

Rhet's Promise

Harts of the West



SAMANTHA THOMAS

RHETT'S PROMISE

HARTS OF THE WEST

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*For my beautiful, brilliant mother. Your quiet strength, and
warm heart, always made our house a home.*

Thank you

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Epilogue

The noonday sun spilled its warm embrace through the wide window of the Autumn Springs newspaper office. Dust fragments danced lazily in the sunbeam, casting fleeting shadows over the worn wooden shelves. The faint acrid scent of ink, and the earthy odor of paper lingered in the air as Sadie sat behind the desk, her fingers poised over the Hammond typewriter.

It was her first day at the office, and thanks to Mr. Marcus Langley's generosity in offering her the position at the Western Echo Press, hope filled her heart. She couldn't help but imagine what it might be like to own a business like this of her own one day. When the newspaper owner stepped out for his lunch he told Sadie she could practice on the new typewriter. Despite being left alone with only her dreams and ambitions, she still hadn't written a word. Not one.

The fancy machine had a circular keyboard, with a type-shuttle design that allowed her to see each letter she typed. The pressure to write the perfect words left her questioning each word choice. She pulled her hands away and took a deep breath. While she fervently wished to bring attention to the suffrage movement in Autumn Springs and the territory, perhaps she needed to start with something a little less daunting.

Pulling out a fresh piece of paper, she reached for her familiar pen. As exciting as it was to have the opportunity to use the Hammond typewriter, she needed to get her ideas down on paper the old-fashioned way first.

Ideas formed before her, and Sadie soon found herself immersed in her work. The front office with its comfortable charm, scuffed wooden floors and shelves lined with neatly stacked papers and books, created a comforting cocoon, sheltering her from the world outside. It was exactly what she needed.

“He’s your problem now.”

Sadie’s head lifted at the deep aggravated voice coming from outside. A heated discussion was unfolding from beyond the office on the boardwalk, and as the voices of men clashed like thunderheads rolling in, Sadie’s natural curiosity pulled at her like a horse tethered too tightly.

Setting her paper aside, she rose and approached the window. Her breath caught as she peered outside and discovered the source of the commotion.

There, beneath the swaying wooden sign bearing the pretentious name “Olcott’s Shave and Haircut Emporium” next to the newspaper office stood Rhett Hart, his commanding presence and dark wavy hair a striking contrast to the bright Montana day. Beside him, looking as unrepentant as ever, was his younger brother, Luke, the embodiment of rebellion with a mischievous grin. The sheriff had already turned away, his hands raised in the air, clearly signaling his complete exasperation with the situation.

Autumn Springs had changed a fair bit over the years she’d been gone, but from the scene before her, some things didn’t.

Still unflappable, Rhett exuded the steady presence he always had. Even the sun knew which side of his face to cast a glow on his chiseled features. It was hard not to admire his unchanged visage. The years had been kind to him, and he appeared to have grown more handsome, if that were possible.

Chiding herself for her foolishness, Sadie knew that she was no longer the little girl who once idolized Rhett, and the truth was she hardly knew this older version of him.

Their discussion grew more heated by the moment, and Sadie couldn't help but eavesdrop, her sense of propriety temporarily forgotten.

"When are you going to grow up?" Rhett's voice held a tone of stern authority, his clenching jaw reflecting his frustration. "You can't keep this up. Your temper is going to get you in big trouble one of these days. Fists don't solve problems, Luke. They usually make more."

Luke's response was punctuated by a defiant toss of his head. "I don't need one of your lectures, Rhett. I can handle myself just fine."

"Yes, we can all see how well that is working out." He lifted his chin in the sheriff's direction. "You're lucky Weston is the sheriff. If he wasn't your brother-in-law, you'd be spending a night in that jail."

"For what? Defending myself. There's no law against that. You should know, lawyer man."

"You can be a real piece of work, you know that?" Rhett's shoulders dropped, and he shook his head. "You got all of us on your side, but you insist on acting the fool."

Luke crossed his arms over his chest. "Not all of us are so perfect."

Beneath the scornful look Luke gave his brother, Sadie could hear the echo of remorse—no—shame, and she felt a twinge of sympathy for the youngest Hart. He was always getting himself into some fix or another, and it probably left him second guessing his actions and decisions when he was all alone. Sadie could understand that. She'd done nothing but second guess herself for months since her divorce. So had everyone around her, which didn't help.

Suddenly her lingering gaze felt intrusive. Reminded of how rude she was being, Sadie attempted to slip away unnoticed. She took a step back, but her foot betrayed her with a creak of the old floorboards. Panic surged through her, and she instinctively ducked beneath the wide window, and pushed

her back against the outside wall, praying she wouldn't be caught eavesdropping.

Their voices stopped, but then began again, as Sadie sidled along the wall until she was away from the window. Sadie knew she should get up and leave before she was caught, but her incessant curiosity held her captive on the wall. Their words were muffled but still audible, and she heard Rhett send away his youngest brother with a stern admonishment.

Just as she thought it safe to stand and retreat from her hiding place, she hesitated. Too late.

Having sent his brother on his way, Rhett turned toward the Western Echo Press office. Reaching for the doorknob, he attempted to open the door. It refused to budge. He gave the knob another rattle and pushed. The door was stuck.

Sadie weighed her options for a split second, torn between staying hidden and helping him. Common courtesy won out, and she slowly rose to her feet. Any thoughts of making a good impression after all these years flew right out the window she'd been eavesdropping through. Served her right.

Rhett, focused on his struggle with the door, his broad shoulders tensing in frustration, didn't see Sadie approach. At the same moment she decided to intervene, he managed to unstuck the door with a forceful push. It swung open, catching Sadie off guard.

The door collided with her, sending her sprawling backward with a startled gasp. Falling against a stack of papers that fluttered into the air like a flock of startled birds, Sadie landed in a heap on the floor.

"Oof!" said Sadie, her dignity thoroughly bruised, and her cheeks aflame. Her insatiable curiosity would truly be the death of her.

Standing in the doorway, the sun's halo around him only emphasizing the man's size, Rhett's eyes fell on her with a mixture of concern and amusement.

"Sadie," he said, his rich voice extending down towards her along with his hand to help her up.

“Rhett.” Sadie accepted his assistance with a sheepish smile. “It’s good to see you again.” Heavens, the man was entirely too handsome. When his fingers touched hers, a warmth flowed through her, and she was unsettled by her reaction. Ever the gentleman, Rhett helped her to her feet with a gentle but firm grip.

“The feeling is mutual,” he replied, his deep brown eyes holding a genuine warmth that somehow managed to quell her embarrassment. “How are you? It’s been a while.”

As Sadie brushed herself off, the remnants of the fluttering papers settled like fallen leaves around her. She glanced around the office, searching for a convenient distraction that didn’t come with a chiseled jaw, and smell of fresh linen and spice. As they both tidied the mess between them, Sadie couldn’t help but wonder when he was going to mention her divorce. When they were younger, he would often point out her shortcomings, but if she was fair, it was only when she threw herself into competition with him.

“It has. A few years,” said Sadie accepting the last of the papers from Rhett. “I’m well. Getting better now that I’m back in Autumn Springs. I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

Rhett seemed to be choosing his words carefully before he spoke. “How long are you back for?”

Sadie raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a teasing smile. “Really? Don’t tell me you’ve managed to avoid all the town gossip. My mother didn’t tell you?”

Rhett cleared his throat. “Tell me what?”

A light laugh bubbled up in her throat. “You’re a born politician, Rhett, but you always were a terrible liar. Your left eye gives a twitch each time you fib.”

Rhett’s hand flew to his eye as he frowned. “It doesn’t.”

“I’m teasing, but you and I both know that Mama told you about—”

She looked around the office then leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, “the divorce.”

Rhett looked like he wanted to deny the knowledge, but touched a finger to his eye and gave in to honesty with a sigh of surrender.

“All right, she did.”

“But probably told you not to mention it.”

“Something like that.” He leaned in and made a show of glancing around in concern. The amusement was back in his eyes. “Very hush, hush. In fact, I didn’t expect you would be working. Are you sure it was safe to leave the house without a disguise or at least a veil of some sort?”

“You’re teasing, but as a small town’s only divorced woman, I don’t think any disguise will be able to hide that fact.”

His expression softened with genuine concern. “I shouldn’t make light of it. I’m sorry. And you aren’t the *only* one. Are you...all right? You seem in good spirits.”

Sadie didn’t feel the need to share just what a blow to her pride Charles Gatwick’s dismissal of her had been, but she was touched by his kindness in asking.

“If we had bumped into each other—no pun intended— a month or two ago, I can assure you that you’d be lending me your handkerchief right now. But I’ve come a long way, and my watering pot days are behind me now. I have much more important things to think about. I’m about the future and not the past.”

“Such as?” asked Rhett.

“Such as interviewing the candidate for territorial delegate right here in Autumn Springs for the Western Echo Press. Mr. Langley has hired me to write columns of interest for him, and I think that people would love to hear your perspective on the issues at hand.”

“You want to interview me?”

“It seems the thing to do. I expect you want to get word out to people as to why they should vote for you.”

“I do. Looks like I better allot some time in my schedule to accommodate Autumn Springs new journalist.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Sadie. “Now, are you sure you can find the time to fit me in between kissing babies, shaking hands and dealing with rebellious brothers?”

Concern etched Rhett’s face, then vanished as quickly as it came. “You don’t plan on writing about Luke, do you? I know he’s my brother, but he has nothing to do with this election. He doesn’t need that kind of attention.”

“He doesn’t or you don’t?” questioned Sadie.

“Sadie.” A warning entered his voice.

“Oh, don’t worry. I would never do that to him. Making any article personal would be unfair and unkind, and in this case irrelevant. People need to know about the issues, not which fathers wish to tar and feather Luke this week.”

Rhett nodded. “I appreciate that.”

“It’s not a favor, it’s common decency. Besides I have plenty of things I look forward to discussing with you.”

“Oh?” For a moment he seemed caught off guard, but then he gave her one of his most charming smiles. “Me too. I’ll confess when your mother mentioned your return, I didn’t know what to expect. This...catching up has been...nice. I’m also surprised, it’s been all of ten minutes and you haven’t even challenged me yet.”

“Concerned you might lose to me in a foot race? Has city living made you soft?” His eyes twinkled as he teased her. After years of competition, Sadie was somewhat relieved to know he could make light of some of her behavior in years past.

“I like to think that I’ve gotten better at picking my battles.”

“Your wit is still razor sharp,” he chuckled. “What battles are you fighting right now?”

Sadie gazed out past Rhett to the main street of Autumn Springs. “I have one particular thing in mind.”

“Just one? Well, as long as it isn’t me. If there is anything you need, let me know if I can be of service.”

Sadie gave Rhett an appraising look. He probably had no idea just how helpful he might be to her cause. A politician open to women’s votes would be immensely useful. “I will definitely take you up on that,” she replied, her tone laced with anticipation.

He gave her a questioning smile but didn’t ask for clarity. “Great. May I leave this in your capable hands?”

He handed over the sheets that he’d brought with him to have turned to pamphlets. Sadie perused the writing, her fingers tracing the words with a sense of purpose. A smile of genuine admiration graced her lips.

“This is really good, Rhett,” she praised, her voice soft but sincere. “It doesn’t surprise me that you have decided to run for office. Law was just the beginning for you.”

His usually air of self-assuredness momentarily wavered as he blushed in response to her words, followed by a nonchalant shrug. “I’m hoping I can make a difference.”

“You can, if you choose too,” Sadie affirmed. She refrained from mentioning women’s votes; she would have time for that during their interview. “Now what it is you want done?”

Rhett went over his requirements for printing the leaflets and wished Sadie a good afternoon. He was halfway through the door when he turned back.

“Would Saturday work for you?”

“Oh, you won’t have to wait that long. These will be ready tomorrow afternoon; you can pick them up then.”

Rhett’s smile revealed his perfectly aligned pearly white teeth. “I meant for the interview. If you are still interested in me.”

“Oh! I am—I mean—for the interview.”

Given the opportunity to turn back the clock and erase her embarrassing reaction, Sadie would have spared no expense.

She was a mature, educated woman, formerly married and now divorced; there was no reason to be behaving this way. Was returning to the town she'd grown up in going to have her acting the child? Or was it just around Rhett Hart? Not that it mattered, at this stage in her life she had no interest in anything other than a bright future for women. His dark eyes twinkled in her direction, and seeing his amusement she straightened out her back, and her thoughts. She didn't need to be the source of entertainment for anyone.

“Excellent. Would you like me to come by—”

“You could, but I know how busy you must be. Why don't I ride out to the Double H, midafternoon?”

Rhett pressed his lips into a fine line before he spoke. “Are you sure? Coming to town isn't a problem for me.”

“Yes, I'm sure. I can kill two birds with one stone. I would love to see everyone again. Mama says that Tilly is growing like a weed.”

“You'd hardly recognize her. She keeps us all on our toes,” chuckled Rhett.

“Only an uncle would laugh at that description.”

“You wait and see. Things around the Double H are always interesting.”

“Then I guess things haven't changed that much.”

Rhett's eyes met hers. “I look forward to your visit, Sadie.”

As Rhett turned to leave, the door swung shut behind him, its old hinges creaking. It was as though all the air in the room had left with him. Sadie remained in front of the aged desk, listening as Rhett's footsteps receded down the wooden boardwalk, fading away in the bustling streets of Autumn Springs, her thoughts bubbling away like a kettle on a hot stove.

That was not how she expected her reunion with Rhett Hart to unfold.



RHETT TUGGED at his collar as he walked away from the newspaper office. He hadn't known what to expect when walking in there, but it certainly wasn't what happened.

The passing years and her divorce had seemingly left no mark on her; if anything, she appeared more vibrant than ever. Those piercing blue eyes against her pale skin, and dark hair, were a stunning combination. Of course, those eyes hadn't always looked on him as kindly as they had today.

Memories of their spirited childhood competitions filled his mind, but for the life of him, after leaving her just now, he couldn't quite remember what it was that used to bother him so much. Was it a boy's pride?

Still, nobody could change that much, and as he handed her the pamphlets, he half-expected her to challenge him by boldly declaring her own bid for office, just to prove a point. It wouldn't have surprised him. He even, for just a moment, pondered whether she had a genuine chance at winning. A part of him didn't want to admit that thanks to prevailing social norms that barred women from holding office or even casting a vote that he didn't have to find out the answer to that.

Sadie Garvin—no—Gatwick, which was it now? She was always full of surprises. If one were to ask him years ago to give her a compliment the best he'd have come up with was to say that she was never boring.

Rhett brushed a hand across his lips to hold back the laughter forming as he recalled her, bloomers peaking beneath her skirts hem, and her cheeks pink with embarrassment. Everything in him longed to tease her, but after so many years apart, he didn't dare take the liberty.

Guilt in knocking her over still lingered in the back of his mind, but by the look on her face, and the fact she hadn't given him a piece of her mind for his carelessness, Rhett suspected that she might have been eavesdropping on his

conversation with Luke. It wasn't to his credit, but that realization did ease his conscience somewhat.

He had an appointment with the bank within the hour, and with the extra time on his hands, Rhett made his way towards his Autumn Springs doctor, Micah Hart. His brother, and Luke's twin. Of his four brothers, Micah was the most similar in temperament to Rhett. The opposite of his twin. Hopefully between the two of them they could figure out what to do about Luke. Gideon was out of patience, and Ben was so enamored with his new bride, Katie, that nothing anyone did these days seemed to bother him. Something had to be done, as troubles seemed to follow Luke like a shadow. Luke wasn't often in the wrong, but his temper had him using the wrong tactics to solve his issues. Sadie wasn't far off when she asked if Rhett didn't want Luke's antics to draw attention to himself, but even if there wasn't an election, Luke needed to get that chip off his shoulder.

He exchanged greetings with the townsfolk who passed by, accepting well-wishes, and promises of votes when the time came. Rhett had always been a familiar figure in town, thanks to his family's long-standing presence and his own participation in the community.

"Rhett," Mrs. Patricia James, greeted him with a warm smile. "We're all rooting for you. It will be nice to have Autumn Springs represented so well in government. I know Ron is excited to see his suits walk the floors in Helena. He's been talking to the Grand Secretary about you."

"Thank you kindly for the support, Mrs. James. A good reminder I need to pop in and see him about a few things. You have a wonderful day." Rhett tipped his hat and winked at the two James girls peeking from behind their mother's skirts. "You too, ladies."

His attention sent both girls into a fit of giggles, and the red-haired daughter winked back. With a sigh of exasperation, Mrs. James hustled them off.

He was feeling pretty good about the positive reception his campaign was getting in town, when Rhett's attention was

caught by the candid conversation of the two men that had just wished him well and were now walking in front of him.

“Well, Bill? What do you reckon about Hart runnin’?”

Bill was scratching his head as he answered. “Well, Jim, I reckon he’s got the Hart name and those uppity looks, but does he have any substance? Can he really do anything?”

Jim snorted. “Yessir, seems to me he’s more a pretty face than a man that gets things done.”

“You figure...” Bill’s words trailed off as the men rounded the corner taking them out of Rhett’s path. His expression remained neutral, but his chest tightened.

The men weren’t asking questions he hadn’t asked himself. He often wondered if the fortunate features he’d been born with that had almost become his trademark, were a double-edged sword. His own family never let him hear the end of it. Did his appearance overshadow the substance beneath? Many might see it as a blessing rather than a problem, but Rhett felt that as much as his looks might, in some moments, shield him from judgement, in others, it was more like being imprisoned in a gilded cage. He had to push the useless thoughts from his mind. His brothers would laugh him from the table if they knew he worried about such things.

He lived his whole life being a big fish in a little pond. The questions people were asking were the same ones he was asking himself: did he have what it takes to succeed when he was surrounded by equally privileged and successful men. Could he still stand out?

With a polite nod to another passing couple, he continued down the boardwalk to Micah’s, his mind filled with the knowledge he still had much to prove if he wanted to make a difference in the territory.

A good place to start was an interview with a bloomer-wearing beauty.

Perched at the old worn service counter of the mercantile with her trusty notebook open Sadie sipped at her tea, transported back to her childhood. Memories of her younger days spent in this very store, helping her mother arrange the goods, and greet customers, flooded her mind. While there were lots of new items to peruse, many of the same household wares held their places on the mercantile shelves, general necessities never changing for the community. It was as if time itself had slowed within these walls.

A faint smile played at her lips at she gazed out the lace-trimmed windows to the street. Autumn Springs had a way of drawing people back into its arms. In some ways it felt as though she had never left. Sadie felt a little surge of excitement at this new chapter in her life.

She could hear her father out back of the store, engaged in a friendly conversation with a customer as he assisted him in collecting a substantial order, their voices carrying the lighthearted banter of old friends. Having him near was reassuring and Sadie was reminded how lucky she was to have her parents. Years ago, the major had traded his uniform and gun, for a horse and saddle, then pots and pans, and never looked back. Many would have been deeply scarred by the major's past, but her father had made a choice to spend the rest of his life in service to others. How had she married a man like Charles, when she had such a wonderful example in the major? It was one of many questions she'd asked herself over the past several months since her divorce.

Her eyes drifted away from the window to a familiar sight—the faithful fly swatter that her mother kept within reach. It hung on a nail behind the counter, always at the ready. The memory of her mother diligently swatting at pesky flies while helping her customers brought a fond smile to her lips. Even the counter itself, bearing scars of countless transactions, shared stories, quietly held the town’s history in its aged wood.

There were many of her mother’s paintings on the wall; some new, some familiar, all vibrant. One painting, it was a recent addition, caught Sadie’s eye—an intricately detailed landscape of a nearby wildflower meadow, bathed in the golden hues of sunset. Sadie and her mother would often picnic there when the major was off birdwatching.

The bell above the door jingled. Tucked behind the counter Sadie had a few moments to observe the two lovely women who entered. A few years older than she remembered, but there was no mistaking Rhett’s younger sister, Emma, and her best friend Nora.

“Sadie! You’re here! We were just stopping in to ask your mother if we might come by for a visit, or to swing by the Western Echo Press. We couldn’t hold off a moment longer and wanted to reconnect with you.” Emma took a quick breath and kept talking, “but what a bit of luck to find you here? Aren’t you working at the paper? I was sure that was what I heard.”

“Hello, Sadie. It’s so good to see you home.” Nora’s soft voice held a hint of laughter at her friend’s exuberance.

It was as though no time had passed between them, and Sadie slipped down from her stool and came around to hug both women. “Hello, girls—or should I say ladies? Mama wrote me that you’re both married now; how exciting! Where are the little ones? Mama said the Harts are expanding at a rapid pace over the past several years.”

“Mabel is with Nora’s mother. She’d stopped by to pick up her shawl, and offered to take Mabel off my hands so we could find you.”

“And yours?” Sadie asked Nora. “Your mother must love being a grandmother.”

A flash of pain crossed Nora’s face, before she answered with a smile. “Oh, not yet. I’m sure she will be when our time comes.”

Sadie wanted to kick herself for her insensitivity. She’d made an assumption, and it was obviously a painful point for Nora. She reached out and squeezed Nora’s hand. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s fine,” interrupted Nora. “We are very busy with Micah’s clinic.”

The sweet woman was obviously hoping to change the subject, and Sadie was happy to move past her foolish blunder, especially if it eased Nora’s discomfort.

“I hear you’re working there, too. I think that is wonderful. It’s good to know that Autumn Springs is so accepting of a capable woman. Your father was a brilliant doctor, and I expect the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.”

“You’re being very kind, but I am not a doctor, I just help where I can.”

“By that, she means everywhere,” added Emma. “Don’t sell yourself short, Nora, if you were a man, you’d have your own surgery. And speaking of working women, how is the newspaper going? Why aren’t you at the office?”

Sadie almost laughed. Emma had always been full of life, and questions. It would be interesting to meet the man who had captured the heart of such a firecracker. The youngest Hart had also always been a champion for justice and what was right, and with her bold personality she might be just the ally that Sadie needed in her cause.

“Mr. Langley has been most generous. He is happy to have me working on stories in the office, or out. He says as long as my contributions are ready on time and of good quality, he doesn’t care.”

“Perfect! What are you working on now?”

Sadie glanced back to her notebook on the counter. “I have a few ideas percolating. I thought perhaps some town history to start. Something a little softer before I hit Autumn Springs with the heavy stuff.”

The three ladies chatted amongst the fabric and Sadie’s mother popped over to say hello, as two more women entered the store. The smiles the women graced Nora and Emma quickly disappeared when they saw Sadie. Their averted eyes, and little whispers caused her mother to let out a soft sigh.

“Your tea should be ready girls. You can take this lovely reunion back to the house if you like. I believe I’ve got a few scones, too.”

Ever the diplomat, her mother shooed the three of them away from the judgemental eyes of the new customers. For a moment Sadie thought Emma might protest, but one look from Mama, had quickly changed her mind.

As they sat down at the table in her parent’s kitchen, Emma finally let out her irritation. “Nasty old biddies. So quick to judge. I have no problem giving either of them a piece of my mind. It wasn’t too long ago that Mrs. Dixon out there had her own issues with laudanum.”

“Emma!” cried Nora. “She’s worked to overcome her problems.”

“Exactly my point. She was able to move on because we were all supportive. People have short memories when it comes to themselves.”

Sadie broke in, “I’ve gotten used to it. Trust me, it was far worse in San Francisco. At least here I have family.” She smiled at Emma and Nora then added, “and friends.”

“You didn’t have any friends there?” asked Nora.

“I thought I did, but you find out quickly who your friends are when storms roll in. Unfortunately, mine all seemed to be fair-weather ones.”

“I’m sorry, Sadie,” Emma spoke softly this time. “When we heard we were heartbroken for you.”

“Thank you. It’s taken a bit of time, but I know now it was for the best. My divorce may mark me as a failure to some, but it also rescued me from the greater failure of a lifetime spent in a loveless union.”

All three women sat and silently sipped their tea.

It was Emma who broke the silence. “Do you think you’ll ever marry again?”

“Emma! What are you thinking? She’s only just returned to Autumn Springs.” Nora gave her best friend a disappointed glare. “Honestly.”

Sadie laughed. There was something refreshing in Emma’s straightforward manner. After months of whispers and innuendo, blunt communication was appreciated.

“My immediate answer is no. Absolutely not. Now that I am free, I realize that I have so much I can do. So much that I can accomplish if I put my mind to it. Not having to pacify or run my actions past a man opens the whole world to me.”

“And if you met the right man, one who supported you in your dreams?” pressed Emma.

Sadie looked over her teacup at Emma. “You sound like my mother.”

Nora laughed, “Except your mother has mastered the art of subtlety.”

Emma smiled, undeterred. “Mrs. Garvin is rarely wrong.”

Placing her teacup back on the table, Sadie sighed. “I don’t know. Mama has always told me that things aren’t always black and white—yes or no. Not everything in life fits into neat and tidy boxes. So, who knows?” Sadie shrugged one shoulder. “What I do know is that my time and focus is much better spent on my writing and doing what I can to make this world a better place; and let’s be honest falling in love doesn’t advance either of those things.”

Emma nodded. “Understandable, but I also don’t think love is meant to advance as much as enhance our lives.”

“I’m sure that is true for you, and you too, Nora, but unfortunately for me that hasn’t proven to be true.”

“I can only imagine how difficult this has all been,” said Nora.

“It has—no, it was, but being back here, home, in Autumn Springs is helping to breathe new life back into me.”

“Then again, we are so glad you have come back home,” smiled Nora.

“Me too,” agreed Sadie. “This is the best place I could think of to help heal my pride, and my heart.”

“Good for you, Sadie. You know I always admired you when I was growing up. You were so smart and strong, and you never let being a girl stop you from doing anything. You certainly gave Rhett—”

“And Nathan,” added Nora.

“A real run for their money,” finished Emma.

At least someone was impressed. Sadie still cringed at some of her youthful behavior.

“Speaking of running, I will be interviewing Rhett about his campaign. I’m looking forward to seeing how he lands on the subject of suffrage.”

Emma clapped her hands together. “Wonderful! Don’t go easy on him. I know he believes that women deserve to be heard, but I must confess having you back to put his feet to the fire a little, brings me great joy.”

“You’re a terrible sister,” chided Nora. “Rhett has done many wonderful things for not only Autumn Springs, but for people everywhere.”

“I’m not. And you quickly forget the things that Rhett, and Nathan used to do to get us in trouble when we were younger. Your brother and mine weren’t always so sweet, thank you very much. Besides, it’s good for him to have a little competition back. Sadie used to trounce Rhett at the spelling bees.”

“Not every year,” reminded Sadie knowing full well her protest was falling on deaf ears.

“Close enough. My point is that Rhett has been unchallenged for years now. The man walks around, and the world falls at his feet. Having Sadie here to keep him on the straight and narrow and force him to show his true self will be great.” Emma quickly held up a hand. “And before you say he’s a good man, and I’m being mean, let me finish. I know how decent Rhett is. He *is* a man a of substance. Problem is he depends on those good looks to get him through. It’s easy, so he never has to work hard.”

“Well, I was only planning on an interview, not an intervention. I can assure you that I will be pushing suffrage to the forefront, and not just for this election. Which is a good reminder. How would you ladies feel about starting a suffrage group right here in Autumn Springs with me? An assembly of women who believe in independence.”

“Oh, I am definitely interested,” grinned Emma.

“Of course, you are,” said Nora. “Raising eyebrows is one of your favorite things to do.”

Sadie quickly moved to reassure Nora. “I’m not looking to start trouble in town. I want to raise awareness. This isn’t an overnight fix, but we do need start somewhere. I want to stand up for what is right, for what is fair.”

“As do I,” agreed Nora. “I just know that some of us aren’t used to being so bold. I’m not one for attention at the best of times, but I do believe in what you are saying, and I do believe that women should be allowed to vote, among many other things.” She glanced over to Emma and back to Sadie. “I’ll help in any way I can, but I won’t be party to throwing bricks through windows or wearing pants.”

Sadie laughed. “Then it’s a good thing neither of those are prerequisites for a suffragette.” She paused, then added, “Although I will say that trousers, even bloomers, are worth a try. It’s very freeing.”

“Oh, I’m sure. Emma’s been trying to get me to wear them when working for years.”

Emma lifted one hand and shook her head. “I have—a futile effort.”

Nora shrugged. “I just prefer skirts.”

“Then skirts it is. All I want is for each one of us to have the opportunity to make our own decisions and steer the course of our lives.”



RHETT STRETCHED out his legs from the high-backed chair in the great room of the big house. The soft glow of the lamplight cast warm, dancing shadows on the walls. When home at the Double H this past year, he found his evenings much quieter as Gideon, and now Ben, had their marital distractions. Ben had been taking Katie out to get her used to riding, and over the past few months she was actually becoming an accomplished rider.

It made him smile to see how happy Ben was in married life. With Katie’s passion for baking, his brother was starting to get a little soft around the edges: they probably all were, and the boys in the bunkhouse never missed a chance to tease him about it. It was all in good fun, as each of them would have jumped at the chance for even a sliver of the joy Ben was brimming with.

It didn’t take long for his thoughts to return to Sadie Garvin. Or was it Gatwick? Had she removed his last name when she took off his ring? He didn’t want to ask, but he’d only be lying to himself if he said he was not curious how it had all fallen apart.

Rhett had known when Charles Gatwick made his sole appearance in Autumn Springs that the pair were mismatched. Sadie was spark and intellect with a smile, but at Charles side it almost seemed as though she were suppressing the very things that made her, her.

He remembered their own spirited debates and youthful rivalries and found himself mysteriously looking back on them with fondness rather than the frustration he'd once felt. Strange.

He put down the paper he'd been reading, giving up on the pretense of concentration after reading the same article for the third time. His interview with Sadie was in three days. He'd hoped to have bumped into her again when he went to pick up his pamphlets, but she wasn't there, and Rhett had to be content with Mr. Langley's promise of support.

It would be interesting to see which issues Sadie was most interested in. There had been rumors about town about Sadie's involvement in the suffrage movement in San Francisco, but she'd been here over a week and there hadn't been any marching parades up Main Street. The Sadie he once knew would have already rallied the troops. Perhaps the gossip was exaggerated; besides he knew better than to believe anything that didn't come directly from the source.

Still, he better be on his toes. Sadie and her keen wit would be ready to challenge him, and the last thing he wanted to do was take a big stand on such a controversial topic. His own feelings on the matter were irrelevant. If he didn't have the voting support of the masses, then he would never have a chance to make change. Right now, those masses were men.

If Sadie had taken up suffrage as her sole cause, she was going to be like a dog with a bone, and he was going to have to be quick on his feet to dance around her.

Rhett released a long breath that rattled his lips.

"Nervous about being interviewed by Sadie?" Gideon asked, as he walked into the room, Ben behind him.

"No," scoffed Rhett. "I've been interviewed many times. I don't see how this will be any different."

"Hmm, so it's just the interviewer that's got you all tied up?" Gideon kept a straight face, but his eyes were mocking.

Having four brothers, and one brash sister definitely prepared him for life in politics. If he could handle the

ceaseless ribbing and teasing from his beloved siblings, he could survive anything.

“I’m not tied up, thank you. Unlike the rest of you lot, I don’t let things get under my collar.”

“Except for Sadie Garvin. She’s pretty good at pushing your buttons,” said Ben. His look of concern was comical.

“Try your best, Ben, but I’m not bothered,” he responded with a shrug.

“Speaking of buttons,” Gideon pointed at Rhett’s white-collared shirt. “Your shirt says otherwise. I hope you haven’t walked around like that all day. You’ve done your buttons up out of order.”

Rhett’s hand flew to his chest as he looked down in horror. His buttons were perfectly aligned, his shirt still crisp. He glared across at his laughing brothers.

“And I thought Luke was the problem in this house.”

“You boys talking about me again,” said Luke as he sauntered into the room. “Can I stay, or should I go back to the bunkhouse so you *gentlemen* can speak more freely?”

“Suit yourself.” Gideon crossed his arms as he narrowed his eyes on their youngest brother. He was making no bones about his irritation with Luke’s antics in town earlier in the week.

“Fine.” Luke turned to leave, but Rhett called him back. “Hold on, Luke.”

“What?” Luke paused. “If it’s another one of your lectures, I don’t want to hear it.”

“No lecture. I’m wondering if you want to help me with my campaign.”

By the stunned look on Luke’s face, he could see he’d caught his brother off guard. He expected if he were to glance at Gideon and Ben, they would have been equally surprised.

“And what exactly do you want me doing? I’m not putting on one of those dandy suits and pretending to like people I

don't. I can tell you that now."

"That's how you see me," chuckled Rhett. "Not exactly a glowing picture you're painting."

Luke shrugged but didn't answer.

"No suit required, but I'm in need of a campaign manager. Someone to help me organize everything. You know, a fella to handle the real business when I'm out smiling, shaking hands and pretending to like people."

Luke's lips twitched and then a grin broke through. "Putting that pretty face to good use I see. Real meaningful stuff."

If he hadn't overheard the men in town talking the other day he probably wouldn't have cared, but Luke's words rubbed at him like sanded paper. He was offering his brother an opportunity; he didn't need to be insulted while he did it.

"So? You interested?"

Luke shook his head. "No, I got plenty of real work to do around here. I'm not interested in all that. That's your thing, not mine."

"Fine. Let me know if you change your mind."

Rhett watched as Luke turned to head up the stairs to his room. When he reached the top, he paused, but he didn't turn around when he said, "thanks." Then Luke was gone.

Letting out a deep sigh, Rhett turned to his brothers.

Gideon rubbed at the back of his neck and shook his head. "You tried."

"I wasn't blowing smoke, Gid. I could use him. I know he's got a temper, but he is honest, he shoots straight, and no matter what he might think, he's pretty smart."

"Yeah, I know, but it'd be nice if he started acting like it. One of these days he's going to get himself into trouble he can't get out of."

Rhett couldn't argue with Gideon, but he prayed it didn't end up that way. All three brothers remained silent, each lost

in their own worry for their little brother.

Sadie stood before the small number of women that were gathered in her family's parlour, her palms moist with nervous anticipation. Her parents had kindly lent the space for Sadie to have her first meeting. Her first effort to bring forward the idea of women's suffrage to Autumn Springs. There had always been whispers between women, but never had anyone organized a group dedicated to a woman's right to vote. After speaking with Emma and Nora the day before Sadie was excited, but she wasn't sure if the stigma from her divorce would carry over and prevent her from championing their cause.

The room, though cosy and familiar, had taken on a different energy today. It was no longer just a place for polite gatherings, for ladies to sip tea and discuss the weather. No, today she hoped it would be transformed into a gathering of like-minded women, a circle of pioneers in their own right, brought together by a shared belief in change.

Emma, front and center with her daughter on her lap, looked on eagerly, while Nora sat patiently waiting for the meeting to begin. They were joined by Nora's mother, Mrs. Bryson, Mrs. Wyley, her sister, and two other ladies whom Sadie had only met today. It wasn't a large group, but it was a start. Sadie glanced over at her mother who gave her a subtle nod. Why was it that even as an adult the confidence of a mother could bring such reassurance?

Taking a deep breath and clasping her hands together, Sadie began.

“Ladies, thank you all for joining me today. I wanted to have a chance to talk with you about something that is deeply important to me, as I believe it should be to all of us.”

She felt her voice waver for a moment but pressed on. “As most of you are aware, I recently returned to Autumn Springs, and I am so happy to be back in such a wonderful and caring town.”

A few nods and encouraging smiles met her words, easing her tension. In that moment, Sadie decided to address the elephant in the room.

“However,” she continued, “I cannot deny, as I am sure most of you have already heard, that my return also marked the end of my marriage.” That certainly got their attention.

“I know that many people might view me as having run home with my tail tucked between my legs, a failure as a woman. While it has not been an easy journey, I refuse to see myself that way. My value is not a reflection of my marital status. If I am to be judged it should be by my actions, my convictions, and my contribution to society.”

Sadie paused, taking in the expressions of the women before her. She saw curiosity, empathy, and even a hint of admiration. These women, she realized, had their own stories, their own secrets, and challenges, and they were not here to judge her.

She took another deep breath and continued, her voice steady now. “Which brings me to why we are all here. I believe that women, just like men, should have the right to make decisions for themselves. To have a say in the world we live in. I believe in women’s suffrage.”

Emma immediately began clapping, as did her daughter, the little girl looking around with wide-eyed joy, mimicking the women in the room.

“I propose we form a women’s suffrage group right here in Autumn Springs. A group that will advocate for our voices to be heard, and our right to be recognized. I know that together we can build a better future for women.”

Her attention was caught by a movement in the doorway, and Sadie glanced across to see her father beaming at her with pride, before he disappeared again into the depths of the house. She looked back to the small gathering.

“I see a future where our voices are heard alongside the men that we admire and love. One where we are seen and treated as the capable women we are. As competent as any man in making decisions about issues that affect our lives. Women across the country are uniting, standing up for what is fair and just. We must support one another—as women.”

“The good men in our lives—and I am lucky to have been raised by such a man—know that there is nothing we cannot achieve if we put our minds to it.”

Sadie saw the approval on her mother’s face and went on to finish. “I am asking you to join me in seeing our value as women reflected in our laws. That we be equal to men under the laws of this land. That we be given the right to vote!”

The room filled with a chorus of agreement and the women exchanged excited glances. Sadie pressed a hand to her heart and the earlier uncertainty that she had felt before the meeting dissolved, leaving her feeling as light as feather.

As the enthusiasm settled, a sense of purpose hung in the air. The women began to speak, each voicing their ideas and their concerns.

“This all sounds very exciting, but I don’t want to be labeled a troublemaker. My family has only recently moved to Autumn Springs, and we want to make this our home.” Mrs. Lena Kelly looked around at the other women. “It’s not that I don’t want to help.”

It was an understandable concern, and Sadie sought to reassure her. “I believe in a quiet approach, not militant. We can begin gently, so as not to frighten anyone. There will be many different ways for us to contribute.”

Emma was next to speak. “If they are frightened then they are being foolish. For heaven’s sake, we organize most things in this town, socials, fundraisers, celebrations of all kinds. We

run businesses and entire households. Why would anyone with half a brain question our ability to decide on which candidates to vote for in some election?"

"You're still young, Emma," chuckled Mrs. Wyley. "As you know Jasper was the sheriff here for years, and now your Weston. One look at those cells will tell you just how foolish some men can be." Soft laughter once again filled the room. "I'm making light of things, but the truth is that no matter what some might say the Lord created us all equal. It's only fitting that our laws reflect His intentions. I stand with you, Sadie."

Mrs. James nodded thoughtfully. "I will have to speak to Ron," she began. "It only seems fair to discuss it with him first. After all, the menswear store depends on the patronage of the town, but I know he will support this. He's always been a firm believer in progress and justice."

"Absolutely," agreed Sadie. "I think it's important to include men in this discussion. Having them as allies will be crucial to our cause."

Her response seemed to settle some of the nerves in the room.

"What about Rhett?"

Sadie, fingers pressed to the side of her neck, turned back to Emma. "Rhett? What about Rhett?"

Emma frowned as though confused by Sadie's reaction. "Well, he's campaigning, isn't he? You're going to be interviewing him, right?"

Delicately clearing her throat, Sadie answered. "Yes, on Saturday, for the paper."

Emma's eyes gleamed with something that Sadie couldn't quite define. "Exactly. It could be a great opportunity for you. You know how influential he can be with many of the men in town."

"I believe that opportunity would benefit all of us, it's not about me." Sadie didn't understand why her voice insisted on wavering in that moment. "But you're correct. Rhett does have

a way with words, and he's well-respected. I did plan on asking him how he feels about women's suffrage."

"Good. I can't imagine he wouldn't be supportive. That would be a foolish stance to take in my family."

"Why am I already feeling sorry for Rhett?" murmured Nora.

"Because you're too nice. My brother is a big boy, if he can't handle a serious discussion on serious issues then he shouldn't be running—for anything."

"I assure you I don't plan on attacking the man. It's an interview." Sadie enjoyed Emma's company, but she wasn't interested in having a drawn-out debate on the interrogation of the woman's brother.

"I know my husband has a great respect for your brother Mrs. Hayes," Mrs. James addressed Emma. "I do too. He has been a generous customer since we opened the store."

"Rhett does love a sharp suit," acknowledged Emma.

"Is he the tall, dark-haired, handsome fellow that was speaking with the—"

"I think we need to focus on the topic at hand." Sadie interrupted Mrs. Kelly. The last thing she needed was anymore discussion of Rhett Hart. Despite her best efforts, her mind kept returning to their reunion at the newspaper and their upcoming interview as it was. She reminded herself that any crush she'd had as a girl was long over, and she was on a different path in life now.

Steering the conversation away from the dreamy dark eyes of Rhett and back to suffrage, the women spent the next half hour chatting, and sharing their hopes for this journey.

Their time drawing to a close, it was Nora that asked the most practical question. "We are all in agreement but what do we do next?"

Sadie took a moment to collect her thoughts. "We could try and formalize our group and give ourselves a name. But this is new to me too," she paused. "Perhaps if we start by spreading

the word and recruiting more women who share our vision first. Education and awareness are going to be key. Letting people know this isn't a scary idea, but a fair one."

Mrs. Bryson spoke softly from her seat near Mrs. Wyley and her sister. "It might be nice if there was a way to identify those who share our hopes."

It warmed Sadie's heart to see not only had Nora and Nathan's mother shown up to the meeting but was also participating. Her husband's and son's deaths had taken so much from her it was good to see she was resurfacing from the depths of her grief. Taking over the boarding house with Celia Durnford, once Mrs. Wyley left her sister and married the old sheriff, had been a real blessing.

"That's a brilliant idea!" agreed Sadie. "Any ideas, Ladies? In San Francisco some of the women wore sashes, and some wore pins."

"Could we choose something less...conspicuous?" asked Mrs. Kelly. "For now."

Sadie didn't want to disagree with the concerned woman, after all these were big changes, and everyone deserved to have their voice heard. Still, she wanted something tangible, something that allowed them to see the support around them.

It was her mother who saved the day. "Would a ribbon suit? I am happy to donate a spool. If we all wore the same color, it would be subtle but recognizable. We could wear them any way we wanted."

"Perfect! What do you all think? Should we make it a ribbon? Should we take a vote?" Sadie said with a wink.

The women responded with an unanimous yes, and her mother disappeared back into the mercantile, and returned with a spool of gold ribbon.

"It's beautiful, Mama. Why did you choose gold?" asked Sadie.

"Years ago, in Kansas, the women adopted the sunflower, the state flower as a symbol of their suffrage campaign," replied her mother.

“I didn’t know you followed such things.” Sadie was surprised. She knew she wasn’t the first woman to come up with the idea of votes for women, far from it, but they never spoke of suffrage in depth when she was growing up.

Dorothy Garvin handed her the spool and gave a wry smile. “There’s still a few things you don’t know about this old girl yet, sweetheart.”

Once again amazed by her mother, Sadie realized it was a good reminder of the strength of all the women that had come before her. The older women in the group had a lifetime of experience to draw from, and both her and the younger women would do well to learn from it.

By the time everyone was ready to head home, all the women were proudly wearing the newly made, little gold ribbons. It was the perfect solution. There was no need for anyone to know what the ribbons meant unless the ladies wanted them to know. It might not be starting things off with a bang, but it was a start, and it gave Sadie hope.



STROLLING DOWN MAIN STREET, Rhett’s boots echoed against the wooden planks beneath him as he caught a glimpse of himself in the window of Win Olcott’s barbershop. A trim was in order. He didn’t like his hair too short, but its ends touching the bottom of his collar wouldn’t do either. The reflection also reminded him to swing by Ron James place to be fitted for a new suit.

The James moved into town a few years back, and Rhett enjoyed Ron’s company, never mind his skill with a needle. The fact that he was a member of the Masons in Helena was also a bonus. Getting the support of the lodge behind his campaign would be a real feather in his cap.

Feminine laughter pulled him from his thoughts, and across the road Rhett spotted a familiar group of women gathered outside the Garvin Mercantile. Emma, little Mabel,

Nora and Sadie were so deep in conversation that they didn't notice as he approached.

"Hello, ladies," Rhett greeted them warmly.

They jumped apart at his appearance, and if Rhett didn't know better, he'd think they were plotting to pull off a bank heist. Given his sister's propensity towards adventure maybe he shouldn't rule it out.

Their odd behavior left him intrigued, but before he could press them on their secrecy, his niece with her father's big blue eyes caught his attention. Tiny hands reached out from her mother's arms, the strings of her bonnet held fast, as the rest of the hat fell down behind her soft dark hair.

Leaning over, Rhett scooped Mabel into his arms, and she squealed with delight, as he blew pretend bubbles on her neck. Her fingers immediately found their way into the hair below his hat.

Emma laughed, "Your hair is the envy of all women, Rhett, from all ages."

He gently loosened Mabel's tight grip on his locks and kissed the offending palms, which only made her giggle. "Unca!"

"Hello there, little miss," grinned Rhett, as he greeted his niece his eyes caught Sadie's.

"She seems to have a favorite uncle. She obviously adores you," she remarked, her voice soft.

"I adore her but believe me when I say that all five of us are rather interchangeable to her at this stage. But I'll take all the giggles I can."

They spoke for a few moments but after offering to escort Emma and Nora back home, Sadie went back inside the Garvin's place. With Mabel still content in his arms, the three of them started walking.

"This is good timing, Rhett. Were your ears burning?" Emma gave him a bright smile; he could tell she was happy

with the relationship her daughter was building with her uncles.

“My ears?”

“Never mind,” said Emma, waving away her previous words. “What are you doing in town?”

“I’m meeting a gentleman over at the International Hotel. Found a potential campaign manager.”

“You don’t have one?” asked Nora.

“Not yet. I even offered the position to Luke.”

“Ahh,” sighed Emma. “Obviously that didn’t work out.”

“No. Anyway, I can’t wait around, or put this off any longer. If this guy is able to string two sentences together and knows what a ballot is, I’m going to hire him. There are too many balls in the air for me to juggle on my own.”

“You should hire Sadie, now there’s a woman who knows how to organize.”

Nora expelled a heavy breath at Emma’s suggestion.

Chuckling at his sister’s attempts, he responded. “No, thanks. She’d spend the whole time telling me how to run my campaign.”

“Isn’t that the point of a manager?” poked Emma. “Wait, why? You two aren’t still going head-to-head, are you? I thought that would have ended once you both grew up.”

Was his sister telling him he was acting like a child? “No, no. It was just a jest. And it’s irrelevant. She is happy writing columns for Langley.”

“And she’s interviewing you, I hear.”

“Yes, she’s coming out to the Double H on Saturday.” Rhett adjusted his grip on Mabel as his sleepy niece rested her head against his shoulder, content to be carried home.

“A house call?”

“She’s not a doctor, and don’t even start. She’s just gotten back, it’s been years. She wants to see everyone, and finally

meet Madeline and Katie.”

“Interesting.”

Nora let out soft laughter beside him. She knew her best friend too well.

“No. No, it is not interesting, Emma. Get that look off your face—has anyone told you how, how—honestly, I don’t even have a word for it.”

“You? Rhett Hart, no words?” teased Emma.

He looked to his sister’s best friend. The sensible one. “Nora? Help me out here.”

Smiling, Nora rubbed the back of Mabel’s dark head as it nestled against Rhett’s shoulder. “I don’t even bother anymore.”

Seeing he would get no help from Nora, he returned to Emma. “Sadie Gatwick—”

“Garvin. She’s not keeping his name,” reminded Emma with a smile.

“Whatever. My point being that Sadie has enough to contend with coming back to Autumn Springs. Don’t go trying to make things more complicated for people than they need to be. It’s an interview. She asks questions, I answer. It’s a great chance for me to share my platform for my campaign. Nothing more.”

“Fine,” shrugged Emma.

“Good,” Rhett finished. He wasn’t sure if it was the last of it, but he wasn’t about to play into his meddling sister’s hands. Her attempts at matchmaking didn’t usually bother him, why was it when she decided to throw Sadie into the mix his normal composure was ruffled?

“Micah said you’ve got some great ideas, Rhett. I look forward to reading about them.”

“That’s all we can do about them,” muttered Emma, but she didn’t say anything more.

Nora found several more neutral topics to chat about, and Rhett gratefully responded.

Micah had really hit the jackpot in finding someone like Nora. A real partner to her husband and support to the entire family. His brother-in-law Weston, the town's sheriff, on the other hand, required the patience of a saint. His little sister was amazing. Kind, strong, and he was proud to call her family, but she was more like Luke than she would ever care to admit.

Once they arrived at Emma's, Rhett deposited little Mabel back in her mother's open arms and took his leave.

Heading back to the hotel, Sadie once again entered his thoughts. Emma's suggestion, while meant to poke at him, was a fair one, if they lived in a different world. Sadie was as capable, perhaps more so than most men he knew.

No, he was not going to get himself roped into such nonsense. Besides, he might not care one way or the other that Sadie was divorced, but his voting public might. His *male* voting public. What would they think of a female campaign manager? No, his ideas came across as progressive enough, he didn't need to add more fuel to the fire.

He would give Sadie a solid interview and that would be the end of it. After that there was no real reason for them to cross paths more than casually. Her writing, and whatever battles she might be fighting were her own. They had nothing to do with this election or his campaign.

A female campaign manager. It was actually ridiculous. Who would take him seriously? Women couldn't even vote.

The effects of riding out to the Double H were starting to make themselves known. It wasn't a terribly long ride from town to the ranch, but having ridden very little since moving to San Francisco, Sadie was keenly aware of just how out of practice she was.

When the intricately carved archway announcing the Double H Ranch came into view, she let out an audible sigh of relief. There was a time when she'd been able to ride like the wind, but this was a reminder that she was not only a little older, but also not the same woman who left Autumn Springs.

As she got closer, she could see some activity over by the large bunkhouse, a reminder of the considerable size of the Double H operation. Her home with Charles reflected his status, with its imposing brick structure and ostentatious features. She hadn't considered it in that light at the time; she was an excited new bride, but now, as she approached the Hart family home, her memory of her home in San Francisco was one of pretension, and undeniably in line with Charles Gatwick's character. The Double H was as successful, perhaps more so than any of Charles' enterprises, yet felt no need to shout it from the rooftops.

The ranch house itself was the very picture of Montana elegance. Made from sturdy, weathered logs, it exuded a sense of permanence and strength. The rich, brown color blended seamlessly with the natural surroundings, making it appear as though it had grown out of the land itself.

In a way it had. Sadie knew that every piece of timber used to construct what the Harts called the 'Big House' had been culled from their resources.

The wrap-around veranda enveloped the front of the house just as she remembered, offering an inviting space to sit and take in the breathtaking views of the mountains. Sadie smiled when she saw the old log stump off to the side of the house, an axe wedged and waiting for the next offending Hart. Memories flooded back. The Garvins and the Harts shared many family meals at this house, and when the boys got too rambunctious, the view from the veranda was often one of scowling boys, and an ever-increasing woodpile.

It was one of those boys, now grown, who now appeared in the doorway. Rhett.

Good grief the man was sinfully handsome. Did he pose that way on purpose knowing exactly which angles suited him best?

Sadie straightened in the saddle. It seemed foolish but she didn't want him to see she had let her riding abilities slip to the wayside while she was gone.

He was waiting for her by the hitching post when her mount came to a stop. He extended his hand to assist her, but pride flared, and Sadie ignored it. She dismounted with elegance hoping he couldn't see her wince. She unbuckled her leather bag, and wondered if her split skirts were wide enough to prevent him from seeing her cautiously shake her leg out.

"Good to see you, Sadie." Rhett chuckled and nodded at her horse. "As independent as ever."

Ignoring his comment, she brushed the dust from her riding habit, swung her bag over her shoulder and gave him a smile. "Rhett."

He wasn't wearing his usual suit, yet somehow in his denim jeans, white cotton shirt, he still exuded an aura of command. It truly came naturally to the man. His sun-kissed skin contrasting against his collar, and his dark waves of hair not daring to step out of line, gleamed in the sunlight. A

woman either fell in two camps when she saw it: jealous or impressed. It was a good thing she was no longer a little girl with a crush, instead, a woman visiting in a professional capacity. Her observations were from a journalistic perspective, nothing more. She was only sizing up the candidate she was about to interview.

He offered her his arm to ascend the wide stairs to the house, and this time Sadie took it. There was no need to be spiteful as Rhett was simply being a gentleman. For the moment she had nothing to prove, and the truth was she was happy to do so as she didn't want him to know that the muscles in her legs were revolting and her bottom felt bruised.

By the time they reached the great room, Sadie was back in control of her limbs. "Where is everybody? I don't think I've ever been here when it's been this quiet."

Rhett smiled. "Madeline and Gideon took Tilly and Andrew down by the river, Ben's out with Katie, working on her riding. Luke is out with the boys at the corrals. I told them this was an official visit from the Western Echo Press, and we didn't need a slew of interruptions."

Sadie hadn't expected that. Suddenly the interview felt somewhat intimate. She'd been so used to the big house crawling with Harts, she never contemplated privacy. "We are all alone?"

Rhett frowned. "Is that a problem? Teresa is here. Did you want to interview the others?"

"No, I think I was just surprised. You don't often get a Hart alone."

"These days it's much easier. Everyone seems to be moving on. With Emma and Micah in town, Ben and Gid focused on their own lives, I often find myself alone here in the evening."

"What about Luke?" asked Sadie.

"He comes and goes." Rhett lifted a dismissive shoulder. "Don't get me wrong, it's not quiet around here, just... different." He tilted his head and looked down at her. "But not

to worry, they will be here soon enough, everyone wants to see you, and if you run out of questions for me, you can start quizzing them. When Tilly finds out you're writing for the newspaper, I'm sure she will be full of suggestions for your columns."

Sadie grinned. "I look forward to hearing them."

Rhett laughed. "I've warned you. Remember it was Emma helping to raise that girl, before Madeline came along. Madeline is a wonderful mother, but she can only do so much with—"

"A Hart?" countered Sadie.

"Not what I was going to say, but perhaps you've hit the nail on the head."

"She sounds wonderful." Sadie glanced around the room. "Should we get started? I don't want to run out of time."

Rhett shot her a questioning look. "How much time do you need? It's an interview, not an exposé. Or am I mistaken?"

Sadie chose a high-backed chair, that looked lowest to the ground in a room full of seating meant for tall men. "I guess that depends on how you answer all my questions."

"And so it begins," sighed Rhett.

Taking out her notebook and pencil from the leather bag she'd dropped beside the chair, she began scanning over the questions she had prepared for today.

"Is the major still getting out for a little bird watching these days?"

"Uh...yes. Yes, I think so." The question caught her completely off guard. The fact that Rhett remembered her father's fondness for bird watching surprised her; was he hoping to remind her of their family connection to soften any questions she might have? The truth was she wasn't sure. She assumed he was, but she'd been so caught up in her own life, she hadn't taken the time to ask about his. Sadie made a mental note to spend some time reconnecting with her father later.

“Oh, good. And you?”

“Me? No, that was something we did with him, less so on my own. And...” she added. “San Francisco doesn’t exactly lend itself to avian opportunity.”

“Really?” Rhett raised one brow ever so slightly. “I assumed there were plenty of peacocks wandering about. Hmm.”

He looked genuinely puzzled. It was hard to tell if he was serious or not. It took a moment but soon the twinkle in his dark eyes gave him away. Two could play that game.

“You are correct, but one quickly grows weary of that particular species of bird. Especially at parties, we, as women, we’re practically overrun.”

Rhett laughed, and Sadie responded with a smile, as he took the seat opposite her and hooked an ankle over his knee.

“I’m ready if you are.”

Suddenly, Sadie was inexplicably nervous. There was no reason for such a feeling to overcome her. She had known Rhett for most of her life, they’d faced off many times over the years. But this wasn’t a competition, this was a conversation, and for some reason, without a prize to win, Sadie was less sure of herself.

Reminding herself to relax her shoulders, she responded. “Yes.”

“So, our interview begins. I guess I need to remember that everything I say is going to be recorded in your little book.”

Little book. Did he realize how condescending that sounded? Would he have spoken to a male journalist in such a way? Was it so ingrained in the male species that they gave it no second thought?

“Are you concerned? Do you believe that you need to watch your words?”

“Not regarding the election, but when seated across from a beautiful woman, a man can sometimes trip over his tongue.”

Sadie's pencil froze in her hand, and she narrowed her eyes on him. A boyish grin on his face, Rhett seemed pleased with his ability to flummox her. Typical. For all his respectful talk, deep down he probably didn't take her seriously either.

Always the smooth talker. Did he think his boyish charm was going to be enough to see him through the election? If he did, he would soon know different.

Setting her jaw, she mentally counted to five, before speaking. "Do you think that flattery will prevent me from asking you the hard questions?"

"Are you planning on asking me such difficult questions? If so, I assure you, I can be far more charming."

Had he always been this obnoxious? Was her memory of Rhett Hart clouded by the perceptions of a child?

"I will be asking you about the issues that will be relevant to your voters. I hope you take their concerns more seriously than you are taking this interview."

Suitably set down, Rhett sat a little straighter in his chair, and tugged at his collar. He met her eyes with a direct gaze. "I take both seriously. Please ask your questions. I will be happy to answer all of them."

"Good. Let's begin."

Sadie spent the better part of an hour interviewing Rhett about the intricacies of his campaign and was pleased to discover how knowledgeable he was on the needs of his community and was genuinely impressed by the vision he had for the future. As frustrating as their start had been, Rhett was a commendable candidate for the upcoming election. He approached her questions thoughtfully, taking his time to provide answers. Unlike many men eager to dominate a conversation, Rhett wasn't in a rush to hear the sound of his own voice; instead, he answered with purpose and sincerity. It certainly gave the impression that when he spoke, he meant what he said. Checking back on her notes, Sadie knew she had asked him nearly all her questions, except one. The one she was most interested in hearing an answer to.

Teresa La Baena, the Harts long-time cook and housekeeper, arrived with a tray bearing a steaming pot of tea and two delicate cups. She placed them on the table between Sadie and Rhett, and Sadie, pausing the interview, took a moment to reconnect with the older woman.

As Teresa took her leave, they both reached for the teapot. Their fingers brushed lightly, and the unexpected contact sent a shiver along her skin. Sadie's breath caught, and a soft gasp escaped her lips. Hoping he hadn't noticed her reaction she quickly withdrew her hand.

Too late.

"Allow me." Rhett's gaze fixed on hers as he gently lifted the teapot from the tray, his lips curled in a half-smile.

She averted her eyes from his deep brown and watched as he began to pour tea into the pretty flowered cup. Ever so slowly, the steaming liquid cascaded into the cup, as if time had slowed down. The fragile teapot looked out of place in his large hands, and when she looked up, he was still watching her.

Sadie's heart raced, and she felt her cheeks heat. The moment felt far more intimate than it should.

Rhett waited a moment longer before speaking. "Do you remember this set?"

Sadie was thankful for the diverting question. "I do."

"Now that ladies have returned to the house it's finally getting some use again. It belonged to my mother. A luxury when she got it. Elizabeth Hart was one of the toughest women I've ever known, but she still liked pretty things."

Sadie could still picture Rhett's mother, standing right here in this room, laughing with her own mother. Like Dorothy Garvin, Mrs. Hart was beautiful, but took no guff from any man. One day you could see her at church in lace and skirts, and the next it would be a pair of trousers working alongside her husband. In those early days when an extra pair of hands were need, all answered the call: man or woman.

It was a large leap to think that if she were still with them today, Mrs. Hart would have enthusiastically approved of the women's suffrage movement. It was women like Elizabeth Hart and her mother that were the backbone of this country.

Sadie took a small sip of the tea. "This brings back lovely memories of your mother. I know Mama still misses her so much."

"We all do," agreed Rhett, then pushed himself back into his chair. "Now, you've asked quite a few questions, but why do I feel like there is something you have been waiting to discuss?"

Sadie hesitated for a moment, her fingers tracing the delicate rim of her teacup before placing it back down. Was she so transparent?

"You've seen through me, Rhett," Sadie conceded. She looked up, her blue eyes meeting his. "Your stance on votes for women. It's a topic that is very important to me, and I can't help but wonder where you stand on it."

Rhett, to his credit, didn't bat an eye. He seemed to be considering her question before he responded.

"Women's suffrage is certainly an important issue, and I appreciate your dedication to it. However, my campaign strategy is to prioritize issues that have more immediate relevance to the majority of the people. Rest assured, if elected, I'll carefully consider all matters brought before me, including those related to suffrage."

Sadie's nose wrinkled in distaste. He had given her an answer that was no answer at all. He was just like all the other politicians, like most men in power. Say a mouthful of words without saying anything at all.

"That almost seems like a practiced response. Now, would you care to answer the question I asked?" she replied, this time more forcefully.

"You're making a complicated issue sound simple, which it is not." Rhett's face remained impassive, which was all the more infuriating. He was an intelligent man, from a good

family, filled with strong women. Surely, he could see the disservice that was being done to women.

“I believe it is a simple issue. Only fear is making it complicated. I ask you; does it seem fair that half the population is given no say in the very matters that affect our lives?”

“No, but many would not agree with you.”

Sadie gave a very unladylike snort. “You mean men, men would not agree with me. Just because it is not a popular idea, does not mean it has no merit. Abolishing slavery was also unpopular, but that battle was won. There are still changes to be fought for, but finally the tide is turning. There is no excuse for sitting on the sidelines when wrong is being done.”



SHE WAS GETTING RILED UP, but Rhett knew he had to tread carefully. He knew what he believed, but while Sadie thought full steam ahead was the answer to everything; he couldn't afford that luxury, not if he wanted to win an election.

“I'm not saying you're wrong, Sadie.”

“But you're not saying I'm right either, are you? In fact, you're not saying anything at all. If it's the words that bother you, would you prefer to wear one of our golden ribbons? A silent support?”

So, that's what his sister and Nora were up to the other day. He'd noticed the matching ribbons, but was distracted by Mabel, and forgot to ask their meaning.

“I wear no symbols. Of any kind, Sadie. I can't have people thinking I'm being influenced by any one group.”

“I'm not asking you to carry a sign advertising the mercantile or the newspaper. Whether or not women deserve the vote *is* a political issue. You're supposed to have an opinion. Voicing those opinions is how people decide to vote for you or another candidate.”

“Voicing yes, but hitting them over the head with it? No.”

“I hardly think the wearing of a ribbon is hitting people over the head,” she replied.

The woman was relentless.

“Of course, you don’t. But others might.”

So, you’ll hide your beliefs—if you’re even telling the truth—in order not to offend some troglodyte that believes women should be seen not heard?”

“I am telling you the truth, and no, what I’m saying is that this election is about more than one singular issue.”

Sadie was now staring at him, arms folded across her chest. “Not for me it isn’t.”

“But I won’t only be representing you, will I?” His eyebrow inched upward in question.

“I can’t vote, so I’m not sure how you’ll be representing me at all.” Sadie pressed her lips, raising both brows in response.

Rhett chose to ignore her comment. “If I go to talk to someone about, say water rights, I want them to be focused on the topic at hand, not questioning me on irrelevant issues.”

“I understand that Rhett, but how can you say that suffrage isn’t relevant?”

“Votes for women are not an issue for this election.” Sadie opened her mouth to respond, but Rhett held up a hand to stop her. He needed to get his point across without being interrupted every few moments. “It’s not. Not to point out the obvious, but as you said, women do not have the right to vote here. My opinion on that doesn’t matter right now. Once I am elected—”

“If.”

“Fair enough. *If*, I am elected, then I can start to make efforts to table that action. If I alienate my actual voting base now, then I will never have a chance to champion your cause. Can you understand?”

Sadie tilted her head as she looked at him. “Oh, I understand very well.”

Good heavens the woman was as prickly as a thistle in the summer sun. This was the Sadie Garvin he remembered. He was irritated and invigorated by their debate at the same time. He knew that if he even let a hint of a smile slip out, he’d be in trouble. She’d never been one to hide her emotions, she wore them on her sleeve, and that little wrinkled nose of hers was a dead giveaway at her irritation. Years ago, in school they had competed for a bag of candy as a prize for an English essay. He had narrowly won the prize, and Sadie looked as though she could smell rotten eggs for days afterward when she looked at him. The fact that her parents owned the mercantile and she had full access to the exact same treats meant nothing. She’d simply wanted to win.

“Then why do I feel like we are talking past each other? You’re getting angry with me, but surely you must realize that I can’t wave a magic wand and bring women the vote. I don’t have that power.”

“Don’t condescend to me, Rhett Hart. I know perfectly well that isn’t how this works. You’re right you don’t have that power, not yet. But Wyoming has already accomplished it, why not Montana? One day we will get statehood: you and I both know that time is not so far away, and when it does, I want the chance like any other Montanan in shaping its future. So, no, you can’t wave a magic wand, but you can promise to bring our concerns to the table. To let our voices at least be in the room.” Then she gave him a sly smile. “And if you think that you only need to garner the support of the men in this territory because they drop the actual ballot, you’re not as smart as I thought.”

What did she have up her sleeve? “What exactly does that mean?”

“It means that women, even without the vote hold a lot of sway. Husbands have wives, Rhett. Brothers have sisters, and fathers have daughters. Wearing ribbons and holding signs in the street are not the only way we have of showing our displeasure.”

“That sounds more like a threat than an argument for fairness and justice, Sadie.”

He watched as she lifted her teacup, and took another sip, then smiled. “You can take it whatever way you like. I’m just saying if you think a few speeches and well-placed handshakes are going to get you in office, you may want to reconsider your campaign.”

“Now you think you can run my campaign better than I can?” asked Rhett.

“I haven’t met your new manager, but I believe I could be capable if placed in such a position, but that is not my point.”

“Dare I ask what your point is then? I would make an attempt, but I fear I would get that wrong too.”

“You’re a good man, Rhett. Smart, even-tempered, competent, and people are drawn to you.”

Now she was flattering him. Rhett couldn’t help but find her utterly perplexing. One moment he felt as though they shared a genuine connection, the next she was cornering him to point out all his flaws.

“I wasn’t expecting so many compliments, Sadie.”

She sighed. “Those are facts, not compliments, Rhett. You can’t win this election on charm alone.”

“I can certainly try.”

She rolled her eyes, but Rhett was certain he could see the corner of her mouth twitch. Why did that bring him such delight?

“Don’t underestimate us, Rhett, the results may not be to your liking.”

It was hard to tell how serious she was. “Again, that sounds like a threat.”

“Facts only sound like threats to the uninformed.”

Rhett didn’t know whether to be intimidated or impressed. Too bad he’d already hired Lewis Frye. Sadie would have made an excellent campaign manager, and he had a feeling it

would have been far better to have her on his side, than face her as an adversary.

“It’s been a long time since we were children, Sadie. Do you think there will ever be a time when we aren’t challenging one another.”

“I think—”

“Sadie!”

Both Rhett and Sadie twisted to see a horde of Harts come through the wide wooden doors at the front of the house. Boots against the flagstones combined with warm welcomes, filled the air. Apparently, his family had waited long enough to see Sadie. They would have to finish their conversation another day.

The table before her was laid out with so many dishes that Sadie wondered if the maple—thick as it was—would be able to stand the weight. She'd been ambushed into having supper with the Harts, and despite her initial protests, she was glad she had agreed. It was hard not to be impressed how quickly Teresa and the ladies put the meal together.

There was still an unspoken tension that hung in the air between her and Rhett. After their earlier conversation was interrupted, and interview finished with the arrival of the boisterous Hart clan, she wasn't sure where they stood. Rhett's interactions seemed to be tinged with restraint, as though he were weighing each word carefully before speaking. The rest of the family, blissfully unaware of what they had interrupted, had no problem filling the air with their lively banter and casual conversation.

It was moments like this that she realized how much she was missing when she left her family and friends for marriage to Charles.

"Miss Sadie?" asked Tilly. The little girl had been happily sharing every aspect of her life, and some of the others to the guest at the table. It was hard not to adore Gideon's daughter with her gap-toothed smile. It was a bit like a neglected picket fence, but somehow it made the blonde-haired child that much more endearing.

"Sorry, Tilly, I think I missed that, could you repeat what you just said?"

Tilly gave her a bright smile. “Sure. I said I also got a mama now. Another uncle, too, but you probably thought he was my brother when we was—” Tilly looked over at Madeline, Gideon’s wife. “Were,” Tilly corrected herself, then kept right on talking. “Showing you, our horses. But he’s not, but he feels like a brother, right Andy?”

“Yup,” agreed Andy, reaching for another bun.

When the children had taken her to see their horses before dinner, Sadie at first had found it hard to understand some of the words Andy said, but the more the children spoke, the easier it became. And they talked a lot.

“I also have a new aunt Katie. She’s the best, she bakes desserts all the time. All I’m short of now is grandparents, but I’ve got Mrs. Garvin and the major, and they are just as good.”

Heavens, the child could talk the bark off a tree.

“Maybe get to your supper now, Tilly,” suggested Gideon.

“But I want to know more about Miss Sadie,” replied Tilly.

“Then you might want to ask her questions, rather than continuing to share your own stories,” reminded Madeline.

Nodding, Tilly turned back to Sadie. “Do you still go birding with the major? He said you used to. Does he still carve pretty things for you even though you’re old? He carved a dog for me, cuz I didn’t have a real one, but now I do. Thanks to your mama.” Tilly paused, then glanced back at Gideon, patting his hand. “And you, too, Daddy.”

Gideon closed his eyes as the rest of the table did their best to hold in their laughter.

“Well, I haven’t had a chance to do any birdwatching with my father yet, but you have me thinking. As I’m getting on in years perhaps, I should ask him to carve me out a nice walking stick.”

The adults of the table laughed out loud, but Tilly merely looked confused. “You’re not *that* old, Miss Sadie.”

“Thank you, Tilly.”

“You’re welcome.” Poor Madeline looked fit to be tied at her daughter’s precocious talk. So, Sadie shot her a quick smile to let her know that no offense had been taken.

“You’re both from big cities?” Sadie asked the two women across from her. “I know when I first arrived in the city it was almost overwhelming. The pace is so much faster there.”

“I think it goes both ways,” answered Madeline. “I’ve had to learn quite a few new skills, and Andrew—”

“Andy!” interrupted a chorus of male shouts.

Madeline gave an exaggerated sigh. “As for my brother, Andy, I think he was always meant to be out here.”

Sadie looked over to Andy. “You certainly seem to be a born cowboy.”

“Yup!” His eyes shot to his sister, and he cleared his throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And you Katie? Having lived in San Francisco myself, I can imagine what a change this must all be,” said Sadie.

“One I am so grateful for. Your parents were so good to me, while I was living with them. They were just what I needed. And now...” she gave Ben an affectionate grin. “I finally have someone to bake for. In fact, a whole houseful to bake for.”

Katie was obviously head over heels in love with her new husband. She was a beautiful woman, and the freckles across her nose made it look like she’d been dusted by cinnamon. Knowing Ben Hart’s fondness for desserts, Sadie wondered if that was part of his new wife’s appeal.

Madeline and Gideon also seemed quite happy. Their connection was a quieter one, but the occasional exchange of glances and the way their fingers found each other while talking hinted at a deep bond.

It left a small ache in her heart to know that even if she were still married, the affections she was witnessing were something she never could have had with Charles.

“And you, Sadie?” asked Ben. “You’re writing a story about Rhett here?”

Sadie hesitated, her eyes meeting Rhett’s before returning to answer Ben. “Yes. I am hoping to stir up some interest in the upcoming election.”

“More like stir up, trouble,” muttered Rhett.

So, he was still smarting from their interview.

“And I thought I was the only one being accused of that. What trouble are you stirring up, Sadie?” asked Luke.

“I didn’t think I was. Rhett and I were simply having a discussion on the matter of suffrage. I was curious about his stance on votes for women.”

“I thought the interview was over?” said Rhett.

“I was answering Luke’s question,” countered Sadie. “Is that acceptable? I thought that one of the principles of this country is free speech. Or is that only for men, too?”

Rhett stabbed a fork into his potato, but his face remained neutral. “I don’t recall having said anything of the sort.”

Luke leaned back in his chair, grinning, with his arms crossed. “Well, if my opinion matters, I would have no problem giving women the vote.”



RHETT LONGED to knock that smug smile right off his little brother’s face. Luke probably hadn’t given the idea one moment of thought before now, he just wanted to get under Rhett’s skin. Of course, Sadie looked as pleased as punch at the reply.

“I’d think Rhett you’d want the same. If women voted, those looks of yours would make you a shoo-in. Without them, you might actually have to be show some character.”

Rhett drew in a breath and let it out slowly, he was not going to be pulled into an argument with Luke. Sadie felt

differently.

“I don’t believe that women are so base, Luke,” refuted Sadie.

Luke shrugged. “Men are. If you were running, I’d vote for you, Sadie.”

“Luke,” growled Gideon.

“What? I would,” said Luke.

Sadie gave his brother a bemused smile. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, but I don’t think it’s fair to say that Rhett is without character, sure, he might be handsome, but I also don’t think it’s fair to assume that women make important decisions based on such useless traits.”

Had Sadie just defended him, and insulted him in one breath?

“I’m just saying.”

She narrowed her eyes on Luke, pinning him to the chair. “Saying, what? That women only care about a pretty face? You think we would pick a candidate the same way we pick a dress?”

Rhett had to bite his bottom lip to prevent the smile of satisfaction that was threatening now that Sadie had found another target.

“Uh...no?”

Sadie nodded. “Smart answer. And yes, Luke, your opinion does matter. Having allies such as yourself is exactly what we need. Men willing to stand up and do the right thing, not sit on a fence waiting to see how which side is winning the battle. So, I thank you for that.”

She certainly wasn’t short on righteousness, and for some reason the idea of Sadie and Luke in cahoots bothered him.

“Well, Luke has never been one to shy away from a fight.”

Rhett was immediately remorseful at his outburst. Whatever Luke was going through didn’t need to be brought

into this conversation. Why was he still letting Sadie get under his collar after all these years?

“At least he’s willing to take a stand. Maybe he’s the one that should be running for office. Luke says exactly what he’s thinking. There’s never any doublespeak. That makes him a lot more trustworthy in my books than some candidates I’ve seen.”

“Shoving one’s opinion down someone’s throat: that makes a man trustworthy?”

“Sharing is not shoving. There’s a difference,” argued Sadie.

“Not bothering to see all sides of an issue, that’s what you want? That’s the kind of man you are looking for?”

Silence settled over the table.

Luke loudly whispered to Ben. “Do they even know we are here?”

“Sorry,” said Rhett and Sadie in unison.

Sadie turned to Madeline, Katie, and the rest of the table. “This is terribly embarrassing. You’ve invited me for a lovely meal, and I have let my passions get the best of me. I was going to see if you and Katie might like to join our fledging group for our next meeting in town, but I think we can chat about that later.”

“Don’t be. I would love to hear more, Sadie. I have strong feelings on the subject myself,” reassured Madeline. “But perhaps that conversation is best saved for another time.”

“Are you actually undecided, Rhett?” asked Katie.

“I have never said they shouldn’t.” Rhett was getting tired of defending himself. Believing something was one thing, being forced to shout it from the rooftops was another.

“So, do you or do you not think women should have the right to vote?” pressed Madeline. “Gideon?”

Gideon immediately threw up his hands, palms out. “Do I look like a fool? Don’t drag me into this.”

“Ben?” asked Katie.

Luke started to chuckle, and Rhett shot him a dark look. Couldn't he see the trouble he was stirring up?

His youngest brother shrugged. “Don't blame me, boys. There's a reason I'm not getting married.” He grinned again, then added, “But if I did, I'd want my lovely wife to have the right to vote.”

The table erupted into chaos. Andrew was covering his ears, Tilly was cheering anything the ladies said, and Sadie, for once, said nothing, her eyes remained intently on his. He couldn't tell if she was pleased or if she could finally see just how incendiary the topic could be. And this was in a house that if everyone took a moment to listen to one another they would realize they were all on the same page.

“Enough!” Gideon barked. “This is madness, no one here is actually disagreeing. Rhett, you know full well that you support votes for women. Can we please put this to rest?”

“Sounds good to me,” replied Ben.

With the table in agreement, Rhett released a long breath. If he were lucky enough to be elected, any debates had to be more orderly than a full Hart table. Teresa came back in the room, and refilled several of the bowls, and gave them all a look of disappointment. Rhett was starting to think if they were going to do something about the vote, it should be taken from everyone and given solely to mothers. One look could quell poor behavior, and they ran households like finely oiled machines. He chuckled to himself. It was definitely something to consider.

With everyone seemingly settled, Rhett saw an opportunity to steer the conversation in a more constructive direction. He cleared his throat and addressed the table.

“You know, “Rhett began, “while we're on the subject of making our voices heard, there is something that I would like to propose, something that would greatly benefit all of Autumn Springs.” He once again locked his brown eyes on Sadie's blue.

“All,” he repeated.

All eyes turned to him, waiting on him to continue.

“Many of you know that the old schoolhouse in Autumn Springs burned down years ago and was never rebuilt.”

“You sound like you’re practicing a speech,” mocked Luke. “Just spit it out.”

Ignoring his youngest brother, he kept speaking. “Our town is growing rapidly, and with more and more miners bringing families to join them, there’s a desperate need for a new school. A place where children can receive the education they need; to help us all build a better future.”

He knew he probably was being rather showy in his speech, but it never hurt to practice his oratory skills. He was pleased to see he had their attention, even Luke seemed to have set aside his usual antagonism. Only, his poor niece stared on in horror, probably having already put together his intention.

“I’ve been thinking. What if we come together as a community and take it upon ourselves to rebuild the school? Why have we waited so long?”

The idea hung in the air, and Rhett waited for a response from his family. It was Sadie that spoke first.

“You mentioned earlier in our interview that you wanted to see education brought to the forefront. I think this is a great start. I’m so happy to hear you say that.” She smiled, and Rhett felt an immediate pleasure at her approval. “And you’re right, this is something that everyone can agree on.”

Agreement resonated throughout the room. Tilly and Andy seemed to be the only ones who felt their education was sufficiently covered by Double H activities.

“What does everyone think about a fundraiser? Perhaps a fair, or a dance, where we all pitch in?” offered Sadie.

Katie jumped in, “I love the sound of that?” She leaned forward and looked down at Madeline. “Don’t you?” Turning back to Katie, she said, “I’d be more than happy to bake for

the fundraiser. And I'm sure my husband would be more than happy to buy every last one of my mother's rose water sugar cookies."

"You got that right!" agreed Ben, rubbing his stomach. Then he hesitated. "Wait, are those the ones with the flowers on them?"

"Yes. I'm sure that Nora would be happy to share some petals from her beautiful garden," nodded Katie.

Rhett couldn't help his laugh from escaping at his brother's face. It seems they'd finally found the one thing he didn't like eating. Flowers. Rhett thought he was about to hear Ben protest the botanical addition to the cookies, but Ben surprised him. Instead, he tucked back one of Katie's escaping curls, and smiled. "Sounds wonderful."

Katie beamed, and Rhett watched as both Madeline, then Sadie sighed. Ridiculous. The whole lot of them. Maybe Luke was the only clear-headed one of the whole group. Marriage didn't seem all that appealing if it meant he was forced to eat a mouthful of flowers.

"Shall we bring up the idea at church tomorrow morning? I think the sooner we get started the better."

The heated discussion from earlier was long forgotten, even Sadie seemed to have moved on excited about the school and fundraising ideas. Rhett, quite pleased with himself for the diversion, sat back and enjoyed the rest of his supper.

Autumns Springs bustled with a vibrant energy as the fundraiser for the new school got underway. Flags fluttered in the warm breeze, and colorful banners adorned the wooden and brick buildings. Booths and games lined Main Street, while adults visited, one eye on the children darting in and about around the activities.

Only three weeks passed since her interview with Rhett, and dinner with the Harts, and the town had come together quickly. It was the morning after her meal at the Double H that the idea for the school and subsequent fundraiser had been brought up at the church, and the response had been overwhelmingly positive. After the service, Sadie has also seized the opportunity to speak with some of the ladies in town, subtly gauging their support for her upcoming suffrage meeting. While many appeared receptive, she was also aware of the glares and hushed conversations of a few local men who clearly disapproved of her efforts.

Rhett seemed to be deliberately avoiding her over the past weeks, and she'd only seen him in passing in town. After their passionate exchange over the matter of votes for women, their warm reunion had turned rather frosty. It was possible that he was simply busy, and the truth was that there was no real reason for them to be bumping into one another anyway. It was becoming quite irritating how often her thoughts were returning to the man. She instead tried to focus on putting together multiple columns for Mr. Langley, so that if her

suffrage activities started to fill her time, she would not leave him without material.

Sadie made her way through the crowds, and when she rounded the roasted corn stall on her way to the target shooting contest, she stumbled across several children playing with slingshots. Sadie used to love using the slingshot her father had carved for her as a child.

“What’s the target gentlemen?” Sadie asked the boys.

A taller blond boy sauntered over and stuck a thumb over his shoulder towards a half-broken clay pot sitting on a rock. “A penny will get you five stones for this beauty.” He held up a slingshot that was clearly his pride and joy. “Penny goes in the pot, and winner takes all.”

Enterprising little scamp.

“That sounds a lot like gambling—”

“It’s not!” defended the boy. “Just a fun little contest, that’s all.”

Sadie didn’t want to encourage the behavior, but there was a small part of her that longed to give it a try.

“What’s going on here?” Elaine Stockwell asked as she came around the corner, one hand on her hip, the other holding her small daughter’s hand.

“The boys have come up with a wonderful idea of having a slingshot contest for the children. A penny for five stones,” said Sadie.

“Kevin Stockwell! Are you charging people to use your new slingshot?”

“No! Ma, look, Emmet’s got his own.” Kevin pointed to a nervous looking boy of about eight years.

“And what is the money for?” Elaine demanded. “Danny?” She turned her attention to another similar-looking blonde boy a few years younger than Kevin.

“What’s it for?” the little boy repeated.

A set of panicked eyes looked to their mother, their friends, and then to Sadie. Knowing she'd been inclined to do the same thing at their age, she decided to come to their rescue.

“I believe they were saying it's for the school. Isn't that right boys?” asked Sadie.

Danny let out an audible gulp, and Kevin shot her a thankful, lopsided grin.

“Sure is. We wanted to help out with building that school.”

“Really?” Elaine looked down at both boys, her eyebrows raised. “And here I was concerned it looked like I was raising a pair of rabid barn cats. Well, if that's the case, see that it does get to the fundraising committee. Every penny.”

“Oh, we will, Ma.” Kevin gave his mother an angelic smile and elbowed his brother. “We were just so excited to get that new school built, we can't wait to—

He immediately fell silent when Sadie signaled to him from behind his mother to stop talking by drawing a hand across her throat. The clever boy immediately changed tack.

“Can't wait to see you win that pie contest,” he finished.

Elaine turned and gave Sadie a wry smile, confirming that as their mother she knew full well what her boys had initially been up to.

“Thank you, Sadie. If you all will excuse me, I'm off to keep one eye on my apple pie. Mrs. Capshaw has been loitering around the table, and I'm not putting up with her salty shenanigans this year.”

As Elaine walked off with her daughter in hand, she shouted back at the boys. “I'll be checking with the committee, boys.”

Plans foiled, the boys packed up their things and darted off.

“Sadie! Sweetheart!”

Sadie turned around to see her mother approaching with a wave, and the old sheriff's wife, Mrs. Wyley at her side.

It was hard not to smile at the two women. Sadie had watched earlier as the old friends had entered the Games of Graces contest as a team. The women tossed the wooden, ribbon-covered hoop back and forth off their smooth sticks like they had been practicing ahead of time.

Perhaps they had. Their competition should have known better when the ladies arrived with their own hoop and sticks. After soundly trouncing the young girls that were participating, they then graciously backed out of the second round of the contest and let the little girls play.

"Hello, ladies," welcomed Sadie. "I see you are both enjoying yourselves today."

The women, elbows joined, giggled like schoolgirls.

"I'll confess, today has been so much fun," replied her mother.

"We like to remind the children that we might be old, but we're not dead yet!" added Mrs. Wyley.

The pair once again fell into laughter. It was nice to see Mrs. Wyley so happy. Her marriage to old Sheriff Wyley had brought a spark back into the good woman.

"And where are Sheriff Wyley and the major?"

"You're kind to still call him that, Sadie," said Mrs. Wyley. "I give him plenty to putter about with at home, but he still seems to find his way over to get into Weston's hair at the jail. Hard to give it completely up."

"Your father is back at the mercantile. With so many people in town he didn't want to close down for the day. Many of these folks don't get into town very often and want the chance to pick up a few things today as well. He is also talking with Frank Morgan. He's thinking about hiring him to help with the orders out back. If Frank thinks he's ready."

"He was such a kind man, so sad he lost his wife and girls that way," said Mrs. Wyley shaking her head. "Jasper used to

have him stay overnight in the cells when his drinking got bad. Safer that way I think.”

“He’s been sober for a full month now, and Ned wanted to lend a hand,” said Sadie’s mother.

“Good man, your major. I hope Frank is realizing that the Lord never gives up on his children.”

Sadie felt a warm pride at Mrs. Wyley’s praise of her father. He was a good man. And it was men like him that would also help women achieve the equality they deserved.

The conversation quickly turned.

“I enjoyed your article in the Western Echo Press this week, Sadie. It was a good reminder of how well the town can come together when we need to.”

“Thank you. Mrs. Wyley. Since I wasn’t here when the mine collapse occurred it was a chance for me to hear the story through so many different eyes. A horrific tragedy, but I did want to focus on the way everyone worked together.” Sadie didn’t bother to add that she also hoped that spirit lingered in the minds of Autumn Springs when the women held their first large suffrage meeting.

There was some commotion over by the pies table, and the three women made their way over. It looked like the pie tasting and judging was to begin.

Sadie could see Rhett approaching the table with a strange man at his side. Sadie hadn’t seen the man before, and as well dressed as he was there was something shifty in his eyes, and his weak chin didn’t lend an air of honesty. She wondered if this was the campaign manager Rhett had hired. If so, she hoped he would be an asset and not a liability for Rhett.

Sadie chided herself for her judgements on the man’s physical traits. He might very well bring benefit to Rhett’s campaign. There was no reason for her to feel otherwise.

Mayor Branam stood in front of the table, happy to be before the crowd.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! I see a lot of eager faces gathering ‘round for our favorite contest. The pie judging! Usually, ya’ll know that I take on the honor of judging these delicious pies, but we’ve got ourselves a special guest here today.”

Sadie along with the rest of the crowd looked around to see who it could be.

“That’s right, it’s none other than Rhett Hart, who’s running for a territorial seat. I reckon it’s only right to put him on the other side of the ballot this time.” Mayor Branam, paused to chuckle at his own joke, then continued. “Rhett would you be so kind as to do us the honor?”

Rhett, standing tall in the warm afternoon sun, tipped his hat and smiled his pearly whites at the crowd. Sadie was almost certain she heard a soft chorus of sighs from the women in the crowd; a reminder to keep her own face neutral and fight the urge to smile back at the man.

Stepping forward he nodded to the mayor. “I’d be delighted to take on this important responsibility. After all, even the campaign trail requires a few sweet distractions.”

He finished his words with a wink, and while the crowd chuckled, Rhett made his way behind the table with the waiting pies.

It was the usual contestants, not much had changed over the years. Elaine Stockwell, ever hopeful she might beat Mrs. Capshaw for top spot, was looking far more confident than Sadie could remember in years past. Among the other ladies who entered their pies in the contest, there was an intriguing, misshaped pie towards the end of the table, entered by the two James girls. Ron and Patricia James had charming young daughters, though Sadie wasn’t sure if they had fully mastered the art of presenting their culinary offering just yet.

As the tasting began, Nora approached from behind to stand beside Sadie.

“I’m not sure why anyone bothers to enter. Mrs. Capshaw has been ensuring her success for the past eight years with that

saltshaker of hers,” Nora whispered, and Sadie held in her laughter.

Rhett made his way along the table, declaring each pie just as good as the last.

“I don’t know how I am supposed to decide when all of your pies are so delicious.” Rhett let out an exaggerated sigh. “I don’t know how you’ve been able to choose all these years, Mayor Branam.”

Mrs. Capshaw stepped forward. “But choose you must. I don’t think you’ll have any difficulty once you’ve tasted this.” She pushed her pie across the table towards Rhett.

Digging his fork into the sliced piece, he gave Mrs. Capshaw an obliging smile, and popped the piece in his mouth.

His eyes bulged, and his jaw froze.

Sadie watched as his nostril began to flare. She could tell he was doing his best to hide his panic, but as the crowd began to titter, it was obvious he wasn’t successful. What was going on?

Nora elbowed her and nodded with her head towards Elaine Stockwell, who was watching with a serene smile on her face. She looked like the cat that got the cream. Mrs. Capshaw’s eyebrows squished together as she surveyed the crowd.

A soft laugh came from Nora. “It looks like someone is finally getting a taste of their own medicine. I was surprised it took someone this long.”

Turning back to watch Rhett handle the salty situation, she felt the smile she’d held back earlier come dancing across her lips. She had to give him full credit, as he carefully choked down the piece, and placed the plate back on the table.

“Delicious.” He gave Mrs. Capshaw a practiced smile and moved on to the misshapen pie.

The two young girls clamored up to the table, and with big eyes and beaming smiles to match, watched as he picked up

their plate. Their pride was evident as was Rhett's apprehension, but he soldiered on.

Putting the final piece of pie in his mouth, he chewed. A slow smile crossed his face, and when he smiled, he let out a long breath, before taking another bite of the pie. "Amazing!" he cried out, and Sadie wasn't sure if it was in appreciation or relief. Either way, he quickly announced the James girls the winners, and extricated himself from the area, as Mrs. Capshaw glowered at the other contestants.

"Well, that was worth the walk," laughed Nora. "I need to get back to the clinic, but I look forward to seeing you at the big meeting, tomorrow night."

Hugging Nora goodbye, Sadie wandered off to find Katie at the baked goods sale. Coming around the horseshoe pit, she could see a fiery competition between the blonde-haired boy from earlier, and a girl about the same age.

"You think you're so good, Kevin Stockwell, but just watch this," taunted the little girl as she pitched her horseshoe, hitting her mark perfectly.

The young boy scowled, then turned and stomped off. Sadie watched as heartbreaking disappointment took over the girl's face. Part of her longed to comfort the little girl and show her that she didn't need to try so hard, but some things were left to mothers and time to teach.

She'd been guilty of the very same behavior when she had so desperately tried to capture Rhett's attention in all the wrong ways. In retrospect it was easy to see that her approach and efforts often left him embarrassed, though that had never been her intention. It wasn't so much that she regretted being better than Rhett at some things, it was the way she would rub his nose in it when she was.

Sadie hadn't grown up with brothers, she had no idea how to act around boys, and especially one she liked. Her father was her only reference she had to go by, and he was always impressed by all her accomplishments.

Her “anything you can do; I can do better” was the girls equivalent of a boy pulling braids of a girl he liked. Useless, off-putting, and generally annoying. Barney Whiteson used to do that to her, and it hadn’t worked for him, just like her attempts hadn’t worked for her. In fact, she’d been relieved when Barney’s family moved from Autumn Springs as the town was too small to avoid the boy forever.

Was that how Rhett felt? Had he been equally relieved when she left Autumn Springs too? She may be over any silly childhood crush, but the idea that he might have been glad to see the last of her bothered her far more than she expected.

Sadie soon joined Katie and noticed that the pretty rose cookies the redhead had made were already sold out.

“Your cookies were popular.”

“They went quickly,” replied Katie.

“I can see why. Those were the prettiest treats I think I’ve ever seen.”

“They might have been too delicate for some of the men that came by the table. Ben popped by, bought, and ate three of them just to show they weren’t poisonous with the flowers on them.” Katie laughed. “Poor thing. I know they aren’t his favorite, so I also made some cinnamon rolls to surprise him back at the ranch. At least he’ll finish his evening with his favorite treats.”

Sadie smiled at the story. The newlyweds already understood the give and take of marriage, it was a good sign for a long marriage, and lesson many, including herself could stand to learn.

“Not many takers for my election cake?” asked Sadie. “Don’t they know that democracy is delicious?”

Katie laughed. “I think you’ll have some takers if you let them know the icing is made with brandy.”

Three men approached the table and picked out the goodies they wished to purchase. Sadie took the opportunity to offer the cake she had made.

“Slice of this delicious brandy iced election cake, gentlemen? Every tasty crumb contributes to building a school here in town, ensuring a brighter future for all our children.”

“I don’t have any kids, but I’m hungry,” said one of the bearded men.

Sadie could see a few feet behind the men was the man who had been at Rhett’s side earlier. He was watching her with an uncomfortable intensity.

“Hunger is a great reason, but so is investing in education and progress.”

The man squinted at her and frowned. “You that lady going on about voting and the like? Got all the women yakking about rights this and that back at the camp.”

The other two men began to look uncomfortable.

“I believe in a woman’s right to vote, yes,” Sadie replied evenly. She had obviously gone about her sales pitch incorrectly, as this man looked less than pleased.

“You shouldn’t go around getting the womenfolk all riled up,” he complained.

“I don’t think I’m—”

“As men, your fathers, brothers, and husbands, we look after you. We know what you need. You should be grateful we take care of all that thinking for you.”

Sadie gritted her teeth as the man twisted to look at his friends, letting out a cruel laugh. She told herself that now was not the time to correct the man about what she should and should not be grateful for. Sometimes it was better just to let people speak their piece without interrupting. For any woman listening, the patronizing words of the misguided would serve as greater motivation for joining the movement than all her words ever could.

“Could you even imagine, boys? Women voting? What a nightmare that’d be.” The awful man turned back to Sadie and Katie. “You girls need to be home, tending to your children, and your husbands.” He leered at them, and Sadie could feel

Katie's temper rising next to her as if it were a palpable thing. But the man continued. "Or is that too difficult for your woman's mind to understand."

"No, sir," replied Sadie coolly. "You've stated your opinion quite eloquently. I'm sure you've made yourself quite clear to every woman here."

And he had. Sadie could see nearby women glaring at the offensive man.

"Good, now," he said, flipping a coin from his pocket onto the table. "Serve me that cake."

Sadie said nothing as she cut a slice of the election cake, slid it onto a plate, and served it to the man.

"That's more like it," he sneered, stabbing his fork into the slice.

Suddenly Katie slammed the knife she'd been holding down on the table, but Sadie grabbed her arm before Katie could speak.

Laughing, the man and his cronies walked away, and Sadie watched Rhett's friend smirk and take his leave.

"Why didn't you say something?" demanded Katie. "A piece of cake? I would have liked to give that...that... whatever he was, a piece of my mind."

Sadie picked up the man's coin, flipped it in the air, then caught it. "I get it. I really do. But I've come to realize that there is no arguing with a man like that. So, instead, I'll save my breath and take his money. Money that is going to build a school to educate little girls, so they never have to be dependent on a man like that."

Katie just stared at her for a moment, then she broke out in laughter. "Oh, oh, you're right, that's even better." She clapped her hands together. "Wonderful."

Sadie smiled back. She sounded a lot more confident talking to the unpleasant man that she actually felt. Part of her had been scared to death, but as time went by, she was learning when to pick her battles.

Leaving Katie to tend the table, Sadie left to take a moment and catch her breath.

Rhett wasn't intending to have a conversation with Sadie today, but when he spotted her leaving his sister-in-law Katie, looking a little unsettled, his legs went marching off in her direction before he could order them to stop.

"Sadie," said Rhett, as he approached her. "I was half-expecting to see your scathing article about me in the newspaper by now."

She stopped to wait for him and gave him a brief smile, that didn't quite reach her blue eyes. "Hello, Rhett. You've been busy campaigning I hear." She said it pleasantly, but he felt there was an edge of censure in her voice.

"It's been busy," he replied.

Was she still upset with him? He wasn't really teasing about the article. Ever since their interview he'd been wondering if she was going to try and sabotage him in print, since he hadn't given in to her demands to vocalize his support for votes for women when she'd been out to the Double H. He thought their mutual efforts to bring a school back to Autumn Springs had allowed them to find some common ground. They hadn't been working side by side, but he was still participating in the fundraising.

Campaigning did consume most of his time, along with working with his new manager to become aligned on their plans for the election, but that was only a part of the reason. Truth was, he'd been avoiding her, not out of disdain or even irritation, but simply to avoid any confrontation over the

matter of suffrage again. Discussing the issue with Sadie was difficult; she only saw it as good versus bad, and that didn't help him one bit right now. It was hard enough for him to be taken seriously by some of the men in town, and elsewhere when all they saw were his looks, and creature comforts. When most men were working like dogs to make a living and put food on the table for their families, it was hard to be a man of the people when you didn't look like the average man. If he started wearing gold ribbons and carrying signs for Sadie, his campaign would be over before it even began; then he would have no chance to effect change.

"I can imagine," said Sadie. "Have you managed to secure a campaign manager yet?"

Ah, this seemed like neutral ground.

"Yes, a Mr. Lewis Frye. His family was involved in politics back east. Seems a decent enough fit. Not a lot of options out there. Mostly, I'm just glad to take some of the work off my plate." Rhett still wasn't completely convinced of his new manager's suitability, but time was of the essence, and Rhett couldn't afford to be wasting time interviewing people until he got the perfect person. Sometimes a man must make do with what he's got. "You've also been keeping busy. I've read your other articles in the newspaper, they were good."

They were actually excellent, but Rhett didn't think Sadie needed any more convincing of her capability. One thing this woman always had was confidence.

"Thank you. And as to your first question, it's Mr. Langley who decides which columns he wants to print. So, if you are looking for when it will be printed, you should talk to him."

"I can wait."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you will see our interview in the paper soon."

Smiling, Rhett nodded. "I look forward to reading it."

There was a certain relief that the article was already in Mr. Langley's hands, and Sadie wasn't holding off having it

printed because she was searching for synonyms for the words like misogynist and coward to spice up her article.

“Are you sure?” There was a glint of mischief in her eyes as she spoke, and Rhett felt his chest hammer in response. How could a woman so frustrating suddenly become so appealing? This was another reason he’d been avoiding her.

“Oh, no.” Rhett held up his hands. “Whatever you are about to say, I capitulate on all points. I have no interest in sparring with you today, Sadie Garvin. We are here to raise money for a school, not to rouse our tempers.”

Sadie closed her eyes, and breathed out as she opened them. “You know what Rhett, you’re absolutely right. And after the last interaction I had, I think a change of focus is needed.”

Rhett didn’t like the sound of that. Had someone been bothering her?

“What interaction, what happened?”

She waved away his concern with her hand. “It’s over and done with. And I won’t give it anymore of my time. In fact, I think I will go over and find my mother and Mrs. Wyley. I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of them have entered the three-legged race together, and I don’t want to miss it if they do.”

Her blue eyes sparkled as she spoke, and suddenly an idea struck him.

“Excellent! I’ll take you over.”

Before she could refuse, Rhett placed her hand on his arm, and he started walking. He was almost surprised when she didn’t remove herself from his grip and let him know she was capable of walking herself. But she didn’t, and that fact alone felt like a win.

There were a few questioning glances directed at them as they made their way to the side of the mill house where the three-legged race was taking place. The children had just finished their race, and the lucky winners were already sharing

with their friends, the two large bags of hard candies that the Garvin Mercantile had donated.

They didn't see Mrs. Garvin or Mrs. Wyley among the participants, and it was only when Rhett walked them over to the starting line, that Sadie pulled her arm away, and looked up at him in question.

"Are you entering the race?" Her brow squiggled as her eyes met his.

"No...we are."

Eyes wide, Sadie backed away. "Absolutely not!" She twisted to look at the people around her. "What?" She turned back to him and hissed. "No."

Unable to resist, he leaned in to whisper in her ear. "What happened to anything boys can do, girls can do better, Sadie? Don't tell me you've become a quitter."

His words produced the exact reaction he expected. Sadie straightened up and threw her shoulders back, her chin thrust out in defiance. "Get the rope."

She hadn't spoken a word as he tied their legs together, even as his fingers grazed her ankle. He felt her tense for just a moment, but when Rhett looked up, she was still looking forward.

Now that they stood side by side at the starting line, Rhett was wondering if this was such a great idea. He could tell by the determined gleam in her eyes that he had ignited Sadie's competitive spirit, but he wasn't sure what exactly he'd ignited within himself.

Her warm thigh pressed alongside his, and her arm around his waist, were distracting in a way he hadn't expected, but not so distracting that he didn't see the raised brows amongst some of the onlookers. His rash decision to show Sadie that they could in fact work well together instead of constantly being in competition, might have some unintended consequences.

He was about to ask Sadie if they should reconsider when the pistol went off.

Sadie was off like a shot, and when Rhett didn't leap forward as quickly, she glanced back at him in question. "What are you doing?"

It was too late to stop now, and if that was the case they better win.

He tightened his grip around her waist, and then nodded. "Go."

Their initial movement forward was uncoordinated, and soon their legs tangled, and they stumbled, nearly crashing to the ground. Rhett chuckled as they steadied themselves against one another. Laughter washed toward them from the crowd.

"You can't get one woman to listen to you, Hart! How you gonna get the government to!"

Rhett ignored the jeer and looked down at Sadie. "We need to walk in rhythm, you can't do this on your own, and neither can I," whispered Rhett. "We won't even make it to the end."

"Don't blame me for your clumsiness, Rhett Hart."

Their bickering had them losing ground, and if they didn't get it together soon, they would have lost all chance of winning. That wasn't going to happen. If he wanted the people in town to vote for him, he needed to be seen as a winner. Even in a ridiculous three-legged race. "You're a menace Sadie Garvin. Now hold on to me and pretend you're a part of a team."

Sadie huffed. "Fine."

With a renewed determination, Rhett started counting off steps quietly to Sadie. "One-two-one-two-one-two."

Slowly they synchronized their steps, each one taken carefully and with precision. Soon their strides were perfectly timed, and they began to catch up to the frontrunners.

"Ha! We're catching up," grinned Sadie.

"Keep going," pushed Rhett. "Don't stop."

"I'm not," Sadie said, gasping for breath. "Don't you stop."

As they approached the finish line, neck and neck with Winford Olcott the town's barber and his brother Wallace, Rhett and Sadie's eyes met, and they shared a determined nod. With a final burst of energy they surged forward, crossing the finish line, just barely ahead of the brothers.

The crowd burst into cheers and applause as Rhett and Sadie exchanged triumphant looks. Hand anchored casually on his hip Rhett grinned back at the stretch of grass they had just crossed. There had been a few moments where he wasn't sure they would pull it off, but they had. When they chose to, they worked well together. He wondered if Sadie realized the same thing.

Sadie bent down and deftly untied the knot, then stood back up to face him, placing the rope in his hand. "I hope you know I am aware of your manipulations."

"I am," nodded Rhett. "But admit it. That was fun."

Her lips twitched, and Sadie waited a few seconds before giving in to her smile. "It was. But I imagine there will be tongues wagging about it later."

A twinge of guilt hit Rhett. "That was never my intention, Sadie."

She gave him a close-lipped smile. "That I do know. Besides, I don't think that some of them could think less of me anyway."

It wasn't fair, but Sadie wasn't wrong either. There would always be some people who judged others, not always because of what the person had done, but because of what they felt deep inside about themselves.

"I hope that's not true," frowned Rhett. "However, I will say that it was nice to know that we are actually capable of working together instead of always being at odds. We aren't children anymore."

She dropped her gaze from his for just a moment and when she looked up, her cheeks were even more red than they had been from the exertion of the race. "I was hoping you might forget some of my behavior as a young girl."

The sunlight was angled at just the right height in the sky to create a halo around her. When had he ever thought of Sadie as angelic? Rhett swallowed, as her blue eyes took hold of his brown. “You are hard to forget.”

Her hand fluttered to her neck, then she quickly pulled it away, looking down. “I—I think I should go find—”

“Congratulations!”

Rhett tore his gaze from Sadie to see Mrs. Garvin, holding out two more bags of candy.

“I didn’t think you were going to win,” chuckled Sadie’s mother. “But it looks like you found a way to work together.”

“We did,” said Rhett, as he took the proffered bag. “I think I will use these as I do a little meet and greet this afternoon.”

It was best if he left. Whatever had taken hold of him, needed to be put aside. The only thing he needed to be thinking about was the election, not the beautiful vibrant woman that Sadie had become.

“Thank you.” Rhett nodded and left before Sadie, or her mother had the chance to say another word.

Sam Matthews had been more than generous in donating space in one of the private meetings rooms in the International Hotel for their meeting. Gazing out at the sea of faces before her, Sadie was grateful for the room. Perhaps it wasn't a sea of women, and more of a healthy pond, but she was still happy. She hadn't been sure how many would actually show up to the meeting, and while some came only in curiosity, she could tell that others were here, excited, just as she was, about advocating for change. Familiar and unfamiliar faces smiled back at her.

“Ladies!” Sadie clapped her hands. “Ladies, let’s come to order.”

She had spent several days polishing her first speech, and when the ladies settled into their seats, she took a deep breath and shared her heart.

“Ladies of Autumn Springs, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for joining me today. As we gather here, in this very room, we are taking a monumental step forward in securing our futures. Today, we begin to write a new chapter in the history of our community. A chapter where our voices, our dreams, and our desires are no longer overlooked, our capabilities are respected. One where we all stand proudly together, ready to forge a better future for all women, young and old.”

Sadie’s eyes swept the room, and she saw a mixture of apprehension and determination staring back at her. Would her

words inspire these women, the way the speakers she had listened to in San Francisco inspired her? Did they feel as she often had, silenced, overlooked, and underserved. Could she help them to see they weren't alone in this journey?

Standing at the side of the room, was Mrs. Clark, the territorial president for the Women's Christian Temperance League from Butte. The WCTU leader nodded in encouragement to Sadie. Thrilled the woman had accepted Sadie's invitation, her presence was a comforting reminder that they were part of a larger movement, a wave of change that was sweeping across the country.

Sadie continued, "This is just the beginning, but the possibilities before us are endless. The path will not be easy. We will be met with challenges, but today we plant the seeds of a future where our voices will not be ignored, where our rights will not be trampled on, and where we, the women of Autumn Springs, will shape our destinies."

There was enthusiastic applause from some and uneasy looks from others. Her mother and Mrs. Wyley beamed at her.

She'd been hoping for a rousing response, but she needed to temper her expectations, as for many of the women, this was their first public conversation around the subject.

"I know that much of what I am saying can sound frightening. Change isn't always easy. But that is why women need to stand up for one another. Support each other." Sadie smiled encouragingly. "Talk to your husbands, fathers, brothers. Explain that suffrage is nothing to be feared. Votes for women take nothing away from them. Help them to understand that as women we have no desire to be above them, we just no longer accept being below them. All we are asking for is our rightful place at their sides."

An unfamiliar middle-aged woman near the back stood up, her bonnet still tightly tied beneath her chin. "My husband says that you want to start problems. That women like you end up smashing windows, breaking up families." She sat down as she finished speaking.

Shaking her head, Sadie quickly responded. “No. I would never wish for that. I hope I am being clear when I say that I am not advocating for violence.”

A young blonde woman sitting near Nora at the back of the room rose to her feet. “My man says that you hate men. That your own husband divorced you and now you want everyone to be as miserable and lonely as you.”

“Oh!” gasped Nora, who’d been sitting quietly near the back. “That’s not true and it’s unkind.”

Sadie held up a hand to stop Nora’s defense of her, as she tried not to let the sting of the woman’s words cause her to crumble to the floor. Thankfully Emma wasn’t here. “It’s okay, Nora.” She addressed the woman’s statement. “I don’t hate men at all. I have been raised by one of the best. What I truly want is what I expect you also want. Choices. Choices and the chance to direct my own future. Don’t you want that too?”

The ladies let out a murmur of agreement.

“That’s why we are all here. We aren’t asking for more, just a seat at the table in the decisions that affect our lives. I mean, look at what we were able to do in raising funds for the new school. When women work together, we are a force to be reckoned with.”

A stout dark-haired woman gave her a respectful nod. “Fair enough, but I got my ways too. If my man doesn’t mind me, I just burn his dinner until he starts catching on to my displeasure. I serve it with a smile.” Gentle understanding laughter filled the room. Emboldened, the woman continued. “When he asks me what’s wrong, I just tell him that it’s real hard to make decisions with my woman’s brain. Sometimes I just don’t know whether I should remove a pan from the fire or not. Smartens him right up.”

Sadie waited for the ladies laughter to die down. “While I applaud your ingenuity, I really do want to remind everyone that we are not looking to create a battlefield with lines drawn between men and women. We should want them to see how beneficial it is when we all work together.”

Seeing that she had their attention once again, Sadie brought the meeting back to order. A few of the women at the back left, leaving the remaining seventeen women to continue.

It took only ten minutes, but they finally agreed on their first order of business: what to call their newly found group. In the end, the general consensus christened them the Women's Suffrage Society.

Mrs. Dellencourt had been strongly in favor of either the Marigold Mavericks or the Suffrage Blossoms, and while several of the ladies thought the names quite lovely, eventually they decided to go with something that sounded more official. Surprisingly it was Quinn Burrill, Autumn Springs most unconventional stagecoach driver, that managed to change some minds. Quinn was the one who brought their guest speaker to them tonight, and Sadie was thankful that she had stayed to listen. Many were put off by Quinn's rather indelicate character, but for those who knew her, knew that beneath the rough exterior was a heart of gold. Quinn's blunt reminder that if any of them wanted to be taken seriously, they better get a serious name. While Mrs. Dellencourt huffed her disapproval at the truthful words, the rest of the ladies quickly changed their votes.

With the business of naming their group concluded, Sadie introduced their guest speaker.

"Now, it is my pleasure to introduce a remarkable woman. She is the territorial president of the Women's Christian Temperance League and is gracing us all the way from Butte." Sadie gestured toward Mrs. Clark. "Please give a warm welcome to Mrs. Clark, who brings with her a wealth of experience and knowledge in our suffrage movement."

Applause rippled throughout the room, and Sadie moved off to allow the older woman to take centre stage.

As Mrs. Clark, spoke, Sadie made her way to the back of the room, smiling at those she knew and those who were new to her, and stood next to Quinn. The smell of horse and leather emanated from the driver.

"She's a good talker," whispered Quinn.

“She is, thank you for bringing her here safely. I was surprised you joined us,” replied Sadie softly, not wanting to distract from Mrs. Clark.

“Well, we ain’t leavin’ till morning, and I didn’t feel like turning in just yet.”

Sadie thought about how handy it would be to have someone like Quinn, who had the most freedom Sadie had ever seen for a woman, helping the cause.

“I hope you hear something here that will inspire you to join us.”

“Well, I ain’t one for joining. But at least you won’t be naming yourselves after a bunch of flowers.” Quinn shook her head. “Sides, I think you could talk till you’re blue in the face. You ain’t gonna get all them menfolk to listen to you.”

Sadie gave her a quick smile. “I have faith in the decency of men, Quinn.”

Quinn spit an impressive and accurate stream into a bowl near the back wall of the room. Several looks of disgust shot their way from the nearby women.

Quinn just shrugged. “You always was optimistic, Sadie.”

Sadie chuckled to herself and focused her attention back on their speaker.

She was so enthralled with Mrs. Clark’s speech, she jumped when the door at the back of the room swung open, and a man stomped in shouting, “Where is she?”

His rugged features were covered by a thick, unkempt beard. Deep lines of frustration and anger furrowed his forehead, while a pair of piercing, restless eyes scanned the room.

Sadie stepped forward. “Where is who, sir? And may I kindly ask you to lower your voice. No one here is hard of hearing.”

The man straightened the worn, dusty coat that hung loosely over his shoulders. “Don’t you go tellin’ me what to do. I know Opal’s here. Get me my wife!” He went to look

around Sadie. “Woman! You best show your face and get to walking before I get angry.”

This wasn't angry? Sadie didn't dare to voice her question. No wonder the poor woman was hiding. Sadie couldn't imagine what it would be like to share a home with this man. While every part of her wanted to chase this man from this room, and the hotel itself, she knew that would be of no help to poor Opal.

A timid looking woman came forward and stepped around Sadie.

“I'm sorry, Ira.”

Sadie's heart ached as she watched the woman's chin waver. This lovely woman had the courage to come to their meeting, she didn't deserve this treatment. She had to do something to help.

“Oh! This is your wife. It's me that should apologize. I asked her to hold off leaving so as not to disrupt our speaker.” She turned to the shy woman.” And you are absolutely right, Opal. My notices were very misleading. This is not a church temperance meeting, and I can see why you joined us in error.”

Opal's eyes widened, then she regained her composure, giving Sadie a grateful smile. “Yes, it was very confusing. I'm sorry to have interrupted all of you.” She walked over to her husband. “I'm ready to go, Ira.”

Ira looked around at the women, and with a skeptical final glance at Sadie, he left with his wife.

Closing the doors behind the couple, Sadie prayed the woman suffered no more than the momentary public embarrassment. She let out a long breath and turned around to face the uncomfortable looks of the ladies before her.

It was Mrs. Clark that spoke first. “And that, my dear ladies, is a fine example of why it is so important for us to continue our fight. We deserve the vote, but it's even more than that. We need the vote. Without it, women will never get the rights we need. Not only to secure our futures, but for many our very safety.”

There was a chorus of agreement, but two more women left the meeting.

Sadie felt an anger in her bones, at how easy it was for one man to have intimidated them. She understood the women's trepidation, but it only made her more certain of her belief in this cause.

"Perhaps we can finish up for this evening," suggested Sadie.

"Yes, but before we do, I would like to invite all of you to join us in Butte next week. There will be campaign speeches for the current election, and our chapter plans on having a parade that day. There will be all sorts of people visiting to hear the speeches, and it will be a wonderful opportunity to have our voices heard as well."

Sadie had been to several of the marches in San Francisco and was excited to participate. She glanced around the room. "How exciting! Is anyone here interested in joining me?"

Nobody raised their hands. Was it too far away? Were they afraid? Was she asking too much too soon?

Maybe she was. Simply attending the meeting was difficult enough for many of the women; to leave town, even for one night, was probably shocking to them.

"We have families. We can't just leave town. I'm happy to help here in Autumn Springs, but I'm sorry Sadie, I can't travel," said Elaine Stockwell.

"I understand," replied Sadie.

"Why doesn't Nora Hart go with you," proposed the same blond woman who had spoken earlier. "She doesn't have to worry about children like we do, since she doesn't have any."

Sadie felt a pang in her stomach as she watched the profound sadness that swept across Nora's face.

"How can you say such a thing! We are here to support one another." Sadie was fighting back the urge to slap the hurtful words from the woman's mouth when Nora stood up.

“That’s all right,” said Nora, then she turned to the woman beside her. “I don’t think you meant to be cruel. You’re right, I haven’t been blessed with children, but I still will not be going.”

Chin up, she faced the rest of the room. “You all have my support, and I will stand at your sides here in Autumn Springs, but I am also needed here. We have had several sick children, as many of you know, and while I may not have my own to love, I still plan on giving my all to care for yours.”

Silence enveloped the room.

Elaine Stockwell rose. “I for one am grateful for everything you do for my family, Nora. And yes, we do need you here.”

Hoping to turn attention away from Nora, Sadie changed the subject.

After thanking Mrs. Clark for coming, they concluded their meeting, and while the ladies spent a few moments milling around, Sadie began handing out golden ribbons, encouraging everyone to wear them as a subtle yet meaningful display of unity.

For the first time in a long time, Sadie finally felt like she had something to contribute.



UPSTAIRS, in the International Hotel, Rhett sat across from his campaign manager, poring over the preparations for his upcoming rally in Butte. He wanted things to go perfectly. His leading opponent, Denton Hughes would also be there, and he wanted to be ready. There was no love lost between Rhett and Hughes. Denton Hughes was brash, bold, and he operated in a morally gray area. But one thing he sure knew how to do, was work a crowd.

“You’re going to have to seem more approachable, Rhett. Handsome isn’t going to cut it if you want to make it to the finish line.”

Looking at his campaign manager, Rhett frowned. “I’m getting a little tired of these comments. You do realize that I am a successful lawyer and rancher. I have made some solid contributions to this community.”

He was getting fed up with having to defend himself. It was one thing when his brothers teased him, another when his capabilities were disregarded because of what he looked like. Hughes had been paying for editorial cartoons to be made of Rhett, making him look more like a woman, saying he was too pretty for politics, and he should leave it to the men. Rhett hadn’t voiced his anger, but it simmered beneath the surface. He wanted to be taken seriously.

“Here in Autumn Springs people might know about all that, but you aren’t running for local mayor. Your list of achievements isn’t pinned to your chest. Your face is the first thing people see whether you like it or not.”

“So what? Go around like Hughes, offering free booze and loose talk? Having cartoons made to ridicule my opposition. That’s not my style.”

Lewis shrugged. “Suit yourself, but you hired me to help you out. I’m trying but you’ve got to do your part. Best way to build enthusiasm for your campaign, is to show enthusiasm.” He leaned back in his chair. “We could even get yourself a wife. A sweet, pretty little thing. Voters love that.”

“A wife? As a campaign ploy? You’ve lost your mind. I’m not even sure if I want to get tied down. I certainly don’t need a wife just to help me get elected.”

Again, Lewis shrugged, and took another swig of his drink.

Rhett was beginning to wonder just how much help his campaign manager was going to be. There were moments when his suggestions had Rhett wondering exactly what kind of principles the man lived by. Good thing it was only for a few more weeks. If he managed to succeed, or even if he didn’t, he would take the time to find himself someone he could be more aligned with. For now, Lewis Frye would have to do. Still, Rhett realized he probably should ramp up his

efforts. Straightforward, honest and understated, wasn't doing him any favors. Maybe he did need to be more outspoken, louder—at least on issues that mattered.

As they finished up for the evening, the sound of muffled voices below interrupted their conversation. Rhett's brow furrowed, and he looked over to Lewis, who seemed equally confused.

"That doesn't sound good," muttered Rhett as he strained to make out the inaudible sounds.

"Probably some rowdy guests," answered Lewis.

Too distracted by the commotion to continue, he made his way to the door. "I'm going down. We don't have much left here to do anyway."

He descended the stairs to the lobby, to see the source of the noise: five agitated men who were clearly in loud opposition to whatever was happening behind the closed doors of the hotel's private dining room. He also saw Floyd Keller, the owner of one of the saloons hanging back, but watching with amusement.

Rhett's jaw tightened as he assessed the situation. He had no idea what had drawn these men here, but it was obvious they weren't guests, and were intent on trouble. His irritation simmered just beneath the surface as he approached, joining Sam Matthews the hotel owner, who was trying to reason with the men.

"Gentlemen, there's no need for all of this. Head on home." Sam Matthews glanced briefly at Rhett; his calm demeanor ready to slip at any moment.

"We're not the trouble, Matthews. It's the battle-axe brigade you got hiding behind that door." The gruff voice belonged to a man of average height, but solid build with meaty hands, probably the product of hard labor and a number of saloon brawls.

Rhett turned to look at the doors the man was referring to, and in just that moment they were pulled open: Sadie.

Of course. There was no one that could get on a man's nerves like Sadie Garvin, but to be fair he couldn't see how these men were being bothered by a private meeting.

She looked flushed, and her nose was wrinkled in distaste as she looked at the men. She was joined by an older woman he'd never seen before. He could see his sister-in-law Nora, Mrs. Garvin, Mrs. Wyley, and a few other women he recognized from town. Most of them were wearing those golden ribbons.

"No one is hiding. Is there a problem? Our meeting is adjourned, and we would like to take our leave." Sadie almost bit off her words.

Red cheeks, eyes blazing she looked magnificent, but furious. Did these men realize that they were about to get hit with a double barrel shot of righteous anger? Having been on the receiving end of it, he knew it was going to sting.

"Yeah, there's a problem. Riling these women up."

Sadie took another step towards the men. "No one here is riled up, sir."

"Don't try and tell me different than what I can plainly see. I don't need to be worrying about a bunch of hens going off half-cocked in my town."

Rhett watched Sadie's fingers spread out at her side, and he wondered if she was about to slap the man. Instead, she took a breath, and he could have sworn he watched her count to ten under her breath.

"What is it you are afraid of? I mean, if you believe yourselves superior to us, then why, pray tell, are you so afraid to allow us access to the same things as you? Worried that if given a chance our power will be too great?" she asked.

"We ain't afraid, what I'm saying is women like you ain't following the natural order of things. You should all be home, tending to your husbands and families."

"We were born on this soil the same as you, and you." Sadie pointed at the other men standing behind their ringleader. "Our voices deserve to be heard. We deserve the

right to cast a ballot, to have a say in the future of this territory, and the country.”

“Yeah, well, like you said, you ain’t got no voting rights, and we do. And we’re electin’ that you shut your mouth.”

The men just laughed at her, and Rhett felt a flash of anger. These men were done here, he’d had enough.

He may take a different approach to the progression of women getting the vote, but there is one thing he was about to make very clear. Sadie Garvin might know how to get under his skin, but she was also under his protection: Hart protection. If they didn’t like that, then he would happily help them come to terms with it. But they wouldn’t like it.

“I think that’s enough. It’s time for everyone to go home.” He’d give them one chance to retreat.

“You heard him. I’m not having this in my hotel,” said Sam.

More ladies came up to stand with Sadie, and an older woman stepped in front. It was a showdown, and neither side seemed interested in backing down. Even Quinn the stagecoach driver was standing at the ready, a hand on the pistol at her hip. That wasn’t good. Quinn was a dead-shot, and she never had much tolerance for people running their mouths. Especially men: most in town gave her wide berth.

“Ain’t you up for election, Hart?” The man sneered at him. “Nobody wants a desperate man to represent them. And you gotta be desperate to be sidling up to these womenfolk. Just look at that sour old crone.” The man pointed to the older woman standing before Sadie. “First they want the vote, then they’ll be taking away our cards and whiskey.”

The woman stood fast against the insult. “I do believe in temperance, sir.” She sniffed the air and then continued. “And your behavior here tonight is a prime example of why.”

Floyd Keller, always looking to stir up trouble, shouted from the back. “See, boys, they say it’s just the vote, but don’t you believe it. If we let them get away with it, you’ll be lucky if you’re left with cigars and chewing tobacco.”

The respectable older woman spoke, “No, sir. And I assure you I use that address lightly. I think men of your ilk are afraid that if we are given a chance, we would simply be more likely to administer the law than ignore it. But doesn’t that say far more about men than us.”

They were all sitting on a powder keg, and it needed to stop.

Rhett stepped in between them. His back to the Sadie and the rest of the women. “Ladies, please go back inside the room, and close the doors.”

“We will not!” cried Sadie. “We have every right to stand right where we are.”

Good heavens, did the woman have no sense of self-preservation? Could she not, just this once, stop arguing?

“See,” jeered the man in front of him. “Bunch of ungodly women.”

Rhett inwardly cringed at the words, and he wasn’t surprised as Mrs. Wyley pushed her way to the front. “Ungodly? How dare you! God created man and women in His image. Perhaps if you spent a little more time practicing your faith, instead of preaching nonsense and hate, you would not only be a happier man, but you might actually find yourself a wife.”

Rhett watched as the man’s eyes bulged at the insult, and his friends laughed. This wasn’t good. Mrs. Wyley wasn’t wrong for taking the man to task, but Rhett also knew that when a man was humiliated, he could become far more dangerous.

The man was about to snap when Weston and the old sheriff, Jasper Wyley, came through the doors of the lobby. Rhett released the tension that had been building in his shoulders. He would have been happy to take on the men with Sam if it was required, but official back up was always better.

“Everybody out,” growled Weston. “I mean it, fellas, I got plenty of room in my cells if you’re looking for some new accommodations.”

“You heard the sheriff; it’s time to go.” Rhett’s piercing gaze bore into the man, an unspoken tension hanging in the air.

The man waited a moment longer, then turned away. “Let’s go, boys. We made our point.”

Rhett didn’t move as he watched the men walk out with that oily snake-of-a-man, Keller, slapping them all on the back and offering a free drink at his saloon.

As Sam, Weston, and Jasper checked on the ladies, Rhett glanced at a movement on the hotel stairs. It was his campaign manager.

Rhett furrowed his brow, and his campaign manager acknowledged him with just a lift of his chin, then walked back up toward his room. Had he been watching the whole thing? If so, why hadn’t he come to join them? He reminded himself to ask the man later.

Turning back to the room, he found Sadie, and their eyes locked, as she walked over to him.

Any relief he’d felt with the exit of the men was tempered by the defiant look in Sadie’s eyes. He felt a muscle in his cheek twitch, and he told himself to breathe. He didn’t want to say anything he would have cause to regret later, especially when he and Sadie had finally found what he thought was neutral ground.

“Are you okay?” Rhett kept his tone even.

“Yes, thank you. I—we all appreciate your assistance. Sam Matthews too.”

Rhett nodded, still not sure if he could trust himself to speak.

Sadie’s nose wrinkled. “You can’t possibly be upset with me. You do realize that we have done nothing wrong here.”

“I’m not upset with you, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was upset with the situation. This could have ended badly, Sadie.”

“But it didn’t, which shows how important it is to have good men, like yourselves,” she gestured towards Weston,

Sam, and Jasper. “Here, supporting our cause.”

Rhett narrowed his eyes at Sadie and gave her a probing look. “Is it that you can’t see the potential danger, or are you being intentionally obtuse?”

She stared back at him, incredulous. “I beg your pardon.”

She was mad, but she should have been scared. He knew he sounded angry, but when he saw those men threatening her, it was more than that, he’d been afraid for her safety, and it made his stomach sick to even think of it.

“I’m saying this is why you need to be careful. You can push a man too far, and it can have terrible consequences. And if you don’t care about yourself, you should at least think about some of the other women in there. Your own mother!”

Uncertainty flickered in her blue eyes, and then she glanced back at the women before returning to meet his. “I don’t want anyone to be hurt, Rhett. But if all it takes is intimidation to stop us, then we have no chance. It’s not fair, and we are tired, you can’t possibly understand.”

A tightness took hold of Rhett’s chest, and he sighed. She was right, he couldn’t understand, not really, but he couldn’t see how these confrontations would help in achieving her goals.

“Changes don’t happen overnight. You need patience if you want to win this race. If you recall Aesop’s Fables, it’s the tortoise that wins in the end.”

Pressing her lips together, Sadie tilted her head. Rhett felt like she was staring straight into him.

“I know the story. I also know that it doesn’t apply in all things. I have learned a few things from this evening, Rhett.” She stood a little straighter. “Sometimes, gentle forbearance can be misplaced.”

Rhett closed his eyes, then opened them. It was like talking to a brick wall.

“All I’m asking is that you be careful,” he paused. “Please, Sadie.”

“Thank you for your concern, Rhett, but I know what I’m doing.”

Nothing about that reassured him.

Sadie had never felt more alive.

When she had arrived in Butte the night before, she had been welcomed with open arms by the organizers of the march. They embraced her as one of their own, and it felt so good to be a part of something that was so important. Their appreciation for her fledging attempts in Autumn Springs, filled her with a validation she hadn't known she was lacking.

Preparing for their parade this morning the atmosphere amongst the women was filled with anticipation. Their unity was empowering, and it flamed the spark within her, that only rekindled once her divorce from Charles was complete.

She felt no danger this morning, just purpose, and while Rhett's warnings still lingered in the back of her mind, she did her best to push them to the side. Sadie wondered if Rhett understood the profound sense of purpose that came with being part of such a movement. His political aspirations seemed to be driven by his own need for change. Could he recognize their shared desire to reshape their worlds?

Mr. Langley at the Western Echo Press had been kind enough to let her print off leaflets to hand out during their march. He wasn't choosing to be loud in his support, but he still wanted to help. Sadie wanted to have something to hand out to the spectators. She knew not all would be supportive, but for some women this might be the only time they would hear such progressive ideas. She didn't want to let the

opportunity slip by. It only took one small spark to fan the flames of change.

Gripping the leaflets, she'd had printed back in Autumn Springs, Sadie proudly stepped in line with her fellow suffragettes. In their crisp white dresses, and sashes declaring "Votes for Women" in bold letters, they moved like a wave along the streets of Butte. Many of the onlookers greeted them with heckling, and disdainful smirks, but it was the women who looked on with interest and curiosity, that kept her going.

She had marched in San Francisco, but something about taking these steps so much closer to home, felt far more meaningful.

They moved in a determined procession along Butte's streets. Large hand-painted banners swayed above the women, displaying their demands for all to see. As gusts of wind swept past them, Sadie was glad for the advice she had been given by some of the other ladies. Early this morning she'd sewn in a row of lead shot into the hem of her dress. With the fall approaching and the weather constantly changing, they didn't need any further cause for ridicule as they proceeded. Mrs. Clark was further ahead, but Sadie had made friends with some of the other women last night and did not feel alone. How could she when she was surrounded by so many like-minded women?

Sadie hoped she would have been joined by some of the women from Autumn Springs, but after the incident at the International Hotel, many declined to come. Emma was disappointed she could not come, and begged Sadie to provide every detail when she returned to town. Katie Hart intended to join her but over the past several days she had been feeling unwell when she woke in the morning.

As they got closer to the campaign speeches, Sadie continued to hand out leaflets, many tossed away, others tucked into aprons and reticules. She could see the large makeshift stage ahead, an American flag as backdrop, and red, white, and blue bunting draped along the simple construction. Several men sat in chairs along the back of the stage, and one

barrel-chested man wearing a bowler hat was speaking to the crowd.

As their parade approached, the man speaking, a Denton Hughes, gave them barely a glance, but his words became louder. Mrs. Clark directed all of the ladies to the back of the crowd, and they silently held up their banners and placards as the man finished his fiery, blustering speech. To Sadie he seemed to be more interested in rabble-rousing than sharing his platform.

Some of the men in the crowd started to pay more attention to them, and while most looked back with disinterest or disdain, others began to move in closer to them.

“You seem to be in the wrong place, ma’am.” A tall, slim gentleman wearing a broad-brimmed hat approached her.

Sadie stiffened but held steady. “I don’t think so, sir.”

“Humph,” replied the man, and he sauntered back to his companions in the crowd and pointed in her direction.

Sadie shifted her attention back to the stage, hoping the men would move on. Soon Mr. Hughes finished his speech to a stirring round of cheers and applause. Then it was Rhett’s turn.

He walked across the makeshift stage to speak. No, he almost glided. She may have put aside any romantic thought of Rhett Hart years ago, but it was hard not to admire his polish. From speech to gait, the man was impossibly smooth.

It was difficult to see him as spoke, as the tall man before her blocked most of her view. But she could see Lewis Frye, Rhett’s campaign manager, and he was looking straight at her, his face almost expressionless, except for a dark look in his eyes. What was it about that man, that made her so uncomfortable? They’d never even met, and he was looking at her like she had somehow wronged him.

Sadie severed the contact and moved a little closer to her group. Unable to prevent herself from looking back once more, she was relieved when she saw the man was gone.

She found herself taken in by Rhett's speech. It was obvious the man was very serious about the vision he had for the territory. He wasn't running for a lark. This wasn't amusement and entertainment to him. He wasn't parroting what others had said, or simply saying what they wanted to hear. He believed in what he was saying, and Sadie knew without a doubt that if she ever got the chance to vote, it would be for Rhett Hart.

He was talking about a regulatory body that would implement measures to help control and prevent disease among livestock, when she felt a shiver of apprehension travel up her back. Sadie took her eyes from Rhett to scan the crowd and noticed more people looking their way.

"You all don't belong here," shouted a voice from the crowd. Men started to turn their attention away from the stage and move closer to them. Sadie could feel their resentment, their outrage feeding off one another.

"Get outta here!"

As more and more voices joined in the chorus of derogatory taunts, the situation quickly escalated. The men started to surge closer, pressing on Sadie and her fellow suffragettes.

Sadie and the others stood their ground, determined not waver in the face of such animosity. She didn't believe the men would dare to do much more than rant and rave in such a public space. But fear gnawed at her as the unruly crowd began to encircle the women, trapping them all together.

"Go home, where you belong!" another man yelled, spittle flying from his lips as he pointed at Sadie.

Another man ripped a sash from the shoulders of a young woman nearby. A sense of dread swept through Sadie as she saw the malicious glee in their attackers' eyes. Their peaceful march was devolving into a nightmare. A few of the women terrified by the threatening actions of the men began to scream.

And then chaos followed.

Sadie felt rough hands seize her arms, attempting to pull her away from her friends. She tore at the hands, her heart pounding in her chest, her eyes darting through the crowds, desperately seeking an escape.

She could see Rhett through the hostile crowd, she called out his name, and their eyes locked.



HE STRAINED to see through the frenzy of people. When the shouting started Rhett's attention was drawn to the back of the crowd, and he was certain he caught a glimpse of Sadie. When he looked again, she was gone. Was she in the chaos? Was she even in Butte, or was his mind playing tricks on him?

He'd watched as the suffragettes arrived, but he was unconcerned as they gathered at the back. It was merely a peaceful demonstration, and they were being respectful of the rally. How had it turned so quickly?

There!

He saw her again, her head still held high, but she looked frightened. She was still safe, but he needed to reach her, get her out of harm's way before things got even worse. He jumped down from the stage and started to push his way through the throng of people. Bodies collided against him, and Rhett gave thanks for his height as he could still keep his eyes on Sadie. He ducked, a rock narrowly missing his head, losing his hat among the bodies pressing against him. He looked up again for Sadie, and at that same moment he saw a brutish man grabbing her roughly.

The rage that instantly filled him was unlike anything he'd ever felt.

His chest constricted, and the blood began pounding in his ears. Every fiber of his being was consumed by a desperate need to protect her. He let out a guttural roar, pushing and shoving bodies out of his way.

Their eyes found each other, and Sadie screamed out his name. The sound of her cry struck him in his soul.

He was only feet away as the man holding her tore the sash she wore from her body. When the man looked up, his eyes widened as Rhett bore down on him. Shoving Sadie forward and into Rhett's body, he turned back into the crowd.

Rhett longed to go after him, but he needed to get Sadie away.

"Rhett," she panted, clinging to his shirt.

"Stay in front, next to me." Rhett covered Sadie with his body, pushing them through the chaos.

Rhett almost had Sadie to safety closer to the boardwalk, he just needed to get her away from the crowd. Without warning, a heavy blunt object struck the back of Rhett's head. Shocks of pain radiated through his skull and for a moment his vision blurred. He staggered, pressing his hand to the back of his head. He turned around and pushed Sadie behind him, using his body to protect her.

He saw the older woman from back at the International Hotel in Autumn Springs, running towards Sadie, away from the crowd. A man behind the woman pulled back his arm to throw a broken bottle at her.

Suddenly, Sadie darted around him, "No!" The bottle hurtled through the air towards her.

Instinctively, Rhett jumped in front of her and the woman, and the bottle slashed across his face. The last thing he saw was the man's look of horror at hitting the wrong target before Rhett's vision turned red.

"Rhett! No!" He heard Sadie cry.

Rhett crumpled to the unforgiving ground and Sadie leaned over him, her mouth smashing against his forehead as she ducked over him trying to protect him from further injury. "No, no, no."

Rhett hissed at her through the pain. "Go, Sadie. Get out of here."

“I’m not leaving you. Help!” she screamed. “Somebody help us!”

The older woman was tugging on Sadie’s shoulder. “We need to leave; they’ve all gone mad.”

Sadie shrugged off the hands. “I can’t leave him.”

Rhett fought to maintain his senses as crimson stars burst in his vision. “Go.” He needed her to be safe, that was all that mattered, and she wasn’t listening.

“Mr. Frye!” cried Sadie.

Suddenly his campaign manager was at his side.

“Blazes, man! What did she do to you?”

“I didn’t—”

“Not her,” Rhett grit through his teeth.

“Come on, Sadie,” insisted the older woman. “We can’t stay here.”

“Please, Sadie,” pleaded Rhett, hoping for once she would listen to him. “Go.”

“I’ll find you,” she whispered, then her warm hands left him.

His eyes were closed, but he could hear her footsteps running away. She was going to be safe, that was all that mattered. He closed his eyes, and the darkness took him.

The chaos behind them, Sadie and Mrs. Clark scurried down a narrow side street. She could still hear the shouts echoing behind them, but it was the vision of an injured Rhett that consumed her. But his campaign manager was at Rhett's side, she had not left him alone, he would be taken to a doctor. He was going to be okay. He had to be.

Sadie closed her eyes. If she said the words enough times maybe she could convince herself of the veracity of her words. She couldn't bear to think it wasn't true.

She didn't know where she and Mrs. Clark were headed, she only cared that it was away from the angry mob of men. Mrs. Clark started to slow down, her raspy breaths worried Sadie. They needed to slow down, they were far enough away, they should be safe.

Casting an anxious glance over her shoulder, Sadie saw they were alone, and called out. "Please stop!"

Mrs. Clark look past Sadie and nodded. "Yes," she gasped. "We should be fine now."

The old woman joined hands with Sadie. "I'm so sorry, child. I never expected this kind of response. I thought if we were peaceful, we would have that reciprocated. I was wrong."

Sadie shook her head. "Let the fault lie where it belongs."

After a few minutes, the women caught their breath, and started walking. As they rounded the corner, they nearly collided with two deputies.

Sadie cried out in surprise.

The lawmen's eyes bore into them with suspicion. Then they exchanged knowing glances before blocking the women's path.

"And where do you think you're going, ladies," asked one of the deputies, his mustache twitching like something was caught in its whiskers.

Sadie's heart pounded in her chest, but she forced steel into her voice.

"Please excuse us, sirs. We are trying to get home," said Sadie. Perhaps if they thought that she and Mrs. Clark intended to leave the area, they would leave them alone.

"Shoulda stayed home in the first place, don't ya think?" said the same man.

The deputies exchanged amused smirks.

"I think it's her," said the younger of the deputies, and the mustached one nodded.

It's her? Why were they looking for her? By the look in their eyes, whatever it was didn't seem to be in her favor.

Suddenly the older man's arm shot out and grabbed her, his cruel fingers digging into the tender flesh of her upper arm. "You're coming with us."

"Unhand me," demanded Sadie. Her knees were shaking, but she would not allow it to carry through to her voice.

"I'm one man you ain't telling what to do. Now get moving." The man pushed her forward.

"Stop this," commanded Mrs. Clark. "She's done nothing wrong."

"You best be quiet and move on if you know what's good for you," warned the mustached deputy.

"I will not. I am the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. I demand that you let her go."

“Willy, take her too, then.” He directed the younger deputy. “One or two, don’t make no difference to me. We got room. You can be the president of your cell.” The two men snickered at the joke.

“This isn’t fair, we’ve done nothing wrong,” said Sadie, as she struggled to remove herself from the man’s grip. What was happening?

“Someone sure thinks so,” replied the deputy. “Don’t make this any harder. I’ll toss you over my shoulder if I have to.”

Sadie had no doubt the despicable lawman would do exactly that. Why had they singled her out? It didn’t make any sense.

Until she could figure out what had happened, there was no point in arguing. She glared down at the offending hand locked on her arm. She was certainly going to be bruised from the unnecessary pressure. There was no way to break free from the man, and even if she did, she couldn’t outrun them. And she couldn’t leave Mrs. Clark behind.

Without any other options she started walking.

The deputies marched them to the jail, and any hopes of explaining their situation to the sheriff were dashed, as they walked through the door. The only one there was a sole occupant of one of the cells, and that man didn’t look like one who was fit to defend their honor. Not that they needed defending. They were innocent, and soon enough they would have a chance to see justice done. There had to be an explanation.

The two deputies ignored any attempts at addressing Sadie’s demand for reason, deciding instead to loudly discuss their opinions on the issue of votes for women.

“Votes, bah, what kind of lily-livered man lets that happen? No real man, I can tell you that.”

“For sure, Pete, for sure,” grinned the young bare-faced deputy.

Sadie wondered if the boy was even old enough to shave. He looked like he only had a passing acquaintance with a bar

of soap. A working man might gather his share of dirt and dust throughout his day, but for this deputy it seemed more like he had an aversion to the idea of cleanliness.

“Yessir, women should be at home, serving their husbands and raising their children. Not running around causing trouble. It ain’t seemly. Voting matters are for men to handle, it’s too complicated for them to understand. If we let them vote, our whole way of life comes tumbling down. You hear me, Willy.”

“For sure, Pete, yup, I hear you.”

Mrs. Clark having finally had enough of listening to their hogwash, stepped up to the bars they were locked behind, and pointed to the man passed out in the cell next to them. “This. This is the paragon of society that you choose over an educated woman. This is who you trust to guide the direction of our country? I fear for our futures if you cannot see the irony of it all.”

The older deputy turned and looked at them. “You mean Cecil Knox over there? Nah, he’s a good ol’ boy. Just sauced is all. I’ll tell ya this though, at least he ain’t no harpy.”

The young deputy nodded as though his partner had spoken an undeniable truth.

The deputy continued his rant. “Can you imagine the type of men these women would be voting in? Soft, weak men in positions of power? It would be a nightmare, I tell you. We’d be back under the Brits by end of year, and we’d deserve it.” The deputy rubbed the back of his filthy hand under his nose. “Worse yet, they’d vote one of their own in, then what.” He shook his head. “Nope, doesn’t even bear thinking. My wife can barely get my food on the table on time. Blames it on the young’un’s all about. Imagine if she was in charge of something important. So, you can see why we gotta keep them under control.”

Sadie bit her tongue and willed herself not to respond. Mrs. Clark did not feel so inclined.

“See, Sadie. They like to make light of our desires, show them as ridiculous flights of fancy, spoken by feeble-minded

women. At least that's what they do at first. But with time, when they discover we cannot be cowed by their words, or shamed, they become afraid and embrace the next step in a man's toolbox. Violence." She brushed a hand gently across Sadie's sore arm. "If they cannot convince us to back down, they will do so by force."

The older deputy cocked his head and sneered. "I ain't afraid of some old dried-up teetotaler. You got a lot to say for someone on that side of my bars."

Sadie stepped in, not wanting to antagonize the deputies any further. It would serve no purpose. "Where is the sheriff, Deputy?"

The deputy raked his eyes over her. "Not here. He's away for a few days, and so me and Willy here are in charge."

Sadie took a deep breath. "Oh, thank you, that's good to know."

The sheriff was gone, there would be no rescue from that quarter. She needed to find out why they'd been specifically looking for her. She needed time to think. Leading Mrs. Clark back to the wooden bench in their shared cell, they left the deputies alone.

Hours dragged on, and while man in the cell next to them moaned a few times, he didn't wake. The sun was starting to set, and Sadie started to worry they would be left in this jail overnight. Mrs. Clark assured her that there was no legal reason for them to keep them locked up, and they would soon be released. She'd been saying that too long for it to be believable anymore.

Sadie's empty stomach finally growled enough to catch the attention of their younger guard.

"Are we feeding them, Pete?" he asked.

The deputy frowned over in their direction, and sighed, pulling his legs from the desk they'd been propped on. "Guess so. I'll swing by Minnie's diner, grab something there, do a little walk around while I'm at it. I'll let Zeke know he's not to bother coming in tonight, you're taking his shift."

Willy nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll keep a good eye on things here.”

Pete narrowed his eyes on Sadie and Mrs. Clark. “Don’t you two go causing any trouble.” Then he walked out of the office.

Sadie watched as the moment the awful man left, Willy swiftly claimed the chair that the older deputy had been sitting in and lifted his feet on the desk. She could see he was still just a boy, which meant if Sadie had a chance at getting some information, she better act now. This would be one of the most important interviews she’d done yet. She attempted to re-pin her hair and pasted her softest smile on her face.

She called to him across the office. “You married, Deputy? Children?” She knew it was doubtful, but she needed to get him talking.

Mrs. Clark lifted a brow in Sadie’s direction but remained silent.

Deputy Willy dropped his feet back to the ground and faced her. “Uh, no ma’am.”

She let out her best heart-wrenching sigh. “I have three little ones. I fear I may have made a huge mistake getting caught up in everything. I don’t know what I was thinking. Now all I can picture is my poor babies, all alone with no mama.”

Deputy Willy gulped and scratched at his neck beneath his dirty bandana. “Ah, you’ll be back with them soon.”

“Oh, that’s good. I’ve just never had a run-in with the law before, this is all very frightening. Do you know why we are here? Is it because of the march? I promise you I didn’t hurt anyone or damage anything.”

He shifted in his seat, his eyes darting away from her gaze and towards the door. “I’m just following orders.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Sadie pressed on, trying to keep her voice even and calm. “I understand you have your duties, but it would ease my mind to know a bit more about the situation.”

Was she overdoing it? Hopefully her attempts to play on his sympathies weren't as obvious to him, as they were to Mrs. Clark.

Deputy Willy coughed and shifted again, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of her questioning. Now he was scratching at something behind his ear. "I'm not sure I'm supposed to say anything."

Sadie got up and walked closer to the bars that separated her and the young deputy. She leaned in.

She widened her eyes. "Should I be worried? I thought you would let us go by now. Since we haven't broken any laws, I mean."

He stole another glance at the doorway and seemed to be weighing his options.

"Listen, Pete says it's only for tonight. We're to let you out in the morning. The guy from the Hart campaign said something about a lesson." He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but it didn't hit its mark. "Really, you'll be out in the morning. Both of you."

Sadie's blood ran cold, and she nearly gasped. Hart? It couldn't be possible. Rhett would never do such a thing. He might not approve of her methods, but "teach her a lesson"? That wasn't Rhett Hart. Had he planned it earlier before he was injured? It wouldn't have been possible afterward. It didn't make any sense. She was certain she knew Rhett well enough to be sure that he would never do something so underhanded.

She reined in her running thoughts. If she wanted answers, she needed to ask the questions, she wasn't going to let her imagination run away with her.

"What did Mr. Hart say?"

Deputy Willy looked confused. "Not him, the other fella, one with no chin." The deputy laughed at the description he'd given. "Pete says, he was happy to pay."

"Pay?" cried Sadie.

The deputy's eyes bulged, and he squinted at her. "Hey now, don't you go saying nothing to Pete, or no one. We ain't gonna harm you. You'll be out in the morning."

He turned his back to her, as if severing eye contact would somehow fix things.

Sadie slowly backed away from the bars and dropped back onto the bench beside Mrs. Clark.

It wasn't Rhett, it was his campaign manager. But why? She'd had no contact with the man, why would he wish her ill. It didn't make sense.



RHETT WINCED as Dr. Heiler tied off the last stitch on his cheek and covered the side of his face with bandages.

As the doctor washed his hands, he addressed Rhett. "We'll keep those bandages on for a few days at least. I will stop in tomorrow to change them." He looked over the wire-rimmed glasses still perched on the end of his nose. "Long as it doesn't get infected you should be fine. It's nasty, but you didn't lose the eye. You should be grateful it wasn't worse and that I was around. You should consider yourself lucky, Mr. Hart."

Rhett barely attempted to nod his acknowledgement and his head began to swirl. He closed his eyes for a moment hoping the feeling would pass.

The last thing he felt was lucky.

The only thing he was grateful for was knowing that Sadie hadn't been hurt and had escaped the crowds. That it wasn't her the doctor had to stitch up, instead of him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he gingerly pressed his fingers to his face. He hadn't dared to look in the mirror on the opposite wall, he knew it was bad. The cut was deep, and the initial look on the doctor's face when he came through the door of the hotel room, told him all he needed to know.

With the bandages on his face, he gazed across, and took in his reflection. The white bandages were already seeping, and his exposed eye turning black. He barely recognized himself.

He opened his mouth to speak, and the tight stitching pulled. The pain matched the levels of his frustration and his anger.

Lewis Frye hovered nearby. He'd been pacing since Dr. Heiler started working, and now that the work was done, he leaned in and stared at Rhett's face.

His expression was equal parts revulsion, and concern. "This is a nightmare, Rhett. A real nightmare."

"You think I don't know." Rhett pushed the words through his teeth. "It's my face."

"Right," said Lewis. "I'm just worried how this is going to play out."

Clenching his jaw, Rhett stood. He waited until the wave of nausea passed, and he moved to stand before the mirror.

Dr. Heiler gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "I'll come by in the morning. The bash to the head probably didn't help. Get some sleep, your body needs it," said the doctor, then he slipped out the door.

Rhett didn't respond, he just stared.

A wave of despair washed over him. He'd always taken his appearance for granted, and deep down he also knew that he'd often used it to his advantage. But what stared back at him wasn't Rhett Hart. He didn't know who this man was.

Rhett was afraid.

He knew that the way he looked had often helped to open doors; would some of those doors be closed to him now? He didn't even want to think about it tonight.

From behind him, Lewis spoke, "We'll stay here for a few days. Put off Helena, till..." he hesitated. "Till you're feeling up to it. We can maybe skip Bull Creek, and Calico Flats. We don't have to decide that now."

Rhett slowly twisted his head from side to side, observing the changes in his face. “We will talk tomorrow. I can’t think straight right now.”

“Sure, sure thing, Rhett. I have to talk to some people anyway.” Hand on the hotel room door, he looked back, catching Rhett’s eye in the mirror. “We can’t be seen with those women, Rhett.”

He waited for a response and when he didn’t get one, he kept talking. “It doesn’t look good. I know you’re trying to be some kind of good guy, but they’re going to be trouble. Even that lady friend of yours. She’s not helping you.”

Rhett didn’t speak, he just stared back at his manager.

“Did you hear me?” asked Lewis.

Rhett looked back at his own reflection.

“Yeah, I hear you.”

The sharp knock on the door roused Rhett from his restless sleep.

Requesting patience from the other side, Rhett swiftly dressed and cautiously cracked it open to reveal Dr. Heiler with Lewis standing behind him.

“Good morning, Mr. Hart.” Dr. Heiler walked past Rhett and set his black leather bag on the dresser. Obviously, the doctor wasn’t here to waste time.

“It’s time to change those bandages and have another look.”

While Rhett acquiesced to the doctor’s ministrations, Lewis settled onto one of the chairs by the window. Rhett faced the mirror as Dr. Heiler got to work. He’d been too afraid to peel back the bandages last night to look, but now he steeled himself for what was to come.

Dr. Heiler began to carefully remove the bloodstained wrapping from Rhett’s face. The wound, now exposed, was an angry red gash along his brow, and down his cheek. He didn’t want to believe what he saw, but the mirror didn’t lie, it didn’t bother to give reassurances.

The doctor must have sensed his unease, and he pulled back from his up-close inspection, his wire-framed glasses teetering precariously on the tip of his nose. “It may not look pretty now, Mr. Hart, but it will heal. My suture work is excellent.”

Despite his upset, Rhett found himself smiling at Dr. Heiler's confidence in his work, which was at least reassuring.

"I appreciate your efforts, Doc," said Rhett.

Dr. Heiler's eyebrows briefly knit together. "Doctor," he corrected. "Now, you will keep the wound covered, change the bandages frequently, but," He wiggled a finger. "I mean it when I say keep it covered, otherwise your healing will slow down."

The doctor, then pulled a glass jar from his bag and handed it to Rhett.

"Here. Vaseline." He gave a curt nod like that was explanation enough.

Rhett shook his head and eyed up the almost colorless gooey substance. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"When I arrived from Germany, I was in New York, Brooklyn. A man there was selling this. Chesebrough, I think his name was. Fascinating results. Now the pharmacist here keeps it on hand." He tapped the top of the glass jar in Rhett's hand. "Use it. Cover your cut with it to keep it moist. I don't know why, but it seems to prevent infection. Good for burns too."

"Thank you," said Rhett, placing the jar back on the table.

Replacing the final bandage to Rhett's face, he packed up his things.

"If you are here in Butte, I will remove the stitches for you, if not, have them taken out in roughly seven days' time. Make sure it's done by a proper doctor. Not one of those sawbones that seem to constantly pop up around here."

Certain his advice and warnings had been heard, the doctor left the hotel room, and Rhett sat down across from his campaign manager.

He lifted his hand, palm up. "Now what? I can't exactly give a speech like this. No one will be listening to my words; they will only be staring at my face."

Lewis rubbed the side of his face as he assessed Rhett. “No, you won’t be going to any rallies, but you can still meet with town leaders. If you don’t, Hughes will get a lead on you, and you won’t be able to claw your way back.”

Rhett let out a long sigh as his head throbbed. “Great.”

It was hard to hold on to any semblance of positivity when everything had been turned upside down. Even worse was realizing how much he depended on his face. Rhett wanted to be able to shrug off the injury, to trust in Dr. Heiler’s belief it wouldn’t be so bad, but he’d seen the stitches, he knew.

As glad as he was that Sadie was safe, he also found himself growing angry at her impetuous nature, her determination to do things her way at all costs, that had led to this point. Why? Why did she have to show up at his rally? Why couldn’t she just stay in Autumn Springs, and focus her efforts there? If she had, this never would have happened, and he wouldn’t need to rethink his campaign. He wouldn’t need to rethink who he was as a person. What his future was going to look like.

With his thoughts still on Sadie he addressed his manager. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“What?” replied Lewis.

“I want you to check on someone for me.”

Rhett couldn’t bring himself to see Sadie in person. He was angry with her, but it was more than that. He didn’t want her to see what he looked like. He didn’t want to see the disgust in her eyes. He knew she would deny it, but Sadie Garvin wore her feelings on her sleeve. She’d never been able to hide her emotions.

“Who?”

“A woman.”

“No.” Lewis started shaking his head and held up his hand. “No, don’t even ask it. You’re going to say that suffragette from Autumn Springs, aren’t you? No, don’t bother answer that,” he said bitterly. “Those, those termagants, no—she-devils are the cause of all this.” He gestured to Rhett’s face.

Stunned by the vehemence coming from his campaign manager he sat silent. Rhett allowed himself to feel irritation with Sadie, but the anger emanating from Frye made him want to defend her. Had he read the man so wrong when he hired him? Or was he so blind to what many men were feeling?

Lewis got up and began pacing the room, resentment seeping from every pore. “That’s the problem—you don’t see it. These women have no business meddling in men’s affairs. I knew that woman was going to be a problem. I knew it, ever since we wasted our time at that fundraiser. Eating pies, and the both of you at that ridiculous race. I could tell she was distracting you. Your bleeding heart is going to destroy your chance of being elected.”

“Excuse me?” Rhett stood, his eyes narrowing on his campaign manager. This conversation was taking a direction he hadn’t expected. “You do remember that *you* work for *me*.”

“Which is precisely why I’m trying to help you. But you’re running a soft campaign. Do you see Denton Hughes jumping into crowds to help some upstart that doesn’t know her place?”

“Denton Hughes wouldn’t have jumped in to save his own grandmother.”

“But Hughes isn’t going to have to walk around looking like that, is he? We are going to be weeks behind because of her. Maybe we never catch up. And good luck getting a pretty little wife looking like that. Instead of standing there all offended, you should be thanking me.”

Thanking him? Rhett felt a cold shiver run up his spine. He didn’t think Lewis was talking about getting him back to the hotel yesterday. “What does that mean?”

Lewis Frye pulled himself up to his full height, which still only reached just below Rhett’s nose. His lip curled above his weak little chin, which jutted out in defiance.

“I did what I had to do to put that troublemaker in her place. Remind her that she’s dealing with serious men. You hired me to do a job and I’m doing it. This is no time for such foolhardiness.”

The stitches in his face pulled as Rhett clenched his jaw. No matter how angry he might be with Sadie, he would never abide by anyone harming her. Ever.

His eyes bored into his manager's. "What...did...you...do?" Rhett's voice was low and clipped, each word controlled as he contained his anger.

Lewis took a step back from Rhett. "She's fine. She's just had some time to think about her actions."

Rhett took a threatening step forward. His head pounded, but he needed to know where Sadie was. "Where is she?"

Lewis couldn't hold his gaze. "She's in the jail, but—"

"What!" roared Rhett. A burst of stars briefly clouded his vision, and he knew he needed to calm down. What he wanted to do to the man wasn't going to help: his head or his political career.

"I specifically said not to harm her, just frighten her, teach her lesson."

"Teach her a lesson?" Rhett was starting to wonder if Lewis was even of sound mind.

"Get out," Rhett took another step forward. "Get. Out."

The campaign manager stumbled backwards towards the door. "I was trying to help."

"I don't want your kind of help. You're fired." Just looking at the man brought a sour taste to his mouth. "You disgust me."

Lewis Frye's cheeks flared red, his fists clenched at his sides, and he stiffened in the doorway.

"You'll regret saying that," he spit through gritted teeth. "What I did was for you. I don't deserve this."

Any patience Rhett might have had, had run its course. "Get out of my sight," he seethed. "And if you're smart, you'll get out of this town. I can't guarantee your safety if I see you again."

With those final words, Rhett slammed the door in the man's face.

Sadie. His stomach churned at the thought of her stuck in a cell, alone and scared. He grabbed his coat, and then caught sight of himself in the mirror. He took a deep breath. She was going to have to see him.

He exhaled. It didn't matter, she could be sickened by what she saw, he wouldn't blame her, but he wasn't about leave her in some cell.

He twisted away from the mirror and stormed out of the room, his face throbbing and his mind consumed with one thing: finding Sadie and making sure she was safe.

Everything else could wait.



IT SEEMED she had just fallen asleep, and already it was morning.

True to his word, she and Mrs. Clark had spent the entire night in the cell. Deputy Willy brought them blankets; despite being teased for being soft by the older man. Cecil, the man in the cell beside them, had suddenly woken late in the evening. After making some empty promises to behave himself and not drink to excess, he was released. Sadie had a feeling it wouldn't be long before he was back.

Sleep had been long in coming on the hard cold bench, and while they huddled together and waited, Mrs. Clark, shared many stories of her days of activism. She was a widow, and though she missed her husband terribly, there was also a freedom to do things that many other women couldn't. She felt it was her responsibility to make her voice heard on behalf of those who didn't feel they could speak.

Sadie had spent the night wavering between angry and scared, but Mrs. Clark remained a beacon of hope. She felt guilty for being so thankful that she wasn't alone.

It was also a blessing that the women from Autumn Springs didn't come to Butte with her. If she'd gotten them arrested as well, her hopes for the town would be over before they even began. She couldn't imagine the guilt she would have felt if they had been caught up in this mess.

But nothing compared to the horror of seeing Rhett's head as she held it.

The moment they released her she was going to find him. She needed to know how badly he was hurt. During the few moments she managed to sleep, she kept seeing Rhett leap in front of her, shielding her from the bottle, his face cut—an injury he suffered to save her.

In the quiet hours of the night, she shared her entire history with Rhett with Mrs. Clark. She hadn't intended to divulge every detail, but the situation they were in had loosened her tongue, and she found herself sharing everything with the woman. She confessed how confusing her feelings were, as she believed she had firmly buried them in the past, yet no matter what she did to push them away, they kept resurfacing.

When Mrs. Clark had asked her why she was trying so hard to fight those feelings Sadie tried explaining her divorce, and her inherent need to prove herself. Mrs. Clark had said something that resonated with her.

"You can be right, and you can be happy, but you can't be both all the time."

It made sense, but Sadie also felt that what she was fighting for was important, more important than the rekindling interest she had in Rhett Hart. She didn't know how to reconcile those feelings. She didn't know if it was even possible. And if it was, would Rhett ever feel the same? Would he be angry with her for the events yesterday? Were things different than years past or was she simply falling back into old patterns, where the desires of her heart were unreciprocated?

The questions kept swirling about in her mind. It was a wonder she slept at all.

Sliding the woolen blanket from her shoulders, she approached the bars.

“How long are you keeping us here?”

Groggy from his watch over his innocent captives, Deputy Pete, rubbed at his mustache, briefly looking over his shoulder at her. “Long as I need.”

“You, or someone else?”

He stood. “What do you mean? What are you jabbering about?”

She saw Deputy Willy’s eyes widen as he looked at her. She could see that the young man was afraid of his counterpart.

Realizing her error, Sadie backed off. “I’m just saying that you can’t hold us forever, we’ve done nothing wrong, and eventually someone is going to come looking for us.”

“Still got a whole lotta words don’t ya?” said the deputy. “Can’t you see sense? There’s no way you’re going to change anything. Things are the way they are for a reason. Don’t think that wearing your sashes and carrying signs is going to change that. You ain’t getting that vote now or ever.”

Sadie lifted her chin, unable to let his words pass through her without response. “Maybe it won’t be now. I—we understand that change takes time, but I do believe that it will come someday. Perhaps not a flood, but in waves. I also believe that change doesn’t come if no effort is made to make it so.”

Mrs. Clark still on the bench behind Sadie, spoke firmly. “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*”

Filled with hope and renewed faith, Sadie continued. “So, no, sir. I do not expect I will have the right to vote today, or tomorrow, but I have faith, and I will keep fighting so that someday, comes sooner rather than later.”

The deputy scoffed. “Good luck with that.”

Sadie turned her back on the odious man and retreated to Mrs. Clark.

“Surely, they have to let us out soon. They can’t get away with this,” she whispered.

“Those boys didn’t think this through. The sheriff is a decent sort, once he finds out what’s taken place in his jail, I don’t think it will go well for these two. I hope what they are being paid was worth it.”

Sadie glanced over at Deputy Willy. Caught up in something he would undoubtedly regret.

A shadow passed by the jailhouse window behind the young deputy, and suddenly the door burst open, slamming against the wall. The glass in the window rattled with the impact.

Rhett!

His exposed eye squinted against the change in light from the street, as he sought her out.

Relief and horror filled her as she stared at him. For a moment she almost forgot to breathe. Relief that he was here, but guilt and shame as to what happened to him. His face. What had she done? She couldn’t see the damage beneath the bandages, but if it was a slight wound, his face would not be bruised, and the covering would not be unnecessary. She closed her eyes against the sight. How would he ever forgive her?

When she opened them, she saw hurt flash on his face before he turned his attention to Deputy Pete.

“Release them, immediately,” he demanded. “You have no cause to keep them. Get them out, now.”

Deputy Pete scoffed, but the young deputy was starting to look nervous.

Sadie rushed to the front of the bars, and Rhett looked at her again, frowned and met her at the cell. “Sadie,” he murmured. Then he whipped his head around.

“Her mouth! Why is it bruised, who touched her?”

He stalked towards the deputy. “Was it you?”

The man’s eyes widened, and he moved back behind his desk.

“We didn’t touch her, neither of them,” he protested.

Sadie touched a finger to her lip and remembered that she’d hit it when she was covering Rhett’s head. He must not remember.

“No,” Sadie clung to the bars. “It wasn’t them. I hit it, by accident.”

Rhett returned to the desk, leaning over it, his hands pressing into the aged wood. “I told you to get them out. Open that cell door.”

Momentarily defiant, the deputy pulled himself up, and rested one hand on the pistol at his side.

“They ain’t going nowhere. They are both under arrest for causing a ruckus. I suggest you back up, mister.”

“Arrested. Liar, on what charges? I’m a lawyer, for both of them, you—”

“This man your lawyer? Sure don’t look like one.” Deputy Pete sneered, “Looks more like you angered the wrong sporting woman over at Velvet Lily’s.”

“Watch your mouth in front of the ladies,” growled Rhett, the warning clear in his voice.

“From what I can tell, her and those battle-axes she consorts with ain’t no ladies at all.”

Sadie saw the moment where Rhett’s barely contained patience snapped like a brittle twig. In one swift movement, he rounded the wooden desk and closed the gap between him and Deputy Pete. Grasping the deputy by the shoulders, Rhett pushed him back against the cold, stone wall, their faces mere inches apart.

A panicked Deputy Willy, reached for his gun.

“No! Don’t” screamed Sadie, and the young deputy met her eyes, his hand still at his side.

Sadie shook her head, willing him to stand down. By some miracle he did. His conscience no longer allowing this charade to continue.

Through clenched teeth Rhett growled. “Release them, or I promise you, you will regret the day you ever set foot in this town.”

Sadie stood in stunned silence as she watched Rhett’s anger erupt. She had never seen this kind of rage from him before. Something had taken over him, his even temper crumbling, exposing a side of him she had never seen before. Yet, she wasn’t afraid.

Deputy Pete’s eyes widened, his lip quivering as he stammered. “It wasn’t my idea. The Hart fella, his campaign... they hired us. They told us to keep ’em in there.”

She saw Rhett’s grip tighten. “I am Rhett Hart, you unscrupulous swine.”

Panic crossed the man’s face. “Let them out,” the deputy squeaked.

Deputy Willy fumbling for the keys, hurried to unlock the cell door.

With a final threatening glare, Rhett released the older deputy, and stepped away, leaving the man to regain his composure against the wall.

The cell door swung open with a grating creak, and Sadie stood there, her heart pounding. Her eyes met Rhett’s intense gaze, and she instinctively rushed forward to meet him. She needed to know how badly he was injured, she needed to thank him. She needed...him.

But as she moved towards him, his outstretched arm came up, halting her in her tracks. “Don’t.”

Sadie froze, she shook her head, “Rhett—”

“No.” He didn’t say anything else.

He turned his attention to Mrs. Clark. He looked her up and down, as if assessing for injury.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” His tone far more gentle than it had been with her.

Ever resilient, Mrs. Clark nodded. “I’m unharmed, Mr. Hart. Thank you for your help.”

Seemingly satisfied, his gaze turned back to Sadie. “And you?”

She was fine after their ordeal, and seeing Rhett’s injuries, all she felt was shame. She knew his anger wasn’t only directed at their jailers. “Yes, thank you, Rhett,” she answered softly.

He let out a brief sigh, and for a moment the hardness in his eyes softened. But it didn’t last for long.

Steering them to the open door and safety, he held his hand on the small of her back as he kept his body between them and the deputies.

Rhett turned back. “You’re lucky they haven’t been physically harmed. But this isn’t over. Not by a long shot.” He slammed the door closed behind them.

Standing on the boardwalk, breathing in the fresh air, Sadie struggled to find the right words to say to Rhett, but Mrs. Clark stepped forward, her voice filled with gratitude.

“Hard to imagine these streets so filled with ugliness of yesterday. It’s obvious there is much work to do. But we will prevail. Thank you again, Mr. Hart. I am terribly sorry about your injury. You’re a good man, you didn’t deserve this.”

Rhett’s fingers brushed against his bandages, before he quickly pulled them back to his side. “No one did. I’m glad you’re fine, Mrs...?”

“Clark. Territorial president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union,” she said proudly.

“Ah,” replied Rhett. “Best of luck to you.”

“And you, Mr. Hart,” smiled Mrs. Clark. “Come along, Sadie. We need to let the others know what has happened.”

“No,” Rhett’s voice was firm. “Sadie is coming with me.”

Mrs. Clark looked at Rhett, then Sadie, and apparently finding his demand acceptable, nodded. "Come see us when you are done."

Sadie watched the woman walk away, leaving her alone with Rhett. When she turned back, she could hear the angry shouts of the deputies arguing inside the jail, as she and Rhett stared at each other. The tension between them could have been cut with a knife.

"Rhett—"

Again, he interrupted her. "No." His face darkened.

The buffer that held back his anger with her had apparently left with Mrs. Clark.

Sadie took a deep breath and tried again, her voice shaking as she tried to speak. "Rhett, I—"

He held up his hand, cutting her off. "Not now, Sadie."

She bit her lip, a mixture of guilt and frustration coursing through her body.

She tried again. "All I'm—"

"No, Sadie," he interrupted her again. "Not here."

Her nose wrinkled as her brow pulled down. She opened her mouth to speak again, and Rhett shook his head, and pointed down the street.

"We're going to the hotel. Start walking."

It was hard to miss the curious glances as they walked through the hotel's lobby. Sadie saw the pitied looks directed Rhett's way, and while he showed no reaction, she knew he had seen them too.

When the door to his room closed, just the two of them inside, Sadie prepared herself for the barrage that was about to come.

But it never did.

Rhett took off his jacket and hat, and walked to the window, his face turned away, as he leaned against the frame.

"Rhett?" Sadie waited for him to cut her off again, but he didn't. He remained silent, his back to her.

She decided to plunge ahead. "Your...injury, how bad is it?"

He responded with a quick, disgusted snort. "Does it matter? The damage is done."

"Of course, it matters. I feel awful, I never thought—"

"That's just it. You never think." Rhett barked, as he turned to face her. "What were you hoping to achieve with your stunt?"

"Stunt?" Sadie's head flinched back, and she felt her cheek heat. "What are you talking about? We were standing there peacefully. We remained respectful during the speeches. We started nothing."

“You never should have been near the rally. It was a political event, not a suffrage parade. There’s a time and a place for everything. Did you even consider what might happen? For even a moment?”

Sadie’s sympathy was overshadowed by indignation, her voice rising to meet his accusations. “You think I planned for that to happen? That I have that kind of power over everyone? You think I wanted such awful violence to break out on the streets? We weren’t the problem, Rhett. It was those men that were determined to cause trouble.”

Rhett began to pace the room, running a hand through his disheveled hair. She’d never seen him so flustered.

“That’s precisely my point. You’re reckless. Don’t you see the danger you’re exposing yourself to? What if this,” he jerked a finger to point at his bandages, “What if this happened to you?”

Sadie sucked in a breath. “I wish it had.” Her lips trembled at the confession. “I never wanted you to be hurt.”

“But yet, I am. You need to understand how risky what you’re doing is.”

“You keep saying that I don’t understand. But I do. This isn’t just about me, Rhett. This is about all women. What happened is proof how important it is to fight. I won’t stand on the sidelines.”

“I’m not saying it’s not important.”

“No, you’re just saying it’s not worth it.” Sadie willed herself not to let any tears fall. She didn’t want him to dismiss her words, believing her weak.

“I’m not.”

Sadie pressed her fingers to her temples. “Can’t you see? You should be disgusted by the anger—no, the fury those men felt about something that doesn’t even harm them. Doesn’t it concern you that they would rather see me injured or worse for wanting to be treated with dignity and respect. You think it’s acceptable that my desire to have say in taxation and schools is worth silencing at any cost?”

“Of course, not. But that’s not how they are viewing it. I’m not excusing it, Sadie, I’m just saying that men like that are feeling threatened, and that makes them dangerous.”

“But they aren’t actually being threatened, are they? Feeling something, doesn’t make it a fact. This is why we need the support of men, too.”

Rhett hesitated before he spoke. “You want your voice to be heard, I get that, but who will hear your voice from the inside of a jail cell.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief, and she mirrored Rhett’s stance, bunching her hands on her hips. “It was your campaign manager that put me there! And let me point out that when men brawl on the streets, you gather around and enjoy the entertainment. Yet, when we raise our voices, even in peaceful protest, we are tossed in jail.”

Rhett had the decency to look briefly ashamed of her denunciation. “I know, for that I am sorry. I’ve fired him, he’s gone. I had nothing to do with that. But I got you out. What exactly was your plan for getting out of there if I hadn’t shown up?”

Each time she thought she was getting through to him, he proved her wrong.

“I never should have been in there!” she shouted. She tried to rein in her temper. This is not the conversation she wanted to have with him. He had been hurt on her behalf, she needed to focus on that.

They stared at each other in silence, the only sound in their room were their angry breathing.



RHETT’S HEAD was killing him, and his face stung with the pulling of his stitches, but he found himself unable to calm down. He’d gone from angry to frightened, back to angry in such a short span of time that he almost felt dizzy with it.

How could one person, one woman, push him to the brink? There had never been a single soul that made him react so intensely. He prided himself on his composure, but here was Sadie, standing before him, ripping it to shreds.

“Do you hate me, Sadie?” he asked.

Sadie went completely still, confusion clouding her blue eyes. “What? No. No, of course not.”

“Then stop this. I can’t have you doing this.”

She shook her head. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you, Rhett. I wish you would be on my side, but I can’t force you to believe what I do.”

“I told you; I believe in the vote for women.” He stared up at the ceiling, praying for patience. “I even spoke to Judge W.J Stephens about a suffrage proposal. He’s of the same mind. I’m trying Sadie, you don’t know everything that is going on. I told you we were taking different approaches.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why couldn’t you believe that I was on your side?”

Sadie opened her mouth and then snapped it shut, whatever she was about to say swallowed back.

He saw her eyes flicker to the bandaged side of his face, and he saw her pity. He didn’t need her pity and he didn’t want it. For all the years she had teased him about his looks, just like the others, he knew she would be disgusted by what lie beneath the bandages. He’d seen her face when he walked through the door of the sheriff’s office.

“Trying not to look?” he snapped, gesturing at his face, embarrassed at the pain in his voice. “Just imagine if you had Katie or Emma at your side. What about Nora? Would you still be so righteous if it was their faces you were staring at?”

She recoiled at his words, and he knew he wasn’t being fair, but he couldn’t stop. “I told you to stay behind me, but you didn’t listen you never do. Actions have consequences.”

Tears filled her eyes as she answered. “I know that, Rhett. I never meant for you to be hurt.”

“Do you? Do you know that? Because it doesn’t seem like you do. What will it take?” Anger and anguish took over. He stepped closer to her and pulled back the bandage covering his eye and stitches.

Sadie gasped.

“Look at me! Look at me, Sadie. Look closely if you dare. Pretty Rhett Hart, can you still see him?”

Tears fell down her cheeks, and she reached up to touch him, but he batted her hand away, and stepped back, pulling the bandages back over his eye. “I don’t need your pity.”

“I’m so sorry, Rhett. I never meant—”

“I don’t want your apologies either. They change nothing.”

“What can I do? Please, tell me, what can I do,” cried Sadie.

“You’ve done enough.”

He walked over to the door. “I’ve got two men waiting to take you back to get your things and get you to the stage depot. Go back to Autumn Springs.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not leaving you here. Not like this.”

“Yes, you are.” He gripped the doorknob. “Some hopeful—no— foolish, part of me hoped that we might have worked well together, that maybe we—it doesn’t matter. I was wrong. I don’t want your pity.”

Staring at the floor, he gingerly touched his fingers to the side of his face, then looked up. “Go home.”

Sadie’s blue eyes shone with the tears that were spilling over onto her cheeks. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“It doesn’t matter because I don’t want you here.”

He opened the door, then brushed past her as he crossed the floor back to the window. He could hear her little gasps as she tried to hold back her sobs. Each sound was like a dagger to his heart, but he kept his back to her. He didn’t dare look back; he might beg her to stay.

As the moments passed the door still hadn't closed, and Rhett's resistance began to weaken. Giving in, he turned around.

But she was already gone.

A smile touched Sadie's face, as she thought of Mr. Langley's final words to her this afternoon.

"Perhaps you could make your headlines a little less... sensational. I know I've promised not to control the topics on which you write, but I would prefer to have people buy the paper, rather than beat them with it. Fannie Randolph was in a tizzy thinking that some sort of black magic was taking over the town."

His reference to her article 'Autumns Springs Bewitched by Talking Cactus' about Kevin Stockwell's run in with an angry porcupine, he'd met up a tree. The poor brave boy hadn't shed a tear, but he came running down Main Street scaring everyone half to death with all the barbs sticking out of him. Micah Hart had him fixed up, but it had been quite the event in town, as the porcupine had taken up residence near the church and didn't seem interested in leaving. It was supposed to be a fun story, and if Mrs. Randolph had bothered to read it the actual article, it would have been quite clear. The woman loved to complain, but Sadie understood Mr. Langley's point, and promised to provide more sedate headlines, even for the entertaining columns.

It was one of the few times she'd smiled in the last two weeks.

Since their bitter parting, she had not heard from Rhett, at least not directly. The silence weighed like a heavy stone on

her chest. There was no reason for him to contact her, especially since she knew he blamed her for his injuries.

At night, when she lay beneath her quilt, the memory of that dreadful moment filled her thoughts. Guilt gnawed at her whether awake or asleep. The violent cut, she knew, was a consequence of her actions, of doing what she thought was right. But the right or wrong of it wasn't relevant, why would that matter to a man, whose face would be forever marred because of her? It was a damage that could never be undone.

She hoped that when he returned to Autumn Springs, she could find a way to mend the broken bridge between them. That he would find it in his heart to speak with her, but she feared that he truly meant it when he said he wanted nothing to do with her.

It didn't help that without seeing Rhett with their own eyes, that rumors began to swirl around town. At first there had been whispers that Rhett had jumped in to stop a fight at the rally, but there were others who relished in sharing a darker retelling, where it was Sadie who had slashed his face at the violent suffrage protest.

She was thankful the Hart family knew the truth, but Sadie wondered if they too harbored any resentment towards her. She hadn't been to the Double H, but with Emma and Nora in town, she was worried the rumors would eventually cause them to withdraw the support they had shown her.

So far, they hadn't. Emma and Nora remained at her side, and still attended the previous suffrage meeting she held last week. Many of the women voiced their concerns at the resulting ugliness of the parade in Butte, and the women decided that for now, they would work on awareness, and getting people informed, before they marched the streets of Autumn Springs. No one wanted what happened in Butte, to happen here.

Sadie agreed and contented herself with knowing that as long as awareness was spread, they were taking steps in the right direction. This was going to be a journey that took time

and effort, it was not a destination that would be reached quickly.

They had another meeting this evening, and Parson Wood graciously allowed them to use the church in the hopes that anyone upset with their gathering would think twice before entering the Lord's house with less than kindness in their hearts.

Sadie had been surprised at the Pastor's offer. She thought he would want to remain neutral in the matter. He reassured her saying that he would never retreat from providing safety for the members of his flock. She was grateful for his kindness.

As she approached the familiar mercantile, she saw her mother out front, arms crossed as a woman spoke to her. Her mother didn't look pleased, and when she was close enough for the women to notice her, the older lady's face tightened at Sadie, and she scurried off.

"That didn't seem friendly," said Sadie.

"She rarely is. Prefers gossip over kindness." Dorothy Garvin waved after the woman, with a sigh. "We reap what we sow, and she will find herself lonely if she continues. And not only her. Mrs. Capshaw was in here complaining about the buzzing of Nora's bees."

"Doesn't Nora give her some honey with each collection?"

"Of course, she does," said her mother. "I told her that Nora was behaving horribly in not sharing any of her honey with her. I would speak to her myself. Mrs. Capshaw quickly changed tack and informed me Nora was in fact a lovely girl, and that I shouldn't speak ill of people." Her mother sighed. "Sometimes I wonder about that woman."

She opened the door to the Garvin Mercantile, and ushered Sadie in. "Enough about her. I'm glad you're back. Your father and I wanted a chance to speak to you. I know you have another meeting tonight."

That didn't sound good. She'd been out of short skirts for years, and still the words 'your father and I want to talk to

you' brought a tremor to her stomach.

Her mother led her toward the back of the store towards a private corner and called for her father. "I think he's in the kitchen."

The major popped his head in from the house, but when he saw Sadie, he said, "Ah," wiping his hands on the apron over his canvas pants. He gave her a serious look and moved to join his wife's side.

They both stood together silently, then he gave her mother a little nod.

"We want you to be more careful, Sadie. We are worried about you. You haven't been...well, yourself since you got back from Butte. I don't want you doing anything foolish."

Sadie stared at her parents incredulously. "Foolish? What exactly does that mean? Pastor Wood has offered the church for our meeting; nothing is going to happen."

"That you know of," finished her father.

"Is there something I should know?" asked Sadie.

"No, you know we would tell you. We're just—"

"You just got out of jail," her mother interrupted. "We are worried about you. We don't want you ending up there again."

Sadie shook her head and frowned. "You really think that Weston Hayes is running a corrupt office?"

"Of course, not!" denied her mother.

"The only reason I was in that place was because of the very kind of men we need to fight."

"It's that fight word that worries me." Her father lowered his voice. "You would do well to remember that many of those men you are referring to would be happy to engage you in violence. In that battle...Sadie, you will not win."

"So, give up, accept what is, that's what you think I should do?"

The major sighed. "I'm not saying that at all. I just don't like the idea of you throwing yourself in harm's way."

"I don't want to, but if you know another way, I'd be happy to hear it." Sadie could feel her frustration growing. "We were only marching; and here in Autumn Springs all we are doing is talking. What is so terrible about that?"

"She has a point," added her mother.

Her father grimaced. "I know she has a point, doesn't make me like it anymore."

Dorothy grabbed her husband's hand and looked at him. "We've all had times where we felt the need, the desire to make a difference. To do something simply because it is the right thing to do. We both know what a dangerous and rocky road that can be. But in the end, it can be worth it."

Sadie watched the look her parents shared, and she knew they were thinking of their own pasts.

"Thank you, mama," Sadie said softly.

Her mother turned her attention back to Sadie. "Don't thank me yet. I agree with your father. I know that you are smart, you are strong, and you have an abundance of perseverance, but you also charge into every fight. At some point you need to learn which ones will lead you to your goal, and which ones are to appease your pride."

Knowing that her mother loved her deeply did not take the sting out of her words. Sadie was hardly taking up the charge or unnecessary risks. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Compared to some of the suffragettes she'd met in San Francisco, and in other cities, she was hardly making a notable contribution.

"I'm not a child. I am woman, married, divorced, and employed. There's a purpose to all I do."

Her mother's brow lifted. "Really? The fundraiser?"

For a moment Sadie couldn't meet her mother's eyes. Maybe she did try to prove that she was just as skilled as many of the men, but was it her fault that she was?

“Am I supposed to pretend to be incapable? Helpless without the help of a man?”

Her mother swatted at her words. “Stop it. You know exactly what I mean. No one is asking you to do anything of the sort. My point is that that you are quick to anger, and when you are offended you often go too far in putting people back in their place. If you plan on taking up this mantle you need to also understand that humiliating the very men you wish to win over helps no one; it only feeds your pride.”

Her mother’s arrow hit its mark.

Was her pride so fragile that couldn’t let a single thing pass, that once engaged she had to see her opponent in the dust in order to feel victory?

It probably was. After Charles left her completely humiliated, she swore she would never give up a part of herself again. She would bend for no man, and never back down. But what kind of person did that make her? Not one that kept friends or curried favor for long. Not one that inspired people on a deeper level.

“You might have a point,” Sadie conceded.

The major grunted then walked over and patting her shoulder, gave her a kiss on the forehead. “She usually does. We are proud of who you are Sadie, always have been, and no matter what whispers you might hear, never forget that.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

He turned back to Dorothy. “Now, if you ladies will excuse me...” He reached for her mother’s hand and gave it a dramatic and gallant kiss. “I must leave you to do man-things.”

Sadie rolled her eyes, while her mother let out a beautiful, tinkling laughter. Some might be embarrassed by the obvious affection between their parents, but Sadie loved it.

Atop the mantle in their parlor there was small, framed painting her mother had done of two doves. The delicate artwork had always been one of Sadie’s favorites amongst the painting her mother had done. It wasn’t until she was 12 years

old that she learned of the story behind the piece. The heartbreak and the years it had taken for her parents to find their way back to one another was like a fairy-tale.

Sadie always hoped she would find the same kind of love, but her choice in Charles Gatwick quickly disillusioned her. Charmed by his ardent pursuit, she happily agreed to be his wife. After years of unrequited love for a boy who only found her annoying, she was easily swayed by the whirlwind courtship that Charles provided.

She knew better now.

Regaining control of her wandering thoughts, Sadie raised a brow at her mother. “Man things?”

“He’s promised to bake me a some of Teresa’s beignets. Ever since you went to the Double H for supper, I’ve been remembering those delicious, sweet treats she used to make.”

“His *man* thing is baking doughnuts?”

“No, my love. It’s making his wife happy, and I can’t think of a more manly thing than that, can you?”

Her mother didn’t wait for an answer, she simply gave her a pointed look, and went to assist the two men who had just walked in the mercantile.

She thought about what her mother said, and again Rhett sprang to mind. He had put his life in danger for her, forced to put his campaign on hold because of her, and even in his anger he had still come to release her from the jail.

Whether he still looked as handsome as he once had, or if he was scarred for the rest of his life, Rhett Hart was still every inch a man. He had protected her, even when he didn’t agree with her, even when she had hurt him, he still came for her.

Sadie thought she had moved past her feelings for Rhett when she grew up and left for San Francisco, but had she? She wasn’t a little girl anymore, she had different hopes and dreams for her life, she had a desire to make a difference in the world. She couldn’t still feel the same. In that moment she

realized that she didn't feel the same. What she felt for Rhett was something much harder for her heart to understand.



HE'D FINALLY ARRIVED BACK HOME last night, after two weeks of speeches and townhall meetings. Rhett met with town leaders, listened to their concerns, and shared his vision for the Montana Territory. Statehood was on everyone's mind.

He'd replaced Lewis Frye immediately, with an eager young man out of Helena, who was full of fire and hope for many of the same issues Rhett believed in. He shouldn't have been surprised when he heard that Denton Hughes had hired Frye onto his campaign. The men were like two peas in a rotten pod, but as long as Frye stayed out of Rhett's way, he wasn't going to let it consume him.

Sitting in his father's old leather chair, he'd spent the day pouring over contracts Gideon wanted advisement on, and eating the trays of treats that Teresa, and Katie, seemed to be delivering to the library on the hour. He appreciated their kindness, but he could also see the pity in their eyes, and it wasn't helping.

He'd tried to focus on the text before him, but his injured eye grew tired with all the reading. His stitches had been removed a week ago, leaving a cruel pucker of scar tissue still red and angry from his cheekbone to his brow. He was going to see Micah tomorrow to assess what else might be done, but Rhett knew that much of what he saw in the mirror was permanent.

He picked up an eyepatch in Helena so that he could protect his eye from the sun, but he also wanted something to hide what was beneath. His family had been supportive when he rode in and they finally saw the damage for themselves, but he knew what they were thinking as they looked at him. Only Tilly seemed impressed with his new look, and claimed she now had a pirate uncle. Perhaps he should be grateful his niece hadn't wished him a hooked hand and a peg-leg.

Going into town to see Micah also meant he ran the risk of running into Sadie. He wasn't sure he was ready for that.

After most days on the campaign trail, he fell into bed exhausted, but his mind didn't want to let him sleep. The bruising on his face was gone, but dark circles had formed under his eyes, as thoughts of Sadie prevented his sleep.

With separation and time to think, Rhett regretted just how harsh and cruel he had been to her in Butte. He'd been so certain he was right, and that she was wrong, that he hadn't even considered things from her perspective. He thought he understood, he thought he knew it all. The very thing he had accused her of.

As he traveled, he began to notice exactly what she had spoken about: the unreasonable anger directed towards the suffragettes and for what? As much as he demanded that Sadie be more patient, he understood her reasons not to be. If he were in her place, or in any woman's place, he would likely be even more outraged by the inherent unfairness of it all.

He'd been in so much pain after the rally, he allowed his anger to cloud his judgement. He shouted at Sadie and blamed her for what happened but stepping back he realized that he had been injured, doing exactly what she'd been about to do; stepping in to save a friend.

Rhett pushed aside the contract before him, and rubbed at his temples, closing his eyes.

But Sadie wasn't really a friend.

Their families had always been close, but throughout the years, he and Sadie had been more adversaries, competitors. He would never have admitted it as a boy, and apparently was still having difficulty as a man, but there were many times that he enjoyed going head-to-head with Sadie Garvin. Like him she was smart, bull-headed and she often pushed him to frustration, but she also pushed him to be better. Would he have done as well, achieved as much if Sadie wasn't always at him? She challenged him, she always had, and he was better for it.

What was it that made him keep thinking of her? The image of those bright blue eyes, shining with tears, as she asked to stay with him, flashed in his mind. The very thought of it now, made him sick. Was it just guilt, or was there something more that connected them?

It wasn't merely a shared history, that was too tenuous a thread to explain the way he was feeling. She had truly gotten under his skin, in a way he never expected. But what did that mean now? She was on a path to bring down the establishment, and he was campaigning to join it.

His fingers probed at the distended scar around his eye, and he remembered the look on her face in the hotel room when she saw it. She would be kind, she would pity him, like everyone else, but that's not what he wanted from her. The irony wasn't lost on him, he'd finally found someone who might have been the one, and it was his appearance that turned her away. Giving in to self-pity was just as ugly, but he couldn't escape it.

The knock at the door, interrupted the direction of his thoughts.

"Hey." Gideon walked in and slumped into the chair across desk from him. "How are things looking?"

Rhett gave his brother a quick rundown of his thoughts on a few of the new timber contracts they'd made with the railroad. The train hadn't made it to Autumn Springs yet, but soon enough it would be here, and the Double H was in a good position to supply much of the lumber needed.

"Sure, you don't want to stick around?" asked Gideon. "Things are picking up; I could use you here."

Rhett's fingers toyed with the eyepatch on the desk. "May not have a choice."

"Meaning? I mean, it works for me," Gideon shrugged. "But maybe you need to get something off your chest."

Rhett stared over at his only big brother. Gideon didn't always say much, but he wasn't one to put up with nonsense

either. He said what he meant, and if Rhett wanted a straight up conversation, Gideon was as good as it got.

“I’m not sure I can win this seat.” There he said aloud what had been haunting him since the rally in Butte. He’d been a little nervous before, but confident he could pull it off in the end. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“You think you can’t do the work to win it?” Gideon asked.

“No. I can do the work, that is not the problem. It’s the getting voted in to do it that worries me. The campaign is struggling, I don’t think I can connect with the voters.”

“Why?”

“How can I expect people to support me, now? I’m not the same. I don’t know what to do. How can I be the man they want me to be?”

A crease formed across Gideon’s forehead. “Wouldn’t it be better if this ‘they’ you’re talking about just approved of the man you are?”

Rhett sat with Gideon’s words for a moment. It wasn’t so simple.

“And who is that now?”

“Now? What’s changed?” asked Gideon.

Rhett frowned over at his brother, and picked up his eyepatch and then dropped it with disgust back to the desk. “It’s hard to miss.”

Gideon didn’t respond right away. He sat there looking Rhett over, chewing on the bottom of his lip. He was obviously working something through his mind, so Rhett let him. Finally, he spoke.

“Seems strange to me that you didn’t lose your eye, but that cut took out your confidence and drive instead. You think it was because of your pretty face that I always felt secure when you handled our papers and accounts? That even as a boy, pa had you working on more than just chasing cattle like

the rest of us? You think it's pity that had me dumping these contracts on you the moment you got back?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. The question is do you really believe what you're saying?"

Rhett didn't know what he was really thinking. He was all jumbled up inside. When he looked in the mirror, all he saw was the damage to his face, did that mean everyone else did too? If he could find a way to get over the shock, could others? And who were the others he was really thinking about?

Gideon narrowed his eyes again. "Oh, little brother, wait a minute here. You keep saying they, but you're really only talking about one they? A 'she' they?"

Rhett shifted under his brother's scrutiny; it got worse when he saw his brother's lips start to twitch with laughter.

"Hot dog! I knew it, well, maybe it was Maddie pointing it out after that dinner we had, but it wasn't a surprise. You're smitten with Sadie Garvin. Boy, after all these years, you're finally—"

"You don't know what you're talking about," denied Rhett.

"Yeah, yeah, I do. All of us do, you're the only one that spent any time denying it." Gideon rubbed his hands together with a glee only a sibling could have. "Took longer than I thought, but you always were stubborn."

"Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black," scoffed Rhett. How could it be so clear to Gideon or the others, when it was so confusing to him? And couldn't Gideon see that Rhett still had the same problem? "And even if it were true, and I'm not saying it is, the problem's the same."

Gideon stopped his chuckling and sat back in the chair, a half-smile still on his face. "So, you think she wouldn't have you?"

Rhett shrugged.

Gideon let out a sigh, before speaking. "Yeah, you don't look the same. I'm not going to lie to you, Rhett. It's not

pretty, but it's also not as bad as you think. It's still fresh, it will get better with time. As for Sadie, you're not giving her enough credit. Blazes, man, you got hurt saving her."

"It wasn't her fault," Rhett reminded him. The irony of his words was not lost on him. He told Sadie to her face it was her fault, and left her in tears, now, here he was ready to defend her instead.

"I know," Gideon acknowledged. "Listen, the solution for both of your problems is the same. You aren't going to please everyone, Rhett. You can't. You're used to being liked by nearly everyone, but Autumn Springs is a small town. If you want to do this whole politics thing, you better get used to people not liking you."

"I don't care—"

"Yeah, you do, but you'll have to get over it. Stop walking a fine line on the issues, say what you mean, and that goes for Sadie too. Tell her, quit wasting time."

"She just got divorced."

"So. It wasn't last week."

"So, how do I know she hasn't sworn off—"

"Love?" Gideon chuckled, as Rhett shot him a glare. "Is that what she told you? She's never getting married again?"

"No, but that stubborn woman is far more interested in suffrage than she is in me."

"Stubborn, sounds familiar," said Gideon. "A smart man would give her a reason to be more interested in you, there's an easy way to do that. Figure it out."

"I think you underestimate how determined she is."

"I think you're underestimating yourself." Gideon got up and left Rhett alone in the office.

Rhett expelled a long breath. Nothing like a cold splash of reality from a big brother.

When he went into town to see Micah tomorrow, he would try and talk to Sadie. At least apologize for his treatment of her

in Butte. He would know when she looked on him again if there was any chance for something more between them; if she could handle the way he looked now.

Having made the decision, maybe now he could get some sleep.

The bell above the mercantile door jingled as Nora walked in.

Sadie looked up from the article she'd been reading to her mother and smiled. "Nora! It's good to see you. You and Micah must have been busy this past week."

"We have." Nora returned the warm smile Sadie's mother gave her. She walked over to where a display of colorful fabrics caught her eye. "Oh, these are lovely." She ran her hand over the cotton. "They're sure to brighten up any home."

"I thought so too," Sadie's mother replied. "We've just received a shipment in from San Francisco, and when I saw these, I couldn't resist putting them out immediately."

Sadie pointed at the woven basket hanging from Nora's arm. "Please tell me that is some of your honey."

Nora laughed softly. "It is. Fresh from the hives. I just dropped some off at Mrs. Capshaw's as well."

"You really are the sweetest, Nora," said Sadie.

"I don't know about that, I do it because I'm hoping it stops her from complaining about the sound of the bees," confessed Nora. "Truly, they're not that loud."

"It doesn't," quipped Sadie's mother, and the three women joined in laughter.

Nora was placing three glass jars on the counter, when Sadie's father came in from the storage room.

“Sadie, I’m guessing it was you that ordered that contraption out back,” said the major, giving her a resigned sigh.

It took a moment for her to realize what her father was referring to, but when she did, her eyes lit up. “Really? It’s here?” She grabbed Nora’s hand. “Come, you have to see this.”

Shaking her head, her mother laughed, “I saw it earlier, good luck, girls.”

Following the major back outside of the mercantile, both women smiled at Frank Morgan, who was sorting through a stack of parcels. He nodded back but kept busy with his work. It was wonderful to see him moving forward with his life.

When she saw it leaning against one of the mercantile’s sturdy wood wagons she clapped her hands together in joy. “Yes!”

There, shining bright under the sun, its metal frame gleaming, was the symbol of her freedom from Charles Gatwick—an American Star bicycle.

“What on earth?” murmured Nora next to her as both women walked over to the bicycle. The dark ebony frame and spoked metal wheels looked completely out of place in Autumn Springs, and Sadie loved it.

She reached out and gently ran her fingers along the smooth metal surface, and then brushed across the wide leather seat. She turned to Nora with a smile. “Well, what do you think?”

Blinking, and shaking her head, Nora said, “I don’t know what to think. I’ve never seen anything like it before, not in person. Are you really going to try riding that thing? It looks dangerous.”

Sadie stepped back to look at the bicycle. The smaller wheel out front, and much larger wheel behind did look rather intimidating. But she wasn’t afraid. She had seen a handful of people riding them in San Francisco, and when she finally had

the nerve to order one, the American Star was recommended because it was less prone to tipping forward.

“I think it should be fine. At least once I learn how it works.”

Nora still looked rather dubious at the prospect of riding such a machine. “I will confess,” she paused. “I am curious.”

“Then be curious no more, Nora. Let’s try it,” said Sadie.

“Ladies, please, I beg of you to be careful, and do not try it on Main Street. You’re liable to scare the horses half to death, and heaven help you if you run over Mrs. Capshaw.”

Both women laughed at the major.

“We’ll be careful,” promised Sadie.

The major closed his eyes with a sigh. “I’ve heard that before.”

He left them to their adventure and together Sadie, and Nora maneuvered the heavy bicycle to the laneway behind the mercantile.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Sadie?” asked Nora. “It doesn’t really look very stable.”

Hand on the leather seat, Sadie turned to Nora. “I had almost forgotten I ordered this, with everything going on. It was months ago, now. A final act of defiance against Charles. He was so adamant that I never ride one. That it was unseemly, and a poor reflection on him and his family.” Sadie pressed her lips together at the memory of the argument she and Charles had at the time. “I conceded, but when it was over between us, I told myself I was going to get one.”

“I’m sorry, Sadie,” said Nora. “I can see why you wanted to get it.” She looked back at the bike. “Still...” her voice trailed off.

“Well, if I can’t figure out how it works, you won’t have to worry,” said Sadie. Staring at the contraption, she felt a bit of apprehension. The small wheel seemed to be for steering and the back for propulsion. “I’m not entirely sure where to start.”

Nora always the pragmatic one, leaned in to examine the unique treadle mechanism with its leather straps. “I think you have to power it with your legs, just like a sewing machine.”

“Right,” said Sadie, as she squeezed the lever by the front bars. “This must control the brake. That’s probably going to be important.”

They both chuckled.

After several attempts Sadie was finally up on the high leather seat, with Nora holding her in place. Their laughter filled the air as Sadie teetered back and forth trying to maintain her balance.

“I think it’s better if you start moving,” said Nora. Giving her a gentle nudge, she stepped away.

Sadie fought to control the bicycle, trying to adjust to the independently moving pedals. Alternating between the two treadles, she began moving forward, and she was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

She had almost made it to the end of the alley, when her overeager pedaling led her to wobble into a pile of gravel and the small front wheel twisted, causing the bicycle to stop in its tracks and toss Sadie to the ground.

A sharp pain shot up through her arm, and Sadie was wincing as Nora ran over.

“Sadie!” Nora gently held Sadie’s arm; concern etched on her face.

“It’s okay,” Sadie forced a smile. “It’s not that bad. Probably just bruised.”

She stood, giving it a good rub, but Nora was unconvinced.

“I think we should get Micah to take a look at it. Just in case.” Nora picked up the awkward bicycle and started rolling it back to the mercantile. She wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Sadie didn’t want to bother Micah, and part of her didn’t want to face any of Rhett’s brothers, not after everything that happened. He was so angry when they parted, heaven knows what Rhett said to them about her.

Chasing after Nora, she called, “Why don’t you just look at it instead? I trust you.”

Nora looked back at Sadie as she rested the offending bicycle against the wagon. “Fine, but you still need to come to the clinic with me.”

In that moment, the major walked out, and looked suspiciously at the two of them, and then the bicycle. “What happened?”

“Nothing!” replied Sadie, brightly. “Nora and I are just going over to her house.”

He gave them a doubtful grunt, and went back in.

Nora’s cheeks flamed. “I feel like a misbehaving child. You’re as bad as Emma.”

Sadie smiled. “There’s no point in worrying him. Let’s go.”

When the two arrived at Nora’s home, they didn’t go into the surgery, instead Nora led her to the kitchen and put on some hot water.

“I find a tea makes everything better.”

“Then I think I could use a little more tea in my life,” said Sadie. “Everything feels like it did on that bicycle: out of control.”

She looked around the kitchen. It was a pretty space, everything in its place. Like Nora, it seemed so put together. Sadie envied Nora’s serene glow.

“I think you’re doing wonderfully for someone who has been through so much,” said Nora. “It must be difficult starting over. You should be proud of yourself.”

She didn’t feel proud. She wasn’t sure what she felt, but Nora’s words still soothed. Sadie wished she could be as content as Nora.

Sadie noticed a small basket of soft yarn and needles on the floor by the cupboard. “Oh! What are you making?”

Nora glanced to where Sadie was pointing. “A blanket. For Tessa Potts. She’s expecting a little one any day now and has been under the weather. I thought she might like it.”

A sheen came into Nora’s eyes as she spoke, and a response caught in Sadie’s throat.

“It’s going to be lovely.”

Nora smiled warmly at Sadie, but the sadness was still in her eyes. “You’ve probably wondered why Micah and I haven’t started a family.”

She didn’t wait for Sadie to answer.

“It’s not that we don’t—” she paused, and her green eyes met Sadie’s blue. “It just hasn’t happened.” Nora looked around the kitchen. “I want it so badly, Sadie. To fill our house with love and children. A home like the one Micah grew up in, like I did.”

Sadie chest ached at the pain in Nora’s words. “Your home is filled with love.”

“But not the pitter patter of little feet,” said Nora.

“Oh, Nora,” Sadie stood and went to envelop her friend in her arms.

There were times when reassurances weren’t what was needed. Being told that things will all work out in the end, doesn’t help when you are stuck in the middle.

As they moved apart, Sadie pulled out a chair for Nora, and then poured them the tea. “If you ever need a shoulder, I am always here.”

Nora dabbed at her eyes. “Thank you. I’ll be fine. I just worry that Micah is disappointed. He swears that he isn’t, but I wonder if it’s something I’ve done, that I’m being punished somehow.”

“No!” exclaimed Sadie. “I know it’s so easy when our hearts are heavy to blame ourselves, but this isn’t because of anything you have done. There is no blame to be assigned here.”

“It just is,” sighed Nora.

“It just is,” repeated Sadie.

They sat in silence for the next several minutes, drinking their tea. Sometimes no words were needed.

Nora’s quiet strength, despite her struggles was as much heartbreaking as it was inspiring. She prayed that if a miracle were to be given, it would be placed on Nora and Micah.

It was hard not to wonder if she too had similar issues. Her union with Charles hadn’t produced children, which was another accusation that Charles laid at her feet. Would he have been so quick to cast her aside if they shared a child?

When Sadie began to fill her lonely days with the suffrage movement in San Francisco, thoughts of children fell to the wayside. But now, in hindsight, it begged the question: was it her commitment to the cause that left her ambivalent or had there been something about Charles himself?

Sadie loved children, she always imagined that she would have a family of her own. As an only child she often longed for siblings and wanted her own home to be a full one. But something had changed after months of marriage to Charles, and she had never taken the time to ask why.

Nora reached out and squeezed Sadie’s hand and smiled. “That’s enough of that maudlin talk.” Patting her cheeks, she lifted her chin. “How do I look? Any blotches?”

“You’re as beautiful as ever,” assured Sadie. And she was, inside and out.

Their conversation continued as Nora gave a closer inspection to Sadie’s elbow, and finally declared it bruised, but sound. She tried to convince Sadie to give the new bicycle a few days’ rest, but they both knew that Sadie was determined to learn how to ride it.

It was only the sound of a door closing and two male voices in the office attached to the house that shifted Sadie’s attention away from Nora’s concerns over the bicycle.

“Micah’s back,” said Nora.

The voices grew more distinct, and Sadie's eyes widened when she realized who he was talking to. The words were muffled, but that timbre and tone she would recognize anywhere.

"Is he with Rhett?"

Nora glanced in the direction of the office. "He could be. Rhett was here earlier, but I thought they had finished."

With only a wall separating them, Sadie's mind raced. She wanted to speak to him, she wanted to see how he was. She wanted to tell him that she had taken what he said to heart. She knew that he had still been meeting with people, continuing to campaign, but he looked so terrible when she last saw him, it was hard to imagine how he had healed.

"Did you want to speak to him?" asked Nora. "I know you said it ended badly between the two of you, but I can't imagine that Rhett could truly blame you. Harts are stubborn, but they aren't unforgiving."

"He was so angry," said Sadie. "But I do need to see him. I need to know...I need to know that he is okay."

Nora gave her an understanding look. "Of course."

There was no need for uncertainty. She had to see him, to ask him directly if he could forgive her. She wouldn't allow her worry to fester when she had a chance to speak with him. Straightforward was always the best answer to situation like this. Her mother had taught her that.

Nora was apparently of the same mind, as she was already up and knocking at the door.

When Micah answered, the door swung open to reveal Rhett behind him in the office, and Sadie couldn't prevent the gasp from leaving her throat, when their eyes met.

He looked far better than she ever expected. It was incredible. He was scarred, but compared to the possibilities her imagination had concocted, it was an absolute relief.

Rhett flipped a patch over his eye. "Hello, Nora."

Then he looked back to her. “Sadie.” His tone had quickly lost its warmth.

“Micah, could I have your assistance with something?” asked Nora.

“Of course, let me just finish with Rhett—”

“Now would be best,” said Nora firmly, as she ushered Sadie into the office, then took Micah by the hand, and left, leaving her alone with Rhett.



RHETT’S STOMACH HARDENED, and he went cold when he saw Sadie’s face. She couldn’t even hold in her cry of disgust. After his heart-to-heart with Gideon, he’d allowed himself to hope again. But Sadie was never good at hiding her emotions, and he knew when she gasped at his face, that she would never be able to look at him the same way. It was like a swift kick to the gut.

The loss of hope hurt more than he ever could have imagined.

Sadie glanced back at the closed door, then returned to look at him, and took a step forward. “It looks, you look—”

Rhett cut her off sharply, “I’m aware of what I look like, thank you.” He was letting his pain speak, and he tried to tuck it away. It wasn’t her fault that she saw what everyone else did. He shouldn’t have expected anything different. At least she was being honest.

He saw her draw in a breath, and then let it out slowly. “Okay. I don’t want to fight with you, Rhett. I have been thinking about you ever since...ever since Butte.”

Did she have any idea how much he had thought about her?

Rhett called on his ability to hide his feelings and told himself he wouldn’t let Sadie see how much her reaction hurt

him. He would still do what he needed to do and apologize to her for the way they parted in Butte.

He drew himself up and met her blue gaze. “Yes, I wanted to apologize. I was...unkind. Not just unkind, but unfair.”

“No,” stopped Sadie. “You were in pain. And I’m sorry for what happened.”

“I don’t need your pity.” He couldn’t keep the bitterness from his tone. His pride was already shattered, he didn’t need to have salt poured into his wounds.

He just wanted to get the apology over and done with and leave. He didn’t want to stand here while she searched for false words to reassure him.

“It’s not pity, Rhett. I thought—”

“You thought what?”

Sadie’s nose wrinkled, as she spoke. “If you’d let me finish. I was trying to say that I was so worried but seeing you now. You look—”

“What? Handsome?” He couldn’t stop his words from tumbling out. “Just like the old me?”

Sadie shook her head. “I don’t understand. I was hoping that if we spoke we might be able to repair what was broken.”

“And what’s that? My face? Us? Because I’m pretty sure that you and I know they are both beyond repair.”

Staring each other down, the silence hung between them.

Finally, Sadie threw up her hands, and scowled at him. “You are the most...the most...oh, never mind.”

She moved towards the door that led from the clinic to the street. “Please let Nora know I’ve left.”

“Can’t win this one, hey, Sadie,” he called as her hand reached the doorknob.

She paused, then spun around.

“You can’t be serious.” Each word was laced with fury. “You simply cannot be serious.”

Rhett suddenly had the feeling he'd be better off dealing with a bag full of bobcats, but his common sense had walked out the door with Micah and Nora. "Oh, I'm very serious."

"Then you," Sadie took one step forward. "Are a vain—" she pointed her finger at him. "Fool."

"Excuse me? You're the one who can't even look at me."

Her brows lifted and then collapsed into a frown. "I am many things right now. Despite how angry I am, I am still grateful for what you did. I never wanted this to happen to you, to anyone. But if there is one thing I am not, sir, is unable to look at you."

"I heard you gasp, don't deny it."

"Because I wasn't expecting you to look so good."

Rhett let out a harsh laugh. Who was she trying to fool? "I know what I look like, Sadie."

"Do you? Have you even looked in a mirror?"

"Of course, I have," said Rhett.

"Then I can only assume that your vision has been affected by that patch of yours. Because in typical Rhett Hart fashion, even an injury to your face has been turned to your advantage."

"You've lost your mind," said Rhett.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. You will have a large scar, certainly, and I don't want to take away what you went through, but with that patch on you look like some fictional sea captain, with a daring story to tell. It's made you look mysterious, more manly; if that could even be possible."

"Manly?" Rhett was stunned. "This," he jabbed a finger towards his face.

"Yes. You were entirely too handsome before, almost pretty." She said it simply, as though it were fact. "Now you're..."

"Now, I'm what?" She had him turned upside-down, he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“I’m not sure of the right word. Dangerous, devilish, no that’s not right.” She tilted her head at him. “You’re dashing.”

Rhett froze. She said it without any guile. “You really mean that, don’t you.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it,” frowned Sadie. “I have been feeling absolutely awful about what happened, I still do, but that doesn’t change the fact that just like you always do, once again you’ve landed on two feet and made it work for you.”

“But my campaign feels like it’s floundering.”

“Feels like, or is? Those are two different things,” said Sadie. “And you think it’s because of the way you look? You should know better. Putting so much emphasis on your looks belittles your true value. Looks never last, Rhett, for anyone. What makes you a good man, a worthy candidate, has nothing to do with your ability to turn heads; it’s who you are inside.” She took breath but she still wasn’t done. “You are an intelligent, thoughtful, loyal man, committed to making this world a better place. Your friends, your family and I know who you are and believe in you. I only hope you remember how to.”

Rhett was stunned into silence. He didn’t know what to say, how to reply.

Sadie waited a moment, then she went back to the door. “You can think about that. If you would like to have a conversation. You know where to find me.”

Then she was gone.

He heard the door from the house to the office open, and Micah stuck his head in. “Is it safe?”

Rhett gave him a wry smile. “You hear all that?”

Shrugging, Micah walked in. “Hard not to. What happened?”

“I apologized, she apologized, then I got testy, and she gave me a lecture.”

Micah started to laugh. “Are you surprised?”

“I guess I shouldn’t be. She said I looked like a sea captain,” Rhett shook his head. “That I was making it work for me.” A grin touched his lips. “You know Tilly also called me a pirate yesterday.”

Still laughing, Micah clapped a hand on Rhett’s shoulder. “You won’t need that eyepatch forever, but while you do, I’m willing to front you the money for a parrot. You just have to promise to wear it for your next speech.”

“Real, nice, little brother.” Rhett looked over to the mirror in Micah’s office. “I guess I did get lucky, didn’t I?”

“You did, whoever did those stitches for you was an artist,” replied Micah.

“He knows.” Rhett gave a chuckle, remembering Dr. Heiler’s confidence.

He looked over to the door that Sadie had walked out, and then back to Micah. “So, now what?”

Micah gave him a confused look. “Do you really need me to tell you?”

Nora appeared in the doorway. “For heaven’s sake, Rhett. Go get the girl.”

“Thank you for saying yes.” Rhett removed his hat and brushed the dark locks that fell across his forehead to the side.

“Thank you for asking.” Sadie gave him a shy smile.

Shocked didn’t even begin to describe what she had been feeling when Rhett came running after her two days ago and asked her to join him on a picnic. It was the last thing she expected when she let her temper get the best of her in Micah’s office.

When she’d first returned to Autumn Springs, she had been so clear on what it was she wanted: to lick her wounds, reconnect with friends and family, and find a way to make a difference in the lives of women. But it seemed that the feelings she thought long gone concerning Rhett Hart were still simmering beneath the surface. His picnic proposal had sparked something she thought forever lost.

“What are you thinking? Please tell me it’s not about that bicycle. Just getting here was adventure enough,” said Rhett.

Sadie glanced over to the American Star laying in the long grass. She’d never admit it, but as much fun as learning to ride the bicycle had been, her bottom was looking forward to walking back to town.

A chuckle escaped her lips as she pictured Rhett’s wobbly attempts to ride on the bumpy pathway. And while the bicycle was less than stable, she and Rhett seemed to find an easy rhythm between them as they made their way to the meadow.

“Oh, nothing really,” smiled Sadie. “Just that you never know where life will lead you.”

Rhett leaned back on the blanket they had spread out beside the babbling brook on the edge of the meadow.

He threw a little stone into the water when he replied. “And do you think life will keep you in Autumn Springs?”

It was a good question; Sadie hadn’t thought much past getting home when she left San Francisco.

“I don’t think I could ever return to San Francisco.”

“No?”

“No, it’s lost its allure. I came back here for a reason,” she said.

“Which was,” prodded Rhett.

Sadie wondered if she really wanted to tell him. For a man that never seemed to question his own ability to do anything, it would be hard for him to understand. She smoothed out her skirts, nervously. “You’ll laugh.”

“I promise I won’t.”

Sadie gave him a dubious look but decided to reveal the truth. “I needed to find my confidence again.”

She watched as Rhett pursed his lips, but she saw the twinkle in his eye. “You promised!”

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I can’t imagine Sadie Garvin with anything but absolute confidence.”

“That’s because you only knew me here, where I had all the support of my friends and family. It wasn’t like that there.”

There was still an ache in Sadie’s heart when she thought on how misplaced her trust was in the friendships she believed she developed there.

Rhett waited for her to continue.

“Our friends—no, Charles’ friends didn’t want to be seen supporting his errant wife. I was almost completely shunned.

If it wasn't for the women at the local suffrage chapter, I could have easily fallen into despair.”

It wasn't an exaggeration. Charles came from a prominent family, nobody wanted to be seen taking sides against a Gatwick, and she soon discovered that many considered her an upstart from the beginning. It had been a cold dose of reality. It had taken time to pick her pride up off the floor, and move forward, but she'd done it. She couldn't imagine herself returning there.

“It's hard to believe that no one would stand by your side. It must have been awful.”

“I'm not always the easiest to like,” admitted Sadie. “I'm sure that some people, mostly men, find me...off-putting. My habit of always speaking my mind and expressing my opinion doesn't exactly endear me to people.”

“No, that can't be,” Rhett teased.

Sadie shot him a smile. “Exactly.”

“Surely Gatwick would have known who you were before he made you his wife.” Rhett frowned.

“Looking back now, I'm not sure he did. And if I am to be fair, for that I'm to blame,” admitted Sadie. That was a truth that was easier for her to see now. “When I first arrived in San Francisco, I wasn't quite as...bold as the Sadie Garvin you knew. Having no friends or family surrounding me made me somewhat reticent to share my opinions.”

“Hard to imagine,” quipped Rhett.

Sadie gave him wry look. “Yet, still true. Anyway, When I met Charles, it was through a friend's brother. I think he was intrigued by me. While shy by my own measure, he believed me to be a refreshing change to the women in his circle. I can only guess that he thought I might become more sedate as time passed, not realizing it would be the opposite. As I became more comfortable in the city, I also found my voice. I think that took poor Charles by surprise. He wanted a quiet and pretty wife.”

“So, he was disappointed in only getting one of the two?”

Sadie felt her cheeks heat at Rhett's words. She didn't know what to say, she knew that things were starting to change between them, but his compliment still caught her off guard. She was used to sparring with him more than sharing tender moments.

Unsure of how to respond, Sadie simply ignored it. "It's part of the reason I purchased that contraption." Sadie gestured to the bicycle behind them. "Charles would never allow me to order one, so, naturally the moment I had the means and the opportunity I did."

"Naturally," grinned Rhett. He picked a blade of grass and rubbed it between his fingers. He seemed to want to ask her something. Instead, he peeked into the basket that Teresa had prepared for them and pulled out a glass bottle of iced tea.

He poured a small glass and handed it to her, then lifted a dark brow, and shot her a half-smile. "Have you had many picnics here?"

Sadie accepted the glass. "Oh, yes. I have a standing arrangement with the sun. If it shines and my schedule allows, there is always a table reserved for me."

Rhett chuckled.

Sadie smiled. "Actually, this is my first time returning here since I've been back in Autumn Springs. I used to come here quite often with my parents. In summer it always looked like mama's painter's palette had spilled its colors across the earth when the wildflowers were all in bloom."

The songs of birds in the trees across the brook reached them, and Rhett nodded. "I imagine the major was in avarian heaven."

"Avian heaven," she corrected. Why did she do that?

"Now, there's the Sadie I remember," teased Rhett.

"I'm sorry. It's a terrible habit. I need to remember not to be so—"

"Helpful," quipped Rhett.

"That's a generous way to describe it."

Rhett pulled off his coat and folded it next to him on the blanket. The smooth cotton of his shirt stretched across his broad shoulders before he twisted back to look at her.

“Do you remember when Miss Phillips called on me to name synonyms for the word firm?”

Sadie shut her eyes against the memory. “Please, do not remind me.”

Rhett kept talking. “I said rigid, then taunt. You immediately stood up to point out the difference between taut and taunt.”

Putting her hand over her face, she shook her head. “Stop! I was unbearable.”

“You weren’t wrong.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Sure, but I never did mix those two up again,” chuckled Rhett. “Always pushing me, challenging me.”

Sadie peeked between her fingers. “I’m so sorry.”

Rhett peeled her fingers away. “I never hesitated to do the same. And who says it was a bad thing?”

Sadie stared at Rhett, and they both broke into laughter.



AFTER ALMOST AN HOUR of delightful conversation, without a single disagreement, Rhett found that he and Sadie had so much more in common than either of them expected. It was hard not to think of what more they could achieve if they worked together, instead of apart. No different than his parents working side by side to build the Double H, maybe Sadie was the one he wanted at his side, both of them working to build a better future.

Sitting in the meadow, Rhett was also discovering the simple pleasure of their companionable silence. In a world where many felt compelled to fill every moment with

conversation, there was something beautiful in the stillness they were now sharing.

Rhett snuck a glance at Sadie as she wrote away in her notebook. She'd brought it along, and when Rhett asked if she thought he wouldn't be interesting enough to keep her entertained for the afternoon, she laughed him off saying she kept it at hand in case something came to mind.

As he gazed at her he couldn't help but appreciate the sight.

Her dark hair was tucked neatly in a prim bun, a bonnet shielding her skin from the sun's rays. She chewed thoughtfully on her lip as she paused between the words she wrote. Was she this pretty as a girl? Had he been blind, or just a boy with too much pride? Perhaps, it was the years since her departure from Autumn Springs that bestowed a mature beauty that only time can bring. It had only been a few years, yet her return had brought a change that made her both different and yet, the same. Or was it him who changed?

Rhett inwardly laughed at the jumble of his thoughts. His brothers had every right to laugh at him, if he ever spoke them out loud.

Sadie suddenly closed the book. "There. Done."

"What inspired you?" asked Rhett.

"I was thinking how much I love this meadow, and it reminded me of Woodward Garden in San Francisco." She gently laughed. "Actually, they are nothing alike, just two beautiful places."

"I've never heard of it," said Rhett.

"Unless you've been there, I wouldn't imagine many have," said Sadie. "I thought a column on the gardens would be nice. I only went once, but there were beautiful verdant lawns, waterfalls, swings and even a menagerie. My favorite were the peacocks wandering about and the conservatory filled with flowers and rare plants. Twenty-five cents to get you through the door."

"Peacocks, again?" Rhett smiled.

“They were noisy, but lovely.” She tilted her head to look at him. “May I ask you a question?”

“Have I ever been able to stop you?” he teased.

Sadie smiled. “What made you think of politics? You said you always wanted to be a lawyer. Why not hang up a shingle and stay away from the ugliness?”

Would she think him arrogant if he admitted that he always believed that he was destined for greater things? More than just Autumn Springs. That given the opportunity, he could do so much more for so many.

“I do still practice, I handle the needs of the Double H, but settling into a world of torts and wills, wasn’t very exciting, and I never felt like I was making a big difference. I wanted to have a greater impact. By doing this, I can advocate for changes that will better an entire territory. Maybe one day the entire country.”

“Ah, so you do have great aspirations for yourself.”

“I never said I didn’t. I would hope that everyone does,” said Rhett. “But yes, maybe one day. First, I have to get through this.”

Sadie gave him an encouraging smile. “You will. Just show them who you are, and they will support you.”

“Well, we shall soon see.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sadie.

“You were right. After seeing what happened at Butte, speaking with town leaders, and after further discussion with Judge Stephens, you’ll be happy to hear I’m not holding my tongue any longer on the subject of votes for women. I’ve already written my support into my next speech. People will finally get to hear exactly how I feel. On a number of issues.”

The admiration in her eyes shot warmth straight to his core. She didn’t even speak, those bright blue eyes, just blinking.

“Sadie Garvin speechless, who could have imagined?”

“Oh, Rhett!” Sadie moved in like she was about to embrace him, then stopped and squeezed his forearm. “That’s wonderful. I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear you say this. Truly.”

Rhett coughed quickly to hide how pleased he was by her praise. In that moment he wished that he could kiss her, savor the sweetness of her approval, and start what they’d waited too long for, but he couldn’t risk it. She was happy they weren’t on opposing sides, but she hadn’t said she wanted to be at his. Instead, he pulled his thoughts back in line.

“I’m glad,” he replied.

“Me too.” Sadie brushed at her skirts. “Rhett Hart, once again the champion of women.”

He scoffed. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Do you remember when we were children? By the mill?”

Rhett remembered that day like it was yesterday. He’d been walking with his best friend Nathan, Nora’s brother when he saw five of the boys from school following Sadie as she headed down to the stream that fed the sawmill. She’d inadvertently embarrassed one of them at school that day, and Rhett could tell the boys didn’t have forgiveness in their hearts as they followed her.

When he caught up to them, they were teasing her against a big cottonwood tree. He told them to leave her alone, but Dewey Phelps just stared him down while yanking on Sadie’s braids, until tears shone in her eyes. It’d taken all of three minutes for him and Nathan to bust those boys up and send them running. She’d gone to hug him afterward, but he’d pushed her away, and told her she should try shutting her mouth for once, and then left with Nathan.

“Not much of a champion, Sadie, I said some cruel things.”

Remorse filled him as he remembered. It was just like at the jail, and the hotel in Butte. He’d been so worried, and then frightened for her safety, but all that came out was anger, and he’d directed it at the wrong person.

He often prided himself on his self-control, he had a long fuse. Growing up with four brothers made it a necessity. If he let every slight lead him to anger, he'd still be chopping Double H firewood. But something deep, something primal in him, seemed to lead to a visceral reaction when he saw Sadie in danger. He hadn't exactly been kind to her himself, but to see her truly in danger had him losing all control. He hadn't understood it then, as a boy, but he understood it now, as a man.

"I did some foolish things too, Rhett, but I have never forgotten what you did for me then, and I will never forget what you did for me in Butte."

What if he hadn't? What if it was Sadie whose face was slashed by the angry mob. Would he be able to look at her the same way? It was so hard to imagine her soft skin looking like his, maybe that was why it was so hard to believe that she could look at him and not feel disgust. He wanted to believe it wouldn't matter for her or for him.

He pulled his gaze from hers.

"Why are you looking away?" asked Sadie, and she brought her fingers to the side of his face and gently turned it towards her. She let go. "Please look at me, Rhett."

He couldn't resist her plea, and he saw a sheen in her blue eyes.

She pushed away the eyepatch.

"Don't." He grabbed her wrist, but she held fast.

"No, you don't need to wear this with me."

Her fingers brushed lightly across the puckered skin, and Rhett flinched, swallowing hard at her gentle caress. "I don't want you to have to look at it," he whispered.

"Do you know what I see when I look at you?" she asked.

Rhett's chest tightened. He didn't speak but he didn't move away.

"When I look at you, I see the man who fearlessly leapt to my rescue without a second thought. The man who used his

body to shield mine. A man whose face reflects his heart. The heart of a man willing to give anything to protect me.”

His emotions clogged in his throat. Was she really saying what his heart hoped?

“I would do anything to keep you safe.”

“I know, and I wish you had never been hurt. But know this, Rhett, you’ve never been more beautiful to me than you are now.”

A rush of relief washed over him at her words, and the love he’d been hiding in his heart threatened to overwhelm him. He began to feel lighter as the tension he’d been holding in for weeks now began to ease.

He wanted to take her in his arms, tell her what he’d been feeling, and promise her the world, but he didn’t. This was just the beginning. He was going to court her the way she deserved, and he knew in his heart, he was going to make her his wife.

So, instead, he lifted her hand from his face and brought it to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to her fingertips.

Over the past several weeks, Sadie and Rhett found every excuse to spend time together. If he was gone for a few days, his first stop back in town was the mercantile, or the Western Echo Press. Mr. Langley teased her that he was getting more printing business from Rhett's campaign than he was selling papers. It wasn't true, but Rhett's determination to spend time with her was becoming a lighthearted jest between Sadie and her employer.

Emma and Nora were both pleased with the direction of her relationship with Rhett, but it was especially Emma who was the most vocal in her support. What didn't help was the town mamas knowing that another Hart bachelor might soon be off the market. Sadie did her best to ignore the few whispers that said she'd already had her chance at marriage, and since she was divorced, she and her blemished character should stop putting on airs.

She knew that she couldn't please everyone, but she didn't need to. More women were joining the Women's Suffrage Society in Autumns Springs, and she finally felt like she was making some headway.

Rumors that Rhett's campaign was pulling ahead of Denton Hughes had both Rhett and Sadie excited that real change was just around the corner.

In high spirits this morning, Sadie left the mercantile and made her way to the Western Echo Press. Her steps were light, and while she was heading to work, her thoughts were on

Rhett. He was coming into town today to pick up a new suit from Mr. James, and she knew he would find time to see her.

Strolling along the boardwalk, thinking how well Rhett's eye seemed to be healing, she nearly missed the fact that there were several posters affixed to the posts outside many of the Main Street businesses. Her curiosity piqued, she stopped to read one.

Any happiness she had been feeling this morning quickly turned to horror as her eyes skimmed across the page. She returned to the boldly printed headline.

Rhett Hart Affair with Divorced Harlot in Butte Hotel!

THE GROUND SEEMED to shift beneath her feet. She felt the blood rush to her face as her pulse quickened. Her heart was pounding wildly in her chest, and she reached out to steady herself against the sturdy wooden post the flyer was nailed to.

She closed her eyes, opened them, and read the words again, disbelief gripping her. Who would have done this? And why would they resort to such dirty tricks?

Looking to the bottom of the poster she found her answers. *For Morality's Sake—Vote for Denton Hughes.*

That vile man. Everything she knew about the man said he was no standard for morality at all. Knowing that Rhett's previous campaign manager Lewis Frye was now working for him, explained it all. The man despised her from the moment he laid eyes on her. Without ever having met her, he just couldn't bear what she stood for.

She tore the poster from its display. She wanted to tear them all down to scream in protest at the unfairness of it all, but it would be of no use. Surely, people had already seen them, and those that hadn't would hear of it soon enough.

Staring back down the boardwalk, then across the street, she saw several people cast curious glances her way, others were not so polite. The slanderous posters were not only an assault on her, but it was a harsh reminder that there were those who would stop at nothing to suppress change.

With crumpled paper in her hand, she continued to the newspaper, her mind racing, not knowing what to do. Did Rhett know?

Mr. Langley was waiting for her, standing outside the Western Echo Press office. The door behind him closed. Sadie felt her stomach turn when she saw the look on his face.

“I’m sorry, Sadie.” He was having a hard time meeting her eyes. “I don’t really have a choice. I can’t keep you on.”

Her chin trembled, and Sadie willed herself to stand tall, and hold back her tears. “You must know it’s not true, that—”

The older man interrupted, “Of course. Of course, I know. But that doesn’t make a difference. I wish I could be stronger for you, Sadie. You’re a nice person, a talented writer, but this business is all I have. I’ve already had two customers threatening to pull their advertising if I keep you here.”

“Already?” People weren’t wasting any time in denouncing her. The posters could not have been out for long.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Langley repeated.

She wanted to stomp her foot and demand that he stand with her against the unwarranted lies, but she knew that despite his fondness for her, he could not.

Her hopes for a fresh start in Autumn Springs were lost. If people were so quick to judge, to believe the absolute worst of her, no amount of resolve would allow her to rise above this denigration of her reputation.

She choked back her tears, as she lifted her chin and met Mr. Langley’s sad eyes. “I understand, sir. I realize that this is not your fault. Thank you for giving me the opportunity you did.”

She didn't wait to hear another apology, she walked over and placed the crumpled flyer in his hand, then turned around and walked away. What's done is done. She'd been through this before, and she knew that her denials would change nothing. Ignoring the stares, and the jeers from several men holding the posters in their hands, Sadie hurried back home.

Her poor parents, would their business be affected too? And Rhett, his hopes, and dreams for making a difference were being ruined because of his association with her.

Sadie stepped back into the mercantile and closed the door behind her. The friendly jingle of the bell a contrast to what she'd experienced outside.

Her mother stood in front of the counter, a mixture of empathy and anger etched on her face as she held one of the offending posters in her hand.

"You've seen them," stated Sadie flatly. Her mother nodded, and Sadie finally allowed her tears to fall.

As Dorothy Garvin comforted her only child, she shook her head. "This goes beyond cruel. Your father is already gone. He'll get to the bottom of this."

Sadie pulled away from her mother's arms and wiped at the tears on her cheeks. "I know who is responsible. But it doesn't matter. It's too late. People don't care about truth or facts. They've seen it, they'll talk about it, they won't forget it."

"But people know you. No one will believe these lies."

"No, Mama. They know you. I've been gone too long, and my return was under a cloud of disgrace. Then the arrest in Butte, the injury to Rhett's face."

"But he doesn't hold it against you. None of that was your fault," protested her mother.

"Don't you see, fault doesn't matter. It's perception." She took the flyer from her mother, and read it again, her lips tightly pressed together.

Sadie had been through this before. People believed what they wanted to believe, and while she might be able to weather this storm, it would mean that she would be putting the people she cared for in difficult positions.

Her mother took hold of Sadie's shoulders and looked her in the eye. "We are going to sort this out. Rhett will—"

"Rhett will be furious." She crumpled up the paper and threw it on the counter. "Once again, because of—"

Sadie stopped; her attention drawn to a commotion at the door.

"You miserable old thing, don't you have anything better to do? Why don't you try doing something nice for your neighbours instead of just talking about them. *Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.*" Emma called out, and then slammed the mercantile door behind her.

Scowling she faced Sadie and Dorothy. "I'm tempted to ask Weston to stop making sure her husband gets home safely after a night of drinking at Belle's Palace. Let's see how high and mighty she acts when she's dragging her husband out of the dirt every Saturday morning."

Shocked by Emma's entrance, Sadie and her mother just stared.

Emma's brow lifted in question. "What? Don't expect I won't fight fire with fire." She marched over and took Sadie's hands. "It's terrible and it's unfair. And we will burn every last one of those awful posters, and then—"

"Emma Hayes, did you just use a proverb to threaten that woman?" asked Dorothy, her voice disbelieving.

"I did," said Emma, defiantly. "That woman needs a reminder of what it says in the Good Book."

"Good heavens," murmured Sadie's mother.

Emma hugged Sadie. "I'll threaten every last one of them if I have to, Sadie. I know what you went through in San Francisco, I promise to stick by your side, no matter what."

Gratitude swelled in her at Emma's declaration. Sadie knew that Emma had high hopes for the time she and Rhett had been spending together, and the firebrand wasn't one to back down, to anyone.

"Thank you, Emma. I feel sick. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You'll see. Rhett will make sure that no one says a word. He won't allow this to go unchallenged."

Sadie's heart sank at Emma's words. They were meant to bolster, but it only filled Sadie with shame and guilt. At what point would Rhett tire of playing protector? At what point was she simply a liability that he could no longer accept?



RIDING INTO TOWN, Rhett guided his horse through the familiar streets. As he passed the well-kept building closer to the center of town, he realized how much had changed. The town's edges were gradually expanding, and there seemed to be no signs of it stopping anytime soon. The once unassuming town was experiencing rapid growth, and with the possibility of the railroad coming through, the opportunities appeared endless. Achieving statehood this year was also on the horizon, and the potential outcomes if that were to pass were truly unpredictable.

But at the forefront of his mind was Sadie. She had brought about a transformation in his life that he could never have foreseen, no matter what his family claimed.

Rhett was planning on inviting her for supper at the Double H when he saw her. Katie and Ben had something that they wanted to share with the entire family, and they insisted that Sadie be present. While Rhett was happy to invite her, it was becoming increasingly apparent that even if he had not spoken of his intentions for him and Sadie out loud, his family was already treating her as though she were a Hart.

The streets of Autumn Springs were busy, and the folks seemed unusually preoccupied. Many didn't even notice his

greetings as he made his way to James Heritage Haberdashery to pick up his new suit. Perhaps they were simply affording him some privacy, knowing he'd been busy on the campaign trail. It made him appreciate his hometown even more.

Slipping from his mount, he secured the reins to the hitching post outside the store. Giving the horse's muscular neck a quick pat, he strode into the menswear store, a spring in his step and a smile on his face. He was looking forward to seeing Sadie later in the day, and very little could dampen his mood.

"Good afternoon, Ron. The new suit ready?" Rhett asked.

Mr. James nodded, but kept his gaze fixed on a paper in his hand. "Yes, it's ready, Rhett." He paused. "But there's something I need to show you."

His voice was grave, which was unusual for the cheery business owner.

"What's wrong?" Rhett's brows furrowed.

With a heavy sigh, Mr. James extended the poster toward Rhett. "It's not me with the problem, it's you."

Rhett scanned the poster and the color drained from his face. He couldn't believe what he was reading.

"Where? Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Early this morning. It was on the post outside." Mr. James lowered his voice. "Not just the one. They were everywhere."

"Were?"

His stomach turned. How many people had seen them?

"Your sister. I saw her and Ned Garvin ripping them down, but people were already talking. Not in a good way, Rhett. I'm sorry."

Staring back at the paper, he saw Denton's name at the bottom of it. Dirty politics was his preferred method, and with Lewis Frye holding a grudge, these kinds of filthy tricks were right up his alley. But why bring Sadie into it? After Butte, did he even need to ask the question?

Rhett clenched his jaw, his anger boiling to the surface. “That conniving snake,” he muttered to himself. If he ever got his hands on Lewis Frye, the man would regret ever having met him.

Ron James cleared his throat, catching Rhett’s attention. “What are you going to do?”

It was a good question. First, he needed to find Sadie.

“I’m not sure yet, but these lies, the horrible picture it paints of Sadie, I can’t. I can’t allow people to think this about her. I don’t care about me; I’m concerned about Sadie.”

Ron stepped closer to him. “I know I’ve only known you a year or so, but may I suggest a solution?”

Rhett frowned. What possible solution was there to this mess? His campaign was compromised, and Sadie’s reputation was in question. What was he going to do, go after Hughes and Frye for defamation of character. He and Sadie had been alone in the hotel in Butte, there was no way to prove the innocence of it.

“You actually think there is one? I don’t think there is an easy way out of this,” said Rhett.

Any hopes Rhett had been harboring for a future between him and Sadie were destroyed. He knew what she’d been through in San Francisco, and because of him, she was going through it again.

“I guess that depends how you feel.”

“How I feel?” asked Rhett. How he felt didn’t matter. It was Sadie who would bear the brunt of this scandal. She must be devastated.

“About her, about Sadie. I’m making some assumptions here, but I know that my Patty speaks highly of the young lady. She comes from good folks. And you two seem to get along. I don’t think I’m wrong when I say that spring in your step when you walked in here was less about a new suit, and more about a gal.”

What was the man going on about? Rhett already knew how wonderful Sadie was. He knew that it was because of her that these past few weeks had been the happiest in his life. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying marry her. Nobody would dare say a word if she were your wife. You and your family have way too much pull in this town.”

Marry her? Rhett closed his eyes and tried to picture his future. In every version, Sadie was there.

“Do you love her?” Ron gave him a smile that said he already knew the answer.

So did he.

“I do.”

“Then marry her. It won’t hurt you politically either. People like to see their politicians married with families. In time this gossip will be replaced by something new, and you’ll have made the best decision a man can make. It was when I married my Patty.”

Ron was right. He’d only been holding off asking her, because he thought she still needed time after her marriage to Gatwick. In the weeks he’d been courting her, his brothers were relentless in their encouragement to make Sadie his wife. He just wanted to be sure she was ready.

But this changed everything. There was no reason to wait, and every reason not to. He would do whatever was necessary to silence the wagging tongues and protect Sadie.

Rhett emerged from the haberdashery, the weight of the defamatory poster and his new mission on his mind. As he stepped onto the wooden boardwalk, people walking by looked away, not meeting his eyes, some whispered behind their hands. They didn’t matter, only one thing did: Sadie. He glanced around, scanning the streets for any sign of her.

His thoughts on the woman he loved, he headed to the Western Echo Press. When he got there the doors were closed to business and Langley didn’t answer to Rhett’s pounding on the door. His actions were only garnering more attention from

people on the street and seeing the many looks of disapproval and curious stares, he felt a sense of urgency as he hurried to the Garvin Mercantile.

He knew she might need convincing. She would be angry at the situation, but once she understood it was the best solution for them both, she would say yes.

She had to.

Sitting in the parlor, Sadie's eyes were drawn to the painting of the two doves. Their story was one of sacrifice and love, but not all stories had a happy ending; she was proof of that. After Emma left, her mother tried to comfort her, but Sadie knew that this wasn't as simple as ignoring the judgements of others. She was exhausted, and since being sacked by Mr. Langley she hadn't even left the house.

She was hiding, again.

She closed her eyes hoping to block out reality when she heard her father clearing his throat. She opened her eyes.

"There's someone here to see you, sweetheart." The strain was still in her father's voice, and she hated to know it was her who caused it.

"I don't want to see anyone," she said. "Not now...please tell them no."

Her father stepped away, and then Rhettt took his place in the doorway. His hat in hand, a thick lock of his hair falling forward over his forehead, touching the edge of his eyepatch. He truly had gone from beautiful to ruggedly virile. Even with all that was happening he could still take her breath away.

"Rhettt!" Sadie stood, facing the man she knew she had always loved.

"I came as soon as I heard. I wasn't in town earlier. I didn't know." He crossed the room, then stopped before her. "I never

thought Frye, even Hughes would do something like this. I should have expected something, I'm sorry."

"No, if I hadn't been in Butte none of this would have happened. I put myself in this situation."

Rhett shook his head slightly. "None of this is your fault."

Sadie sat back down in the chair and smoothed her skirts. "It doesn't matter. It can't be undone." She looked back up at Rhett. "Mr. Langley fired me."

"What?" Rhett frowned. "He's not one to believe such gossip. He knows you."

"He knows it's not true, but he has a business to run. He wasn't being cruel. I can't really blame him."

Rhett crossed his arms. "I can."

"They always tell journalist and writers that they need to tell the story, not be it. I'm—we're too big a story, Rhett. I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. This doesn't have to change anything."

"What are you talking about? It changes everything!" cried Sadie. "I can't even walk down the street. The same men that barged into our meeting at the hotel are now emboldened to say the most wicked things. Mrs. Dixon couldn't bear to be in my presence when I was only divorced, imagine now! How do you think my parents will be treated? Your sister is out there threatening people on the street on my behalf. How is any of that okay? And you! Your campaign."

"Emma threatens everyone, and I don't care what people say. We can fix this."

How could he be so calm when the world was falling to pieces around her? "How? How do we fix this, Rhett?"

Rhett fell to one knee before her. "Marry me."

His words hung in the air between them.

Sadie knew that she loved him, she always had, but this connection between them still felt so fragile, like the delicate

blooms in the early spring in her mother's paintings. In time it would grow, but it was too soon, and not like this.

"Rhett, I—" An unspoken yes, stopped at her lips, this wasn't how things were supposed to go.

Why? Why was he using a marriage between them as a solution? She hoped their love would naturally lead them to this moment, where it would be a choice Rhett made born from his desire, not a hasty resolution to a problem.

"Rhett, we can't marry because of this. It won't do what you think it will." Sadie needed him to grasp the true gravity of the situation. "Marriage to me will only bring you more problems like this."

"That isn't true," he protested, his voice earnest as he reached for her hand. "I love you, Sadie, I want you to be my wife."

"I want to be with you, but it's not so simple," her heart ached as she said the words. "But I can't change who I am, what I believe in." Did he think her selfish? "If we marry, they'll target you, you know they will. That awful poster is just a taste of what they might do." She withdrew her hand from his. "If you want this to be behind you, you need to find a well-behaved woman to stand behind you and forget what is between us."

"No!" Rhett rose from his knee, crossed the room to the mantle, pivoting to face her.

"I do not want a well-behaved woman," he grimaced. "I want a woman who is passionate about the things she loves. A woman who isn't afraid of standing up for what is right. I want a woman who holds out hope for the possibilities not only for herself but for an entire nation. I don't want a woman that stands behind me, I want one willing to stand beside me. I want a partner, to share in my dreams and to share in theirs. I want you."

Sadie stood, and for the first time since she'd seen the flyers posted around town, she gave a little smile. "You want a lot, Rhett Hart."

“I do. But you have reminded me that some things are worth fighting for,” he smiled back.

“You’re painting me in a pretty light, Rhett, but I’m not perfect. I’m worried that you will change your mind about what it is you want, when I don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Change...when the title of wife is placed on me. It’s happened before.”

Rhett frowned, “I’m not Gatwick. A real man—a real husband—isn’t cowed or angered by the strength of the woman at his side. He is empowered by it.”

Everything in her was telling her to throw herself into his arms, accepting his words for truth, accepting his proposal. But she didn’t move.

“Your words are what every woman longs to hear, but I’m afraid. I’m afraid that in time, as your ambition grows and you set your sights on a higher office, I will be no boon to you. I will become a burden, a millstone around your neck, and what we feel now will fade away as resentment grows. You’re a good, decent man. You have the strength of character this territory needs to lead it into the future, and I cannot be the one to stand in the way of that. Some things are more important than the feelings and desire of one person.”

Rhett shook his head. “No, you don’t get to make that decision for me.”

“But I get to make that choice for me.” A heaviness sat in her chest, and she stared down at her empty hands before looking back up at Rhett. “Oh, Rhett, I didn’t need someone to be the perfect match to my soul, I didn’t even believe that such a thing existed outside of my parents love for one another.”

“I believe,” said Rhett. “I believe that is exactly what love is.”

She gave him a sad smile. “Coming back from San Francisco, I wasn’t thinking about love. If I was to even consider it again, I thought all I needed was a companion in this life who would respect me. Treat me as no more, but no

less. An equal. But I don't think my heart had ever forgotten you over the years."

Sadie took a deep breath and kept talking, she had to get it all out now, before her resistance weakened. "I know what you are trying to offer me, Rhett. And I...I love you for that. But it's because I love you that I must say no."

"No," he said it softly, then louder. "No. You don't have to do this. You can say yes to us."

She stepped closer to him. "I have to, because if I don't, 'us' will destroy you."

Backing away from her, he shook his head. "No, I don't care what people say. I don't care what they think."

"Some politician you are," smiled Sadie.

"Don't. Don't make jests, Sadie. Not now."

Sadie raised a brow. "What? Are you going to remove yourself from the political ring. Spend your time reviewing contracts for the Double H? Helping the locals with property issues and land disputes. Now you'd suddenly be content to set up practice in Autumn Springs?"

"If I had to. If it meant I had you."

"You wouldn't. You know you wouldn't. And if you don't know it, I do." Sadie sighed. "We might have a year or two, maybe a few more if we were really lucky, but at some point your true calling would once again come knocking."

"We could try," replied Rhett. "I thought you were a fighter. I'm willing, can't you fight for us too?"

"No," replied Sadie, and she watched Rhett's shoulders sag in defeat.

LIAR, her heart screamed at her. *Tell him you'll do whatever it takes!*

Sadie pushed down the desire. It didn't matter that she wanted to try; for once in her life, she needed to let go. She had to put aside her own selfish desires.

It was time for her to do the right thing.

She walked over to him and lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. She could smell him, that familiar mix of linen and spice, and she closed her eyes to take it in before she spoke one last time.

“Sadie,” his voice soft and pleading.

Opening her eyes, she lifted her hand and placed it against his cheek, her thumb brushing against the scar coming from beneath his eyepatch. “No, Rhett. Perhaps in another time or place I could have happily said yes and spent the rest of my life loving you.” Letting the tears she been holding in fall freely, she pushed up to the tips of her toes and gently kissed his cheek.

“This just isn’t our time.”

Taking one last look, she left the parlor and the man she would always love.

“Lila! Could you please run these over to Mr. Paxton at the Renshaw Opera House on Park Street? He’s the manager there. Mr. Renshaw has agreed to display a stack of our pamphlets there today.”

“Yes, Ms. Garvin.”

Sadie smiled as she watched the young woman scurry off with her package. It was a wonderful sight. Such a far cry from the timid creature she’d met only a month ago. Lila had attended a meeting of suffragettes in Butte, but her father had discovered her there and nearly taken her life. It wasn’t the first time the man had taken his anger out on his daughter, but it had been the last. It was that night that the plan Sadie had been brewing was put into motion.

When she left Autumn Springs, she had used the money that Charles had paid her to grant him a quick divorce and leave San Francisco quietly, to rent a modest four-bedroom house off Washington and Porphyry Street near the St. James Home and Sisters Hospital.

Its clapboard exterior bore the weathered imprint of the mining town, but it had a welcoming front porch, and enough rooms for what she had in mind. She was lucky to have family and some money to fall back on after her divorce, but many women were not. She’d decided to open her home to those in need of a fresh start, offering a hand up in rebuilding their lives. Lila was the first, and it was working out splendidly. Sadie hoped that in time she would be able to help others too.

Squaring the last of the papers away on her desk, she took a deep breath. There was so much satisfaction in the work that she was doing. Mrs. Clark's offer of a position with the WCTU, and her work with an exclusively suffrage focused newspaper, had helped her transition into her new life.

Keeping herself busy was important, and over the past two months she started to believe that perhaps helping these women was her true calling. Not everyone followed the path to marriage and children.

There were moments that she felt a twinge of longing: watching happy couples or seeing a cherubic baby pass by with its mother along the streets. But those times were balanced by knowing the impact that her words and actions were having for the women she was helping. Almost.

From her vantage point in the office on Broadway she could see a flow of people heading down past the school and towards the opera house. Within the hour there were to be speeches from several of the territorial delegates from the Constitutional Convention that was called by the Thirteenth Territorial Legislature. There had been great disappointment when the Territory of Montana did not obtain statehood, and everyone was interested in what the delegates had to say.

But it was one speaker, in particular, that Sadie wanted to see. Rhett Hart.

She hadn't spoken to him since she had turned down his proposal in her parent's parlor. In the days that followed, Sadie packed her things, and left for Butte. Emma and Nora's protests fell on deaf ears. Sadie didn't have it in her to fight the rising tide of judgments that came her way each time she went out. She didn't want to.

Her mother had written to her letting her know that the day she left Rhett came by the mercantile determined to speak to her. Sadie's tears stained the pages of her mother's letter, but those were the last tears that she allowed to fall.

Sadie never cried over Rhett again, but their last conversation haunted her dreams.

Following his progress, Sadie was relieved and thrilled when he won his seat. He ended up trouncing Denton Hughes, a victory made easier when both the politician and his campaign manager were arrested after their criminal activities in Helena were exposed. Sadie felt no guilt in taking deep satisfaction at the downfall of the awful men.

True to his word, Rhett made his opinions clear, and his voice rang out loud in support of votes for woman. He lost some votes for his beliefs, but an overwhelming number cast their ballots in favor of his forward thinking. He was going to do great things for this country.

When Mrs. Clark asked if she would be comfortable covering the speeches for the paper, Sadie readily agreed. Since Mrs. Clark was aware of their shared history, and the reasons she'd left Autumn Springs, Sadie was almost surprised that she had asked. Still, she was grateful the older woman had.

Sadie wanted to see him. She needed to.

There wasn't a day that went by that Rhett didn't edge into her thoughts. His name was on everyone's lips. The results of the election and aftermath of the convention a frequent topic of conversation everywhere she went. She needed to see him one last time, see his success, and stop questioning if she had made the right decision.

Then, just maybe, her heart would find the strength to let him go.

Sadie tidied the office before she locked up, then briefly stopped home to change her dress. She'd been about to leave the house when there was a knock on the door. Opening it, Sadie discovered a lovely young blonde woman seeking her help.

After sorting through the tears and sobs, Sadie learned that the woman was refusing to marry a man her family arranged for her. He was rough, cruel, and far older, and when she objected to the union, her parents had turned her out. Earlier in the week the young lady attended a suffrage meeting where Sadie had spoken. She had heard from some other women

what Sadie had done for Lila and was hoping that Sadie might be able to help her too.

She was desperate and she needed guidance and Sadie couldn't turn her away. She welcomed the woman into her home and promised that she would have a place to stay.

Their discussion took much longer than anticipated, delaying Sadie's arrival at the opera house by nearly an hour.

The opera house was alive with the hum of the crowd, several newspaper men weaved throughout the assembly, jotting down notes from the previous speakers and speaking with people in the crowd.

Sadie passed by the stack of pamphlets that Lila dropped off and reminded herself to thank Mr. Renshaw again for his support.

Brushing the November snow from her cape, she hurried to find a seat and hear the remaining speeches. None were available, so she stood near the back worried she had already missed her chance to hear Rhett speak.

"Any final questions for our speaker?" The well-groomed moderator, dressed in a russet brown frock coat, gestured to Rhett at his left on the stage.

Standing confidently on the stage before the gathered crowd, he waited for another question. Even from this distance, he exuded an undeniable magnetism, and she felt her heart flutter. So much for putting her feelings to rest.

He wore a well-fitted, dark gray suit, the white cotton shirt beneath accentuated the sun-kissed tan of his skin. Even in winter, he looked the picture of health. He was no longer wearing his eyepatch, and the scars so visible months ago were almost indistinguishable from this distance.

As he answered a front-row question, Sadie marveled at how he still possessed the power to command a room and hold everyone's attention. Given the conversation in front of her it was apparent she wasn't the only one being pulled in.

"Good heavens, he is a handsome devil, isn't he?"

“Oh, yes, hard to even concentrate on what he’s saying. That scar makes him look dangerous in the most delicious way.”

The two women laughed, and Sadie felt a flash of irritation at the disrespectful talk. She cleared her throat to interrupt the ladies from further natter.

She strained to hear the question.

“You and Judge Stephens failed at your efforts to get women the vote. Are you going to let the issue die, seeing how little support you got?”

Sadie held her breath. It was a question she planned on asking as well.

“I wouldn’t phrase it quite that way, but in answer to your question, no.” He paused, then began again, his voice steady and filled with conviction as he addressed the entire house. “We stand here today, disappointed by the results at the convention, but our spirit is undaunted, as yours should be. The fight for suffrage, much like our fight for statehood goes on. We—I believe in the power of democracy, and the inherent right of every citizen to have a say in the matters that affect their lives.”

Another reporter’s question cut through the murmurs and clapping of the crowd. “Mr. Hart, if you were married, would you allow your wife to vote?”

Rhett let out a short laugh, and he smiled. “As you know, I’m not. But I assure you, if I were, I doubt that woman would ever feel they needed to ask my permission, sir.”

Laughter rippled at the playful response, and Sadie added her hands to the clapping around her.

Another reporter, emboldened by the light-hearted moment, pressed further. “Then why aren’t you married, Mr. Hart? Do you want to get married? What are you waiting for?”

Rhett’s grin softened, and he looked off to the side before he returned his gaze to the waiting reporter. “The right woman.”

As Rhett's response hung in the air, Sadie felt a tingle course through her body, her heart began to pound in her chest. Was he talking about her? Did he still hold out hope? Like her, had he been tormented by thoughts of what could have been?

It was impossible to ignore the murmurs of approval from the audience. The shared smiles, the subtle nods of agreement, all pointed to a level of support she hadn't anticipated. In that moment it struck her to her core, that she had made a monumental mistake.

The woman in front of her whispered to her friend. "What I wouldn't give to be the that right woman."

Ignoring the offensive woman, Sadie started to question herself. She had tried so hard to put him behind her; but why? If he was refusing to give up on the possibility of what could be, couldn't she?

Hope ignited in her chest.



RHETT STOOD at the center of the ornate opera house stage, his gaze piercing the dimly lit crowd. The old chandeliers above cast an amber glow, and with no window in the room it was making it hard to see any individual faces before him.

He didn't know why he said it. *Right woman*. He already knew which woman that was.

Sadie.

Sadie was the one he had been waiting for, hoping that time and circumstance would lead them back to each other. He thought he was supposed to be patient, give her time, but he was tired of waiting.

When he arrived in Butte, he knew that he was going to seek her out. And this time he wasn't going to take no for an answer. She thought she was helping him by walking away, but how did it help when she had left with his heart?

He was pleased with the response to his speech, and that of Judge Stephens. The idea of proposing that women vote in matters of school and tax, seemed to have plenty of support. It was a stepping stone to their greater goal. But with the speeches concluded, he only wanted to get out of here. He wanted to find Sadie.

He was about to step back from the crowd when Mr. Leiberman stopped him. "I think there is a question from the back." Leiberman called out. "Yes, you, go ahead."

Rhett squinted, but all he could see was a raised hand.

"Mr. Hart, do you believe that people can change? That they can realize the folly of their previous beliefs and change their minds."

"Please move forward, ma'am. It's difficult to hear you," said Mr. Leiberman.

Rhett froze. That voice! He moved closer to the front of the stage, cursing the lack of light. Heart hammering in his chest, he watched as Sadie pushed her way through the throngs of people to the front.

"Your name and publication, ma'am?"

"Sadie Garvin, I'm with The Woman Citizen."

Whispers ran through the crowd.

"Can you please ask again, Ms. Garvin?" asked Mr. Leiberman.

Looking up, Sadie gave him a smile. She had never looked more beautiful.

"I was asking if Mr. Hart thought views could change?"

Rhett raised his brow and gently bit his lip and let out a little smile. "I like to hope that if given time, yes. Like many of the excellent ideas that were put forth at the convention, even the most heartfelt of proposals can be met with resistance."

"I'm sure that people don't always realize at the time how foolish they are being. For those that denied your proposals

would there be any circumstance where you might consider—working with them again?” she asked.

It was impossible to hold back his smile. “I like to believe that when I know something is meant to be, that something is right, that I would never give up...on anyone.” He saw the sheen in her blue eyes as she stared up at him. “I’m hoping that these proposals start to sound much better after people have time to reflect.”

The atmosphere in the room grew warmer, and the hum of conversation stopped, the opera house hushed around them. Rhett didn’t care, it was as though he and Sadie were the only people in the room.

Rhett held her gaze.

“Sometimes it’s hard for people to see the right path when they’re so used to the old one. But I have faith that with time, they’ll come to understand the importance of these changes.” Her voice grew soft, and he knew she had never been more vulnerable with him. “They just needed a push in the right direction.”

He moved to the edge of the stage. “You’re absolutely right. Ms. Garvin. I believe that changing that view is a cause worth fighting for.”

Rhett jumped down from the stage and stood before Sadie. Searching past her for the face of the journalist who’d asked an earlier question, Rhett found him and said, “You! Ask me that question again.”

Eyes wide the man looked at Rhett and Sadie, then nodded and smiled.

“Mr. Hart. Do you want to get married? What are you waiting for?”

Staring down at Sadie, Rhett allowed the love in his soul to touch hers, to bridge the gap that had separated them for far too long.

“I’m just waiting on a yes.” He lifted Sadie’s hand to his lips and brushed them across her fingers.

The room around them was silent, as if it were collectively holding its breath, like him, waiting for her response.

A tear fell down Sadie's cheek as she met his gaze and answered. "Yes."

EPILOGUE

The aroma of the freshly cut pine in the corner filled the air with its woody scent. Around the tree, presents were neatly wrapped and back to being stacked after Tilly and Andy encouraged little Mabel to shake and smell each one.

The wreaths of fragrant balsam and holly that hung proudly on the carved front doors matched the green garlands that wound around the stairs leading from the great room, and from the windows Sadie could see the warm glow the lanterns were casting over the snowy landscape. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and knit stockings lay off to the side, waiting to be filled with surprises by morning.

Sadie let out a deep contented sigh allowing the warmth from the logs to seep into her bones. She was so glad she and Rhett were able to make it back in time for Christmas.

They married immediately after Rhett proposed, forgoing any festivities, happy just to commit to each other in faith and love. There had been some disappointment from her parents and Rhett's siblings on missing the nuptials, but everyone understood. Still, it felt wonderful to walk through the doors of the big house as Mrs. Rhett Hart.

"We are so glad you were able to make it back for Christmas," said Katie, rubbing at the rounded belly beneath her dress. "It's so good to have everyone all together."

Sadie gave her sister-in-law an affectionate smile. Katie was positively glowing with her pregnancy, and Ben had an equal shine. It warmed her heart to see how happy they were.

With the exception of Luke, the men were over by the tree discussing rumors of a harsh winter ahead, and plans for calving season, so Sadie and Katie had extracted themselves and sat down.

“We almost didn’t,” admitted, Sadie. “We now have four women living at the house. Since Rhett and I are about to move into our new home, we had an extra room at my old place. It was filled three days ago, by a lovely woman. Married twenty years, and suddenly her husband tossed her out. No explanation, but it seems she has already been replaced.”

“Twenty years?” gasped Katie. “That’s terrible, I can’t imagine.”

“From the sounds of it, it was twenty awful years,” said Sadie. “But she’s a determined suffragette and has already taken on a mother role for the other three ladies in just these few short days. She’s a real survivor.”

“And,” Sadie added, “they have lovely, peaceful Christmas planned for themselves.”

Madeline came and sat down, joining them on the long settee. “I think what you are doing is wonderful, Sadie.”

“There is a tremendous need, but as Rhett reminds me, we are doing what we can. I am working on being content with that.” She lifted her chin in Rhett’s direction. He noticed and shot her an affectionate smile. “Rhett has been incredibly supportive.”

He had been consistently supportive of her endeavours and including her in his. When Rhett spoke of wanting a true partner, it was evident in his actions, not just in helping her, but also in how he frequently sought her counsel after exhausting days at his office. Their relationship was characterized by a shared commitment to each other’s worlds; he welcomed her into his realm, and she appreciated his involvement in her own pursuits.

“You are both so inspiring,” said Madeline. “We know there are great things in your futures.”

“I’ll confess that Rhett and I have big plans. We are currently working on getting more support for voting in school board elections. If we can achieve that first, hopefully that will carry over when the next state constitutional convention is held in 1889, then we can push for full voting rights. We want to be ready when statehood comes.”

“Speaking of schools,” said Emma, as she and Nora joined the three ladies to sit on the chairs opposite the settee. “We now have enough funds to build a solid school, all we need is a teacher.”

“We need to build it first. I don’t imagine that will be done until spring,” said Madeline. “Although, if I had any choice, it would be sooner.”

The women joined in laughter. The results of Madeline’s efforts were obvious with young Tilly, but a Hart was a Hart, and they weren’t always good with being told what to do.

“Are the children excited?” asked Emma.

“Andrew is,” replied Madeline. “But I’ve noticed Tilly has added the request that winter last all year to her evening prayers.”

“She sounds like Luke,” said Emma. “He always hated school. I swear when the old schoolhouse burned down, for weeks, I secretly thought Luke had done it.”

“Emma.” Nora’s voice held a note of censure. “He had every reason to hate school, Mr. McGowan was horrible to him, and Miss Phillips was no better.”

“You’re right, I was only teasing, but I shouldn’t make light of it. I know better.” agreed Emma. “However, it’s actually a good reminder that we find someone who actually likes children this time.”

The rest of the women murmured agreement.

The five women carried on exchanging stories and laughter and savoring the simple joy of being together at such a special time.

Sadie noticed that Nora seemed distracted, and she wondered if everything was okay. She was more quiet than usual, and she kept looking over at Micah across the room. Sadie hoped that things were all right at home for her. Micah seemed as attentive to Nora as usual, perhaps even more so.

“Are you feeling well, Nora? I know you and Micah have been so busy lately. It must be hard to find some quiet time,” said Sadie.

“I doubt you’ll find much quiet to be had around here for the next few days,” laughed Emma.

Nora laughed softly at Emma’s words. “That’s certainly true.” She offered a shy smile to Sadie. “Actually, everything is more than all right. There’s something I was hoping to share, I just wasn’t sure of the timing.”

Nora paused, and the women leaned in, curiosity piqued. Sadie felt a quiver of excitement in her belly.

Emma grabbed her best friend’s hand. “Don’t keep us in suspense. You’ve got our full attention.”

Sadie watched as Nora’s smile widened, and she looked around the tight group of sisters. “Micah and I have received a precious gift; one we were starting to think wasn’t possible.”

Emma started to cry, “Are you saying?”

“Yes, yes, I’m expecting. Sometime next summer, July I think.”

Gasps of delight and cries of happiness erupted from the women. Sadie didn’t think she could be filled with any more joy.

The men stopped their conversation and stared at the sight of the jubilant ladies, and Micah started to chuckle. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

He told his brothers the news and received a round of hearty slaps and vigorous handshakes, as he mouthed the words, *I love you* to his wife.

Nora’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears of happiness, as she accepted the heartfelt congratulations from everyone.

Boots clattered on the flagstones coming from the kitchen. “What did I miss?” asked Luke as he entered the room, bun in his hand. “I thought the party was out at the bunkhouse, but maybe I was wrong. What’s going on?”

Micah stepped forward and took the bun from his twin. “I’m going to need that. I’m eating for two now.”

Luke scowled at the theft, but then quickly realized what Micah was saying. “What?” He looked over to Nora, as though she were the only one he trusted for the truth in this room. “Really?”

Still beaming, Nora nodded.

“Hot dog!” yelled Luke, and he gave his brother a hug, and took back the bun. “You don’t need this; you need to be in shape to run after a little one.”

As the room erupted into laughter, Sadie hugged Nora, then left the ladies and made her way over to Rhett’s side.

“Pretty wonderful news,” she remarked, her smile mirroring the happiness she felt inside.

Rhett responded with a half-smile, his warm gaze never leaving her. “It is. Are you still certain about our decision?”

Sadie nodded gently and let out a satisfied breath. “I am. I think that we have so much we want to accomplish together, it wouldn’t be fair to have children, not yet,” said Sadie.

In the early weeks of their marriage, they had discussed and agreed to delay starting a family, if they ever did. While Rhett left the final decision in her hands, Sadie knew that they both carried a deep sense of responsibility to advocate for change, and that would demand all their attention. The idea of bringing children into their lives without being able to devote themselves entirely to them seemed unfair.

“I’m really excited to be an aunt though,” she added.

Rhett leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “It’s great news.”

As he was giving her a look that told her he would be kissing her far more thoroughly when his family wasn’t

around, Tilly shouted out, her voice catching everyone's attention. "We forgot to put the star on the tree!"

"That's right," said Rhett, and he left her side to make his way to the well-worn wooden chest nestled against in the corner near the fireplace. As he knelt beside it and undid the worn leather straps securing it, he shared the history of the family star.

"This star," he began, his voice filled with nostalgia, "was made by our father, Logan Hart. It was the first year they had Christmas in their new home here at the Double H. They didn't have as much as we do now, but Pa decided that his wife needed something beautiful to top her tree. They couldn't afford those fancy store-bought ones, but he never missed a chance to make her smile. So, he made this one for her."

The room fell silent as Rhett carefully pulled out the star. The wooden star was intricately carved with delicate patterns. Its excellent condition spoke of how cherished it'd been through the years, although the wood had taken on a rich patina, and its once sharp edges had softened over time.

"It represents not only the Star of Bethlehem, but it's also a reminder of what is here in this house. Beneath this star is not just a tree, but the place where we find faith and family, a sanctuary you'll forever find as your home. No matter how far you roam, you will always have a place here."

Wiping away a tear, Sadie's heart swelled with an overwhelming rush of love as she gazed at Rhett. His ability to infuse simple moments with such deep significance, showed her once again, that she was right to believe he was going to change the world.

Rhett walked over and placed the star in Luke's hand. Sadie watched as Luke swallowed and brushed his fingers over the designs before he smiled back at his brother.

"Put it up! Put it up" chanted Tilly.

Laughing, Luke scooped up the excited girl, and hoisted her onto his shoulders, making her giggle. "Get it up there, girl."

Balancing precariously, Tilly finally managed to affix the star to a round of applause.

Luke dropped her back to her feet, and Tilly looked up at him. “Thank you, Uncle Luke! Andy got to pick out the tree, I was hoping I’d get to do the star.”

Sadie was reminded of her own excitement as a child around Christmas time. “You know, Tilly, with school starting next year, you might be lucky enough to put on a Christmas play. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Knowing how nervous Tilly was, she’d been hoping to help build some enthusiasm in the reluctant girl. “I bet your new teacher would even let little Mabel join in.”

Tilly’s eyes lit up at the idea of a performance. “Ooh, that does sound fun.” Then she paused, looking thoughtful. “Did you have a nice teacher? Uncle Luke says that teachers like to write with quills dipped in the tears of their students. Is that true?”

“Luke!” A chorus of reprimands from his family were thrown at the unmanageable Luke. No wonder the poor girl was scared to go to school if her uncle had been planting such nonsense in her ears.

“Don’t listen to him, Tilly. There are some wonderful teachers out there. I’m sure yours will be too,” said Sadie.

“I hope it’s a lady, and that she’s real pretty, and that she smells nice, and that she likes books,” announced Tilly, then she took a breath. “And that she likes me.”

“She’ll love you,” said Sadie.

Luke walked over and tapped Tilly on the nose. “I admire your optimism, squirt. But take it from me, all teachers smell like moldy old books, and have pinched up faces like this.” He made a funny face causing Tilly to laugh.

“That’s enough, now,” said Gideon, stepping in and giving his brother a stern look. “You ever thought about just saying nothing, at least once in a while?”

“Nope,” grinned Luke. “I’m just sayin’ that I have never met a teacher who wasn’t ugly as sin, or as mean as a rattlesnake, so I don’t see how this one is going to be any different.” Then he shrugged. “Not that it makes no never mind to me. My days of putting up with teachers are long over. There’s nothing, and no one that’s going to get me to set foot in a school again.”

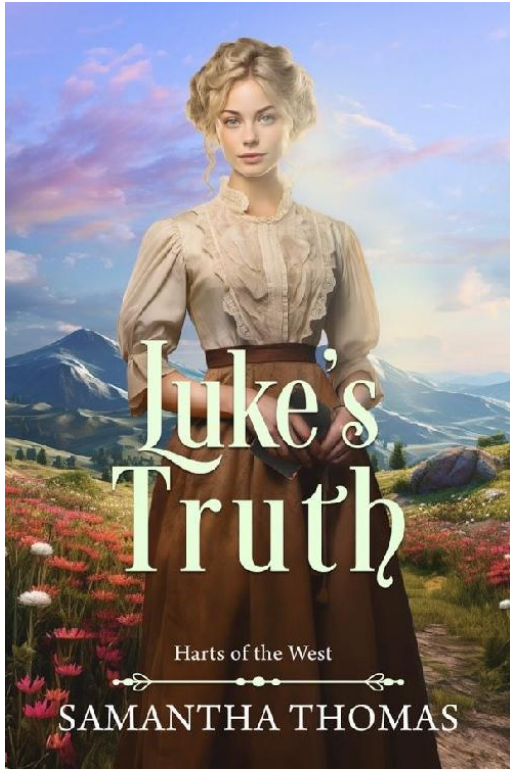
“You know, Luke, Nora and I will be on the committee that decides who to hire, so you might want to be careful with those big words of yours. Sometimes things happen when you least expect them. One look around this room is proof of that. You just might find yourself changing your tune.”

“You’re in trouble now, brother,” laughed Micah

The rest of the Hart brothers started to laugh. Sadie had a feeling it more in relief that that Emma could not longer set her meddling sights on them.

Luke shook his head at his sister and scoffed. “Don’t bother playing your matchmaking games with me, Emma. You can go ahead and hire the prettiest gal this side of the Rockies, I don’t care. Because if you think I’d ever fall for some teacher, you’ve got another think coming.”

WILL LUKE’S stubborn nature and the secret he’s keeping prevent him from finding happiness with Autumn Springs’ new schoolteacher? Grab your copy of [Luke’s Truth](#) to find out!



Luke's Truth

Harts of the West

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SAMANTHA THOMAS