“You heard the man,” Matthew said. “Let’s begin!”

…..

While they were indeed some of the best shooters in the territory, 4 were also the slowest, and all came in past the 4 minute limit. John Swanson did in fact forget his glasses, and graciously removed himself from the competition, for everyone’s safety. Bill Primrose, one of Frost’s horse wranglers, put in an impressive time of 2 minutes and 58 seconds, which was almost a minute faster than both Christopher Higgins and Hank Leonard. Next up was Gary Winslow, and Jane leaned forward on the fence.

“Now, we’ll see some competition. I wonder if he’s gotten better at his short range shooting.”

Maura turned her head to the side but kept her eyes on the field. “Is that his weakness?”

“Yeah. Amazing long range, but that makes sense since his specialty is the rifle. Getting his eyes used to the shorter distances has tripped him up every year, though.”

His quick time on the 10 yard targets answered her question.

“22 seconds!” Matthew announced while Gary reloaded for the next round. It took him 25 seconds to change the cylinder. Six more shots rang out, and again, the time was well under Jane’s earlier breakdown. Instead of her estimated time of 40 seconds, he shaved it down to 37. “One minute and 34 seconds!” Calmly but quickly, he switched out the cylinder for the second time, adding 30 seconds onto his total.

“He’s getting nervous,” Jane whispered.

“2 minutes, 4 seconds,” Matthew bellowed.

The crowd watched intently, holding their breath as they watched the famed Rifleman take aim. It was easy to see why he was chosen for the job - despite the change in velocity and size, his shot was accurate. One by one the cans lifted into the air, barely a second passing between cocking the hammer and taking the shot. Perhaps he had been thinking about beating Jane’s record. Or maybe he just couldn’t believe his luck this year. Whatever it was, it made the crowd draw in a shocked gasp.

“He missed,” Maura said.

Jane wiggled her fingers, gesturing for the scope. Sure enough, the black Cream City flour bin stood tall on the post. “He missed,” she echoed.

“2 minutes, 16 seconds,” Matthew said, pausing for effect. “With a 10 second penalty. For a total of 2 minutes, 26 seconds.”

Jane could see the anger in his frame, but gave him credit for how quickly he overcame it. Turning
to look at the crowd, he shrugged and grinned at Jane.

“Maybe the record next year,” he said. “But at least I won’t be goin’ away completely empty-handed.” He sauntered over to Matthew. “Might as well give me that Winchester now, Mr. Cooper. Nobody will beat that score today.”

The taunt was meant to unsettle Zeke, but Jane was proud to see the young man approach the mark with steely determination. His eyes never wavered from the targets that were being reset by speedy volunteers. Standing in a ready but relaxed pose, he dry-fired his weapon six times before loading the cylinder and carefully clicking the barrel back into place.

“How did he do that?” Maura asked, barely above a whisper.

“Helps your thumb and finger get used to the tension it takes to pull the hammer and the trigger,” Jane explained. “It’ll help him focus, too.”

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” Matthew said, “we’re down to our last shooter. Since Mr. Winslow has the fastest time, it’s up to Mr. Ezekiel Black to do better, or the Winchester goes to the Rifleman. Are you ready, young man?”

Zeke brushed back a lock of hair. “I’m ready, Mr. Cooper.”

Matthew nodded. He held up his hands to make sure everyone was safely behind the lines, then tipped his head at Zeke. “I will count to 3, and when I say ‘3’, the time begins. One… two… three!”

In the blink of an eye, the first six cans bounced into the air.

“17 seconds!” Matthew announced to the gasp of the crowd.

Very calmly, Zeke unlatched the top break with his right thumb, grabbed onto the end of the barrel with his left hand, and in one movement, pulled the barrel down and ejected all the empty casings. He then began reloading the cylinder with fresh bullets. Though every shooter in the contest had a Schofield, the smooth action pleased the crowd every time.

“I know some cavalry men who can do that one-handed while riding a horse, then reload,” Jane shared. She watched him intently. “He’s going to do it in less than 30 seconds.”

Twenty eight, by Matthew’s count.

Maura shook her head in wonder. “I have a lot to practice before the next festival.”

Jane laughed but immediately fell silent when Zeke raised his gun for the next round. He was slightly slower than his first round, but no less meticulous. Matthew glanced down at his watch.

“One minute and… 21 seconds!”

“He is barreling through this!” Jane whispered with pride.

Maura couldn’t hide her appreciation. “You won’t be upset if he beats your record?”

“Upset?” Jane repeated. “Heck, no. I’d be thrilled. Would give me a reason to enter again next year.”

“One minute and 53 seconds!”
His second reload time was a shade slower than the first, and Gary didn’t hesitate in spotting the weakness.

“Don’t get nervous now, kid.”

Jane shot him a look that stopped whatever else he was going to say. To her prodigy, she shouted, “Nothing to it, Zeke!”

Pockets of the crowd showed their support, calling out words of encouragement and praise. When he took a deep breath and raised his gun, the crowd fell silent. A shot rang out and a can leapt into the air, the sun glinting off the metal like a diamond. Zeke cocked the hammer, squinted, and fired again. A second can met the same fate as the first. A third shot followed, slower than the last, but still straight and true. The aim for the fourth took longer than needed, causing a concerned murmur to ripple through the hushed crowd. They collectively released their breath when the fifth target joined the other four. Matthew tried to watch the time and the shooter, his thumb hovering over the stop button of his chronograph. Everyone seemed to lean forward as one, necks craning to get a closer look, hoping their presence would will the young man to victory.

“Come on,” Jane whispered. “Come on.”

“Shoot, Ezekiel!” Nathaniel shouted, unaware of the moment.

But rather than knock Zeke’s concentration, it seemed to be the very thing he needed to cut the tension. With a small grin, he pulled the hammer back and fired.

“Two minutes and… 20 seconds!” Matthew exclaimed.

Zeke dropped his arm like a dead limb, but his face was alive with joy. A cheer went up through the crowd, and several of the gunmen moved to congratulate Zeke. Gary Winslow was one of the first.

He gave Zeke a once over and could do nothing more than sigh at his fate. “Good job, kid. Too bad the territory’s abandoning the militia,” he said. “You would’ve made a great Rifleman.”

Zeke’s eyes widened at the praise, but when he saw Jane approach, he shook his head. “Thank you, sir. But I never would’ve left Beybeck.”

Gary looked at Jane then back to Zeke. “A lawman, huh? Well, I can’t imagine you’d learn from anyone better.” He turned to Jane. “Better be careful, Sheriff; this one’s gonna take your job one day.”

Jane smiled at Zeke. “I sure hope so.”

Gary snorted. “Next year, kid. I’ll be back next year.” With that, he searched the crowd until he spotted his two riders, and got their attention with a sharp whistle. “Come on, boys. If I remember right, the whiskey here’s some of the best in the territory.”

“Don’t go too far,” Jane warned. “They’re about to hand out the prizes. I think you’ll get a ribbon.”

He glowered under the brim of his hat, but it didn’t hide his grin. Glancing discreetly at Maura who was in deep conversation with Elizabeth Black, he said, “Perhaps Dr. Isles could collect it for me?” His face was a picture of pure innocence.

“You’ll collect your own damn ribbon or we’ll see how far I can shoot when I run you out of town,” Jane retorted, much to the Rifleman’s amusement.
“Ah, Jane!” he crowed with delight. “Come to the saloon when you’re done. I’ll buy you a whiskey.”

The men departed, leaving Jane alone with Zeke. “I’m so proud of you, you know that?”

His cheeks turned crimson. “Thank you, Sheriff. I mean, Jane.”

Putting her arm around his shoulders, she gave him a half-hug. “If you don’t tell your mother, I’ll buy you a whiskey later.” His eyes widened in surprise and she couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

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Historical notes:

-Louis Moinet (1768-1853) has been recognized as the inventor of the chronograph, putting it well within the time frame of this story.

-Had a hard time narrowing down a Wyoming flour mill that fit the time period; everything seemed to be just a bit later than I wanted. Went with Cream City Flour (from Milwaukee) because it fit the time period better, and I would assume it was fairly common to get train shipments of non-local items in from the east.

-The Smith & Wesson Schofield revolver has a long history in the Old West, and once it came into general production, it usurped the Colt as the gun of choice. The self-emptying cylinder (the top break barrel forces a star pin to push all the empty cartridges out) made it incredibly popular with both lawmen and lawless men. It was a favourite of Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Pat Garrett. You’ll find a ton of info through Google, of course, but this is a nice little one-page write-up that is very thorough and describes the gun in layman’s terms: http://www.chuckhawks.com/uberti_nickel_topbreak.html
A/N: This was half-finished when my Tuesday deadline rolled around, and I’m sorry to say I didn’t have the interest to finish it. It’s an odd situation when the show comes back from hiatus and I’m writing fan fiction, because my interpretation of the characters- even in AU- is drawn from the season one Jane and Maura. We are a long way from those characters these days. So when I see a current episode, I look at what I’m writing and think, “Who are these people?” I’ve become so disenchanted with the show that it begins to get directed towards my writing, too. It’s harder and harder to write the Jane and Maura I love when those characters don’t really exist on the show anymore.

Anyway, enough of that. Thanks to all who have made it to the end. This has been a much longer project than the 3 months it took to post it (see longer author’s notes at the end of this chapter). Despite my struggles with the show, I’ve enjoyed (almost) every minute of writing it.

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The day was winding down, but before the little ones could get too restless and before the men could get too drunk, the ribbons and prizes were handed out to spirited applause and humble thanks. The Blacks gathered around Ezekiel, oohing and aahing at the brand new Winchester while Jane beamed with pride.

“Fine job you did, son,” Joshua said.

“Thanks, Pa.”

“That was some shooting,” Frost said, joining the group. “I haven’t seen shooting like that since last year.” He smiled at Jane.

“Got a little nervous at the end,” the young man admitted. “Felt like the gun weighed 20 pounds!”

Susan put her arm around his shoulders. “But you did it anyway. I’m so proud.” The kiss on his cheek only made him blush more. “All right, everyone,” she said, corralling the children with her hands. “Time to be headin’ home. There’s still chores to do.” She was met with a chorus of moans and groans, but she was having none of it. “First one to the wagon gets to stay up the latest.” Everyone laughed as the gaggle of kids took off like a shot. Turning back to her oldest son, Susan said, “You are exempt from chores tonight. I thought you’d might like to stay in town and bask in your victory.”

His face lit up. “Jane did say she’d buy me a wh- we… uh… well, that’d be nice, Ma.”

His stutter wasn’t missed by either of his parents, though his father let him off the hook with a squeeze of his shoulder. “Don’t stay out too late. Chores resume at 6 AM tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Zeke replied.

Joshua wagged his finger at Jane who rolled her eyes. “I know, I know.”

“Good,” he said. He touched his hat towards Maura. “I hope we’ll see you again for dinner, Dr. Isles. You can even bring that one.” Jane rolled her eyes even more dramatically. “You ready to go, Mrs. Black?”
Linking her arm in his, she smiled, “I certainly am, Mr. Black.”

After the final goodbyes were said, Jane caught Zeke eyeing the saloon. “Before we do that, why don’t we have a visit with Patricia Vernon?”

“How?”

Jane shrugged. “Why not? You were keen enough this morning,” she teased. “Besides, it might be less threatening than showing up on her doorstep.”

He nodded at the wisdom. “Okay.”

“You need me to stay?” Frost asked.

Jane’s eyes narrowed as she gauged the situation. “Nah, I think we’ll be fine. We’re just going to talk.”

“Okay,” he replied. “I’ll buy the first round when you’re done.”

Her grin was broad. “I’ll hold you to that.” To Maura, she said, “You come with us, but stay behind a little. That way, you’ll be there if we need you, but it won’t look like we’re ganging up on her.”

Maura, too, agreed with a nod.

As they made their way to the small group of women outside the general store, Jane gazed up at the sky, the blue already tinting to grey, the summer holding on in vain. Pink and yellow streaks of light were brushed across the sky, but she could feel the change in the air. She thought of the cluster of Aspen trees behind her cabin turning yellow-gold and sighed.

“What is it?” Zeke asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking about how things change. I mean, look at you, huh?” She good-naturedly bumped him with her shoulder.

“Change is a good thing though, right?”

“It can be,” she said, looking up at the sky once more. “Probably not for Gabriel Vernon, though.”

They reached the women without further comment. Maura chose to move off to the side while Jane and Zeke casually stepped into the conversation.

Touching her hat, Jane said, “Congratulations, Mrs. Vernon.”

Though startled to be singled out, the woman replied, “Thank you, Sheriff.”

“I’m thinking of donating a sewing machine next year,” she continued. “Seems only fair to offer something for such beautiful work.”

“That would be lovely.”

“I knew you were going to win when I saw the work you did on your sister-in-law’s wedding dress. Beautiful. Just incredible work.”

Patricia didn’t reply and an awkward pause settled over them. Several of the women began to slip away quietly until only Ruth Murphy remained.
The older woman got right to the point. “What’s this about, Sheriff?”

Jane’s reply was couched in nonchalance. “Just remarking on Mrs. Vernon’s skill. Sara Guildcrest told me you did her dress. That’s your sister-in-law, right?”

“Why are you asking her when you know it’s true?” Ruth chastised. “I told you Walter Guildcrest was her brother.”

“Did you know Robert Hess was Sara Guildcrest’s brother, too?” Zeke butted in.

Jane made a note to admonish him for revealing their hand so soon, but for now, she carefully watched Patricia Vernon. To her credit, the woman visibly swallowed and nodded.

Zeke wasn’t done. “Did you know about the teeth? That they make Gabriel and Father Hess related?”

“Hyperdontia,” Maura helpfully called out.

“You didn’t need to know about the teeth, did you?” Jane asked, a sympathetic ribbon running through her voice. “You knew all along.”

“Of course I did.”

Ruth looked between the women. “I don’t… I don’t quite understand.”

Jane looked at Zeke. “You’ve taken the reins this far.” In a lower voice, she said, “Be gentle.”

Resting the Winchester on his shoulder, he rolled back on his heels. “Mrs. Murphy, Gabriel Vernon is Robert Hess’ son. As far as I can figure, he gave his son to the Vernons because they were kin by marriage. Don’t know why he didn’t let his own sister raise him.”

“He knew it would raise suspicion.” All eyes turned to Patricia. “They had been living in Cheyenne their whole lives. How would they explain this child to people?”

Mrs. Murphy looked incredulous. “Where on earth was the boy’s mother?”

Patricia brought a trembling hand to her mouth. “Pneumonia. He was only 4.”

Jane remembered the photo she had shown Sara. “They were happy together.”

Patricia nodded. “Yes. But then… then she passed, and Robert turned to faith.”

Jane sympathized, but not entirely. “He didn’t have to give up his son to find God.”

Patricia could only shake her head. “I don’t know why he did it. I don’t know what he felt.”

“What I don’t understand is, why keep in contact with the Vernons?” Zeke asked. “Why have pictures of Gabriel? Why the letters? Heck, why move to Beybeck?” He wiped his brow with the back of his arm. “I don’t think what Gabriel did was right, but there’s a part of me that doesn’t blame him for what he did.”

Ruth held up her hands. “Now, hold on. What in the world is really going on here?”

Jane pushed her hat back and sighed. “I think you know, don’t you, Mrs. Vernon?”

Patricia looked away and it was this small movement that seemed to be the final piece for Mrs.
Murphy. Crossing herself, she whispered, “Oh, Lord.”

Zeke shook his head in disbelief. “What was Father Hess thinkin’? Gabriel had a good life, had people who cared about him. Why couldn’t he just leave well enough alone?”

“He was selfish!”

The exclamation made everyone jump. What they saw made them draw weapons. Amid the discussion, Gabriel Vernon had approached the group unseen. Now, all eyes were on him as he stood behind Maura, arm around her, knife at her throat. He looked around nervously, tears glistening in his eyes. Pockets of people gathered at the scene.

“He was selfish,” he repeated, softer this time.

Zeke’s Winchester was steady. “You don’t want to do this, Gabriel,” he warned. When the other teen defiantly raised his chin, he said, “You don’t think I could do it? You just saw me in the shooting contest, didn’t you? And if I can’t do it, you know the Sheriff can.”

“She wouldn’t have to.” Gary had come out of the saloon to see the commotion. The Rifleman’s voice was as unwavering as his aim.

The bravado of both men diverted attention away from Jane’s trembling hand. She had never pulled her gun to save someone’s life, and that life had never meant so much. Maura looked at her with worried eyes, but something in her gaze was reassuring. Slowly, Jane lowered her weapon and reholstered it.

“Zeke’s right, Gabriel. You don’t want to do this, do you?” she asked. Zeke seemed surprised by her action, but didn’t question it. Instead, he tightened his grip on the rifle. Lifting a hand that she hoped appeared steadier than she felt, she said, “You heard us talking. You know we know about Father Hess. We’re not here to judge you, Gabriel. Why don’t you just tell us what happened?”

“He was my father and he didn’t care!” he gritted between clenched teeth. His burst of anger caused the knife tip to pierce Maura’s neck.

“Okay, okay.” Jane tried to soothe him. “Why don’t you let Dr. Isles go and we can talk about this somewhere quiet?”

His eyes darted around, seeing the crowd for the first time. Disorientation and shame made him pull Maura closer. “No.”

“Gabriel…” Zeke warned.

“Jane,” Gary said.

She knew there was a question behind her name, and she shook off the Rifleman’s silent suggestion. “There’s not going to be any trouble here today, is there, Gabriel?”

Swallowing slowly, Maura spoke up. “I didn’t know my parents.”

Gabriel blinked. “What?”

“I didn’t know my parents,” she repeated. “I was adopted. I was raised by two people who loved me but who weren’t my real mother and father.” His arm loosened ever so slightly from around her shoulders. Emboldened, she continued, “I won’t say I know what you’re going through, Gabriel. But there’s a part of me that understands in the way no one else here can. So why don’t you tell
me? Tell me what happened.”

He closed his eyes tightly. “I found letters.”

“You went through my things?” Patricia said.

“They were my things!” he cried. “Or they should’ve been. Letters. Pictures. Rachel wanted to see pictures of me when I was a baby.”

“Rachel?” Maura asked.

“Rachel Newsome,” Jane said. “You two are good friends, aren’t you, Gabriel?” It wasn’t much of a secret that the two teenagers were head over heels in love.

He smiled at the name, briefly lifting the weight from his shoulders. But one look at his mother brought the reality crashing down once more. “They should’ve been my things. I should’ve had them. They should’ve been given to me. Why did you keep it from me?”

A woman in the crowd sobbed at his plaintive plea. Patricia could only shake her head sadly. “Your father… Robert didn’t want you to know.”

“He didn’t want me,” Gabriel spat.

“No, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. He pretty near told me himself. I went to see him in church, where he couldn’t lie to me. He told me it was true, that I was his son. But that was in the past, he said. I had a family now and he wasn’t a part of that. But he just couldn’t let it go, could he? He wanted to be part of my life without me knowin’ about it?” He looked calmly at Zeke. “That’s why I said he was selfish.”

Zeke’s face softened, even if his aim remained steady.

Tentatively taking small steps towards him, Jane asked, “What happened between the day you saw him in the church and when you saw him in his home?” She didn’t need to spell out the outcome.

“It was the next day,” he answered, his eyes staring into the distance as if seeing the memory. “I couldn’t sleep after seein’ him. I just couldn’t figure it out, you know? Couldn’t figure out why it was so hard for him to want me. I’m a good person, ain’t I?” He refocused on the group that surrounded him, begging for an answer. There were several nods, and a voice separated itself from the crowd.

“You’re the best, son,” Peter Vernon said. “I will always think of you as my son. Please don’t ever think otherwise.”

“Why couldn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “He loved you, but...”

“He loved God more,” Gabriel finished for him. “He told me. Told me in church. Told me he couldn’t be my father because he was a servant of God now. I went to see him the next day because I needed him to explain it to me. I snuck away before mornin’ chores. When I got there, the house was real quiet. I guess I was too early because I found him layin’ there in bed. Peaceful. As if he hadn’t wrecked my whole life, like he hadn’t been lyin’ the whole time. And then a calmness came over me, like I was watching myself from outside my body.”
Maura reached up to touch the arm that had now slipped almost completely from her shoulders. She gently took his hand in hers and slowly turned to face him. The crowd collectively held their breath, none more so than Jane.

Gabriel looked into her face and when he saw nothing but compassion there, he asked simply, “Why?” before he broke down in her arms.

She was momentarily caught off-guard by his weight, but she settled them both to their knees. “I don’t know,” she whispered into his hair. “I don’t know.”

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It didn’t take much to get Gabriel into Beybeck’s short term jail. It took more to get the crowd to disperse. The Vernons asked to remain at the jail, which Jane granted before she trudged to the saloon. She sat in a well-worn chair and welcomed both the whiskey that was put in front of her, and the company of the woman who sat to her right.

“I’ll buy the next round,” Jane said after she downed the glass. She revelled in the trail it burned down her throat.

“What happens now?” Zeke asked, eyeing his own drink with more trepidation than she had shown.

“South Pass City?” Frost asked.

Gary shook his head. “I think Esther Morris’ moved on to Cheyenne, hasn’t she?”

“Yes,” Jane nodded. “We’ll have to take him to the city and present him in front of the court.”

“I know a very good attorney back east,” Maura said. “I’ll telegram her tomorrow.”

Gary snorted. “All the way from out east? Save your money and see if ol’ Timothy Crest is sober enough to stand for him. Shouldn’t take more than a few minutes for the judge to render a verdict.”

Maura tilted her chin up. “Not everything is in black and white, Mr. Winslow. Yes, he may have killed Father Hess, but he’s a boy. Considering the circumstances, do we really want to hang him for what he’s done?”

He had the good grace to look apologetic. “No, I s’pose not.”

Frost tipped back the glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s been one heck of a summer, I’ll tell you that much.”

Jane lifted her eyes to her surroundings. Though the events would keep the gossip circles going for weeks, she knew it wouldn’t take long for things to get back to normal. Life went on. Gary would be heading south with his crew, and Frost would be back to his horses. Zeke, though reaching a milestone in his life, would be tilling the field first thing in the morning. And Maura… Jane glanced over to the shuffleboard that sat unattended in the corner.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but it’s also been one heck of a day. I think I’m going to grab a bottle of whiskey and sit in the hottest water I can stand until my lazy hound starts howling.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Maura said. “What I mean to say is,” she stammered at how her words might be interpreted, “I think you should do that. And I will go home and do the same. Without the dog.” Her cheeks turned pink, but to her relief, no one mentioned it.
Standing, Jane adjusted her belt and hat. “Can I escort you home, Dr. Isles?”

“Yes, please.” She, too, stood and they said their goodbyes to the three men.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Jane told Gary. To Frost, she said, “I’ll see you tomorrow about Father Hess’ horse.”

Ezekiel stood, shy yet with a newfound confidence. “I just wanted to say ‘thank you’ for everything, Sheriff. Mr. Frost is right - it’s been a heck of a summer. But tomorrow’s a new day, right?”

Surprising them both, she enveloped him in a hug. “It sure is, Zeke. It sure is.”

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They mounted their horses and steered them towards Maura’s. The sun was settling now, and it would be a race against the darkness. Still, Jane asked, “Do you mind if we… if we go see Phineas?”

Maura reached across between the horses and touched Jane’s arm. “Of course not.”

The detour was quiet, but comforting. The horses were in no hurry, and their riders didn’t have the energy to encourage them.

Jane was the first to speak. “I hate to wish away time, but I’ll be glad when this year’s over. I think I just really need to start with a clean slate.”

Maura mulled over the idea. “You know, Paris is lovely in the spring.”

Jane raised an eyebrow until she realized where Maura was going with her comment. “Oh no. No.” She shook her head. “Not a chance. I am not getting stuck on a ship with no sight of land for a month. Nope.”

“Such exaggeration!” Maura tsked. “The SS Britannic can make the Atlantic crossing in 8 days.”

“Don’t forget the 4 days it’ll take to get to Boston by train.”

“I thought you liked the train.”

The way Maura delivered the line made Jane blush furiously. “Yeah, well, maybe. Oh, look, we’re here.”

Dismounting, their moods shifted to suit their surroundings. Blindly, Jane reached out for Maura’s hand and they walked to the small marker together. “I would’ve gotten him something more but…”

“He wasn’t that kind of man.”

“No,” Jane agreed, “he wasn’t.” She lowered her head. “I miss him every day.”

Rather than reply, Maura moved in closer to rest her head against Jane. “I know. I do, too.”

They stood that way for a long time with nothing but the crickets singing in the dusk. The horses stood patiently, their tails lazily swatting away the occasional bug. The air cooled and the day was gone.

“I guess we should get going,” Jane said. “I’ve got a dog that’s going to be very annoyed by the
time I get home.”

“You could always bring him to my house,” Maura suggested.

Jane chuckled. “I can barely get that mutt to walk to his food dish. I’d never get him over to your place. So… maybe you can come to mine?” She made a hopeful face.

Beaming, Maura said, “I’d love to.”

“Great!” She looked down at her feet. “See that, old man? Less lonely.”

“He’d be so happy.”

“He’d be so nosy,” Jane scoffed. Nohóó snorted his impatience. “All right, all right, we’re coming. Or going. I’m not sure.”

Maura laughed at her feigned confusion. With a quick kiss, Maura promised, “We’ll figure it out together.”

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Historical notes:

- Esther Morris was the first female Justice of the Peace. Though she only held the position until 1870, she did move to Cheyenne and I thought it would be an acceptable bending of fact to have her still be involved in law in 1883.
- Though I didn’t mention her by name, I was thinking of Belva Ann Lockwood when Maura mentioned a female lawyer she knew. Lockwood would fit the time frame fairly well, and I liked the idea of Maura skirting the social circles of Susan B. Anthony.
- The USS Britannic was one of the steamships owned by the White Star Line, and held many speed records for crossing the Atlantic.

Author’s notes:

As I mentioned in the very first chapter, this started as an idea for a comic over 10 years ago! When I realized how much work was involved in it, I transferred it to text. First person, present tense. Good God, what was I thinking?! So here we are, 10 years later, a switch in both POV and tense, to fit a fandom I didn’t know about at the time! How times change.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!