

Prologue

May 1889

San Francisco, California

The evening performance of the musical comedy had been a roaring success. After weeks of preparation and a dreadful dress rehearsal, Mary felt nothing short of triumphant as she awkwardly ascended the stairs to her second-floor dressing room. Her outlandish costume hindered her efforts, the voluminous hoop skirt consuming the width of the stairwell. As she managed the final step, she was deluged with passing accolades from fellow performers and backstage crew darting about, filled with the same excitement of opening night that would keep them awake for hours into the night.

“Smashing show, Miss McKissick!”

“You were simply wonderful, Mary.”

“Are you going to celebrate with us at Chadwick's?”

“Of course!” Mary answered the faceless voice on the other side of the ebb and flow of human activity. “But I may be a while. Run along without me.”

At the door of her dressing room, she turned the rusty knob as she instinctively threw her sparse weight against the warped door, unharmed by the jarring effect of slamming into solid wood. To her good fortune, the enormous amount of padding in her costume proved useful beyond her portrayal of a comedic matron.

One glance told Mary that her assistant Sarah was not only absent but had also not taken the time to pick up the array of scattered clothing which had been dropped during the mad rush between acts. She stepped clumsily over white underclothes on the floor, picked her way around two open steamer trunks and finally brushed aside a red brocade dressing robe draped across the only chair in the poorly ventilated room.

Without an extra pair of hands, she could not possibly extricate herself from the layer upon layer of fabric, padding and wire framework beneath her petticoats. All she could do was take a seat and wait, a monumental accomplishment given the uncooperative attire. Eventually she managed to perch on the edge of the cushion in a somewhat precarious position, the metal contraption looped behind her like a colorful fan of peacock feathers.

Facing a mirror hanging on the wall above a cluttered dressing table, she pulled the pins from her gray wig, slipped it off her head and set it aside from the cosmetics, hair combs, brushes, and a dented silver frame that had been knocked over. Leaving the frame face down on a wrinkled silk scarf, she searched for the jar of cream to remove her theatrical makeup.

With applause still ringing in her ears, she reluctantly began to wipe away the grease paint. Little by little, the false character lines of the marvelously funny matron disappeared. In her place emerged a very plain and very dull young woman of twenty-five.

The average man or woman walking down the bustling streets of San Francisco would never guess that beneath the drab package lay a voice which even her harshest critics labeled angelic.

Singing meant everything to her. It was not merely a whim. It was her life. No one knew the painful years of growing up awkward and ugly around a beautiful mother with fine-boned features, a full bosom and flaxen hair. Mary was round-faced, flat-chested and had hair that never made up its mind to be blond or red, only somewhere in between.

Nothing could convince Mary that any man — young or old — would ever be interested in her as a wife. Yet when she had discovered she could sing, she felt an inexplicable change come over her, as if during those few moments of song she somehow changed from a homely plain-faced scrawny child in pigtails into someone special. Even beautiful. And yet the feeling only lasted until the final note passed her lips. Afterwards, she was as plain as her name — Mary.

Wondering what had become of her assistant, she released the coil of hair that had been flattened by the wig. Despite the discomfort of her bulky costume, she brushed through the long straight strands, uselessly coaxing some shine and fullness back into it.

Like an addictive opiate, those few glorious minutes were what she lived for — to feel elegant and powerful and in control of her whole world. No amount of parental disapproval could convince her to give up her dream. She had faced the wrath of her father and withstood the tearful pleas of her mother eight years earlier.

Mary mentally pushed her memories back into the dark corners of her mind as she finished cleansing her face.

Wondering what had become of her assistant, she released the coil of hair that had been flattened by the wig. Despite the discomfort of her bulky costume, she brushed through the long straight strands, uselessly coaxing some shine and fullness back into it.

When Sarah still did not return, Mary impatiently tossed the brush onto the scarf. She had to find someone to help her before the entire theater was empty. In which case, she would be left with the humiliating task of asking the night watchman to unfasten the unreachable buttons and hooks. It was something she had indeed done on rare occasion, much to her chagrin, and had been ever-so-fortunate, not to mention grateful, to find a respectful gentleman who maintained proper decorum, given the improper circumstances.

As she rose to her feet, her cumbersome hoops toppled the chair backward.

“Where are you, Sarah?” she muttered, realizing that she had no room to turn around let alone lean over and pick up the chair without creating more chaos from her unwieldy skirt.

A distant and muffled shout alarmed her.

Mary glanced at the door, alert and listening. It was probably a stage hand calling for assistance, she reasoned, thinking of her own present circumstances. But when she heard the voice again, there was no mistaking the sound of panic or the word:

“FIRE!”

Mary stumbled over the scattered clothing on the floor, her unfamiliar bulk hindering her progress. When the doorknob refused to budge, she tightened her grip and tried once more, twisting the doorknob while yanking hard. A stampede of footsteps pounded past her door.

Her fingers ached with the strain of forcing the rusty metal to move.

Shouts of confusion came from both men and women.

Then screams.

“Help me,” she pleaded, trying to be heard over the escalating noise. She tugged hard on the warped door, ignoring the pain tearing through her shoulders.

Groaning with frustration, she slapped her palm against the center panel. The acrid smell of smoke seeped under the door.

“Somebody help me!”

“Mary?”

“Sarah?” Elation swept through her as she sent a silent prayer of gratitude to the Virgin Mother. “The door's stuck. Push from your side!”

Between the two of them, the door broke free and Sarah tumbled in a cloud of dense smoke, coughing convulsively.

Mary snatched two pieces of clothing from the floor and shoved one into Sarah's hands.

“Put this over your nose and mouth,” she commanded, then grabbed the girl by the forearm and stepped blindly from the dressing room.

Plotting their escape, she groped along the wall to the stairwell but the dense smoke made it impossible to go down the single flight and out the back door.

Turning back, she knew the only route remaining was a window at the far end of the hall. As they passed by her dressing room door, she remembered – The photograph.

Removing the cloth from her mouth only long enough to speak, she placed her assistant's hand on the wall. “Follow it. Crawl if you have to. But get to the window.”

“We'll break our necks if we jump from up here.”

“Not if I can help it,” Mary answered, shoving the young woman on her way. Impeded by her bulk and poor visibility, she managed to scramble across the tiny room and grab the silver-framed photograph, snagging the scarf along with it.

She found Sarah leaning out the lower half of the open window, coughing and gasping for breath. Shouts from below begged her to jump before it was too late.

“I can't.”

“Yes, you can,” Mary argued, tugging her back inside. “Throw one leg over the sill. I'll hold you. When you've got both legs out, I'll lower you down as far as I'm able.”

In spite of the young assistant's frightened whimpers, Mary helped her dangle outside the window. In the alley beneath them, a large man stood ready to catch Sarah, his beefy arms outstretched. Mary let go of the girl's hands, watching the terror-stricken face as Sarah fell away.

Though the man nearly tumbled to the ground, he managed to safely break the fall without injury to either of them.

In a burst of tremendous relief, Mary thrust her fists in the air and gave a single cheer.

Now it was her turn.

Although her thick padding hampered her movement, she prayed that the extra layers would be a valuable cushion upon landing. Yet as she tried to climb through the window, she realized her laced-in false fanny and bosom were far too stiff, her wire hoops too unyielding. She could not fit through the wooden frame.

She was trapped.

Chapter 1

June 1890

Northern California Cascade Mountains

“She’s beautiful.” The young girl with the boyish nickname of Charlie stared in awe at the photograph mounted on the dog-eared page of the scrapbook.

“Undoubtedly the most beautiful young lady the world has ever laid eyes on,” agreed Louzana Walker, plaiting the tomboy’s honey blonde hair. She paused a moment to glance down at the picture, adding, “Except for you, of course.”

“I ain’t beautiful,” Charlie corrected as Lou cinched a red ribbon around the end of the braid. “No big bow this time. I don’t want this-here niece of yours to get off that train and think I’m prissy.”

“Until you start wearing a dress, young lady, I don’t believe a soul would dare accuse you of being prissy.”

“She’s fine just the way she is, Lou.” Wilhelm Reichart spoke up from across the parlor where he smoked his pipe, watching the exchange between his little girl and their landlady. “Don’t go making her grow up so fast.”

“Grow up so fast? The child is sixteen years old, for heaven’s sake.” Lou sought support from her older sister looking out the window. “Talk some sense into this man, Rita. Lord knows he never listens to a word I say. Tell him Charlie is not a baby anymore.”

Rita turned from the warmth of the late spring sunshine, her round face graced with a patient smile. “Charlie is not a baby anymore, Wil.”

Lou wasn’t finished. “And it is high-time he puts his foot down about her overalls.”

With a glint of mischief in her eye, Rita echoed, “And it is high-time you put your foot down about her overalls.”

“I heard, I heard,” he grouched. “I got ears.”

“So do I,” Charlie chimed in, without bothering to look up from the photograph, her chin propped on her fist. “And I ain’t wearing no dresses.”

“Good for you, Charlie.” Rita cocked one eyebrow in silent humor at her sister’s exasperation. Wil sucked on his pipe, hiding his amusement. The two older spinsters were as alike as they were different. Both were soft and round and independent-minded ladies, but Rita was dark-haired and olive-skinned while her younger sister Louzana was blonde and fair.

From the day he’d brought Charlie to live in town, the women had adopted his little girl, seeing to her needs while Wil worked down the street at Lee’s Livery as a smith.

He admired the education of his landladies, hoping a little of it would rub off on his bright child. He didn’t mind a bit when Charlie took to calling them her aunts. But now he wondered if Charlie might get her nose tweaked by the arrival of the real flesh-and-blood niece who was coming for a summer stay.

Learning the visitor was an accomplished singer and comedic actress in the theater deepened his concern — but not over Charlie’s jealousy. If anything, a good dose

of resentment would be welcome. At least it would keep his daughter away from a woman of questionable character, a woman who had chosen show business as a profession.

He watched Charlie gaze down on the grainy photograph in an article snipped from the San Francisco newspaper. Unable to deny the awe written across her face, he tightened his grip on the bowl of his pipe and puffed hard, resisting the urge to get up from his seat and walk out.

Although he would have preferred to be shoeing that old mare of Hiram Levy's, he had promised the Walkers to stick around after the noon meal to haul baggage up the steep hill from the railway station in his freight wagon. With all that the two colorful sisters had done for him and his little girl

Charlie, it was only fitting that he could repay the favor now and again.

"You spend too much time with your nose stuck in that scrapbook," he said.

Rita remained at her post at the window. "He's right, you two."

Lou looked up at her sister and smiled. "Oh-ho, look who's scolding, will you? I must have caught you studying the picture of our niece at least a dozen times over the last several months."

"I find myself remembering her mother at that age," Rita defended lightly.

"But Mary doesn't look anything like our baby sister. You said so yourself.

Mary has the round Irish face of her father." Lou lapsed into a lilting accent, "There is no mistakin' whose daughter she be. Not unlike our young Charlotte here." She clasped her fingers around Charlie's shoulders. "'Tis your father's child you are. If not for your blonde hair, he could have birthed ya himself."

Rita gasped.

Charlie giggled.

Wil fumed.

Clamping down hard on his pipe stem, he refrained from a caustic remark regarding the indelicate attempt at humor. He did not condone filling his little girl's head with bawdy comments on such private matters. Charlie was still a long way from growing up yet, but he could already read the fascination on her face as she listened to her adopted aunts relate their sister's marriage into a rich Boston Irish family and the subsequent blessing of five healthy children that had followed.

Mary McKissick was the last child born, yet undoubtedly the biggest humiliation to the upper crust Easterners — in Wil's estimation anyway.

Although not a topic of open discussion, the cherubic spinsters were not blind to the fact that their niece had chosen the second-most disrespectful profession for any woman, let alone an eligible young lady of society who could have had her pick of suitors. Mr. McKissick must have been a weak man, allowing his daughter to pursue a singing career. If it were Charlie, Wil would have stopped her at all cost.

He studied his daughter's uplifted face, painfully aware of the years ticking by. If only he could hold back time, he thought wistfully, recalling the faraway look captured in her eyes when she didn't know he was watching her.

The last thing he needed was this McKissick woman mesmerizing his little girl with adventurous stories of world travel. If he did not keep a careful eye open, Charlie would stow away in the singer's trunk when the time came for her to depart for Paris or some exotic destination.

“It is be best we get a move on,” he grumbled, tucking his pipe into the corner of his mouth as he rose from the only comfortable chair in the parlor which suited his size. “You going to come with me in the wagon, Charlie, or will you be walking down with the ladies?”

She glanced at the two full-bodied women who had helped Wil raise her. Slightly eccentric to say the least, Rita and Louzana were the closest thing to a mother Charlie had ever known. While they were, by far, the most self-reliant women north of Sacramento, there was a bond with Charlie that brought a certain responsibility to look out for their safety — even to the point of being close by when they maneuvered the steep hill between Front Street and the back street.

When she said, “I’ll walk,” Wil wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“Then shall we?” Rita flounced from the room with the flair of a fluffed-up hen heading for the barnyard.

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With each passing mile, Mary McKissick felt her dismal spirits lifted by the music of the mountains as surely as if the finest orchestra in San Francisco had played accompaniment to the breathtaking view from her Oregon-bound train.

The majestic beauty of the southern Cascades rose from the floor of the arid San Joaquin Valley like a symphonic crescendo, climbing out of the sun-bronzed rolling hills to the dramatic peaks of pine-covered ridges, underscored with deep gorges carved by the headwaters of the Sacramento River.

Early afternoon sun played across the rich colors of the dense forest. Deep browns of tree bark. Slashes of red clay. Midst the decay of brown leaves and pine needles sprouted pale green shoots of oak and pine and dogwood.

Green.

Green of every shade imaginable — from the seedlings on the forest floor to the spiked treetops piercing the azure sky. The visual performance of nature was on the realm of a theatrical Spectacular in its magnificent abundance.

The letters from her aunts simply did not do justice to the ostentatious exhibition around every bend in the tracks, especially when she caught her first glimpse of the white-crested Mount Shasta in the distant north. The tall volcanic peak stood alone and apart, except for a smaller cinder cone pressed against its western slope like a little girl clinging to the skirts of her mother.

Sighting the landmark mountain, Mary knew her arrival in Sweetbriar would not be long now. She resisted the urge to settle back in her stiff leather seat, too mesmerized by the sights and sounds and smell of the Cascades.

Not once in the past five years she had lived in San Francisco did she venture outside the bustle and noise of the city to see what the rest of California had to offer. Her career had taken precedence. As it always did. And always would.

This trip was nothing more than a much-needed holiday, she assured herself. If pressed for a confession, she was somewhat grateful to the doctor’s insistence upon rest and fresh air. Left to her own resources, she would have somehow managed to work through the minor inconvenience of her uncooperative health — however temporary it would prove to be.

Most certainly, she would not have allowed herself the luxury of an entire summer stay with her two aunts. In the years since the two ladies had followed the northern expansion of the railroad to the enterprising summer resort community of Sweetbriar, Mary had yet to fulfill her promise to visit the spinster sisters at their boarding house in the canyon town. As fate would have it, she felt a twinge of guilt that it was necessity rather than family obligation that finally pressed her to fulfill the promise.

She shook off the temptation to withdraw into the familiar dark corner of self-pity as the thrilling sights of rugged terrain passed before her eyes.

The train lumbered over a high, wooden trestle spanning a river gorge, opening up a dizzying view of the ribbon of water below. Her heart seemed to crash to her toes at the chilling drop. Although she remained silent, she clutched her stomach. Other passengers in the crowded car voiced varying degrees of awe or discomfort.

Across the narrow aisle, an active little boy took one look out his window and dove into his mother's arms, wailing in fear.

When the woman apologized for the nerve-rattling disturbance, Mary smiled in sympathy without saying a word. Clearly, the mother was considerably more frazzled by the tireless toddler than Mary could possibly experience from the minor ruckus. It was impossible to imagine herself dealing with a young one for two minutes, let alone two days, in the confines of a railway car. Then again, it was impossible to imagine herself with a child at all. Motherhood simply could not interfere with her dream. She had worked too hard, sacrificed too much to give it all up now.

You may not have a choice anymore, Mary Elizabeth.

NO! I will sing again.

A very slim chance.

I will have the surgery, if necessary.

Are you willing to risk your life?

If that's what it takes . . . yes. Yes. YES!

Clenching her gloved hands in her lap, Mary closed her eyes in an effort to fight off the naysayer inside her head. She simply could not give up.

The doctor had said it was a miracle she had survived the fire. If God could perform one miracle in her life, then he could perform another miracle and restore her voice. She would sing again. She had to sing again. And she would do whatever she must to achieve her goal.

“Are you all right, Ma’am?” the Negro conductor asked louder than necessary.

Mary lifted her gaze to his concerned expression, then nodded.

Kneeling at her side, he took great effort to enunciate slowly and clearly as if she were hard of hearing as well as unable to speak. “Sweetbriar will be a dinner-stop for the entire train. Everyone will be getting off. Could be a mite confusing for you since some folks don’t pay no mind to who they’re bumping into in their rush to eat supper. If you aren’t in any hurry, maybe you should wait `til I can come back and help you myself.”

With a half-hearted smile, she patted his arm and shook her head, trying to communicate as best she could without using her voice that she would be perfectly capable of finding her way off the train. After all, it was merely a whistle-stop, not a bustling metropolis station.

“Suit yourself, ma’am. But I still say you best take your time and be the last one off.”

She nodded in agreement, then mouthed the words, “Thank you.”

A month of complete silence was proving to be a difficult order to follow.

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“Are you ladies sure your niece said she would be on this train?” Will snapped his timepiece shut and thrust it in his pocket. The day was wasting away while he stood on the platform waiting to play porter to a prima donna.

Lou glanced at Rita. “I suppose it is entirely possible that she may not have been up to traveling quite yet.”

“She would have sent word,” came the matter-of-fact answer from the older sister. “We will be seeing her any minute now. I’m sure of it.”

The candy man wandered past with his tray of taffy which he sold to the milling crowd of summer arrivals.

Wil hated the circus atmosphere of Sweetbriar when this time of year brought hordes of city folk, swelling the town’s modest population to ridiculous heights. It made him uneasy to be among so many people nowadays. If it were not for his livery stable on Back Street, he would just as soon spend the next three months upriver. If he had a lick of sense, he’d go and take Charlie with him.

“There she is!” his daughter cried out with far too much enthusiasm for Wil’s liking.

His gut told him to get his little girl as far away from town as he could manage. But he had too many people depending upon him, not just Charlie and the Walker sisters. Wilhelm Reichart didn’t walk away from his responsibilities no matter how much inconvenience it proved to be for him.

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Mary stood on the top step of the passengers’ car, her gaze sweeping over the sea of hats — from extremes in ladies’ fashions of flowers and feathers to the more sedate in men’s head wear.

An endless flow of humanity spread across the train platform to the hotels and eating establishments across the street.

Aside from the relatively level location of the depot and adjacent railroad tracks, the charming little town was built on a steep hillside overlooking the station and the river behind her. It appeared this parallel road was the main street as she scanned the side-by-side buildings, each connected by two or three steps to allow for the uphill grade until the last structure was perched high on a bluff above the tracks.

Anxious to repair her health and hurry back to the city, Mary already felt a sense of rejuvenation in the sheltered canyon with its fragrant pine-scented air. Considering the undeniable lift to her spirits, she held a glimmer of hope that her recovery may take only half the time.

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Wil lingered behind as the sisters followed Charlie toward the woman descending the train steps. She was dressed as he had expected, in a smart traveling suit, which was as fine as ones worn by the wealthy city ladies who spent their summers here. But as he drew closer he realized she was not as glamorous as her photograph in the newspaper. With her hair tucked beneath a conservative hat, she looked more like a girl playing dress-up in someone else's clothes. Put an apron on her, put her behind a counter at the mercantile and she could pass unnoticed as any one of the plain townfolk who lived in Sweetbriar year-round.

"Mareeee," Louzana sang out, waving a lace-trimmed handkerchief in the unconventional color of brilliant purple. Yes, indeed, the Walker sisters were not the least concerned in maintaining a reputation of anything less than strange. Sweet as their peach preserves, but strange none the less.

Rita was the first to reach her niece. After an affectionate hug, she stepped back to allow Lou to do the same. All the while, the two never let their young woman get a word in edgewise.

"We have some friends for you to meet, dear." Rita gestured with a sweep of her hand to Wil's daughter. "This is Charlotte Reichart—"

"But I only answer to Charlie." She thrust her hand out to the smiling Miss McKissick, and pumped it as hard as any lumberjack at the mill up the river. "It's a real pleasure to finally meet you, ma'am. I never met an honest-to-goodness real actress before. We do plays and all around here, but nobody in them has done as much as you have. Well, unless you count the traveling shows that come through but they don't get their picture in the paper like you."

"That's quite enough, Charlie," Wil gently admonished, wondering just when the young woman would speak up. "Keep it up and you'll wear out her ears before she sees the sun set."

Lou leapt in with a formal introduction to Wil, which she embellished with unbridled praise and gratitude for his limitless assistance at the boarding house. "Sister and I never could have managed if not for Wil."

"I am afraid you have it turned around," Wil said, having long ago outgrown the need or want of such blunt appreciation. "Your aunts are not ones to be subtle, I give them that. They both speak their mind — no matter how uncomfortable it makes me or anyone else, for that matter. Sometimes they seem to enjoy the somewhat harmless game."

"Game?" Rita feigned shock. "I think not."

"Men . . ." Lou sighed impatiently. "Pay them no mind and they pout like puppy dogs in need of a pat on the head. But pay them a compliment and they scoff as if you have insulted them."

Allowing a small chuckle, Wil noticed their niece appeared amused. Yet it struck him as odd that she still remained silent. Charlie, on the other hand, was oblivious to the joke at his expense. Wil turned his head to see his daughter was not even paying attention to the four adults. Her attention had been drawn elsewhere.

Wil's gaze followed the direction of his daughter's wide-eyed stare.

A young man in a dark blue suit walked toward them with a leather valise in one hand and a familiar mile-wide grin on his slender face.

"Tommy Morrison?" Wil said, bemused.

“Yes, sir.” The kid stuck his hand out. “Pleasure to see you, Mr. Reichart. How are you, sir?”

“Just fine, boy.” Impressed by the firm handshake, Wil looked him up and down. “Hardly recognized you. Hope you learned more at college than how to dress like fancy city folk.”

Shaking his head, Tommy chuckled, then turned to Charlie. “Still chewing your nails, Squirrel Bait?”

She promptly dropped her hand.

“Not me,” she lied.

Even though a telltale flush of embarrassment spread up her cheeks, she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up defiantly at Tommy towering over her. Wil observed his mule-headed daughter once again standing her ground with the Morrison boy who was six years older and as patient as ever.

“You haven't changed a lick,” Tommy said with a lopsided grin. “I'm glad.”

When he planted a chaste kiss on her blushing cheek, her eyes widened in surprise. Before she could respond, Tommy directed his attention to the Walker sisters and their visiting niece.

“Miss Rita. Miss Louzana. You two look as young as the day I left,” he greeted with a gentle squeeze of each lady's gloved hand.

“Hogwash,” Rita responded, laughter in her eyes. “After four years among those stuffy Eastern professors, you've been brainwashed into thinking you can get away with such blatant flattery.”

“Why of course not, ma'am.”

Lou interrupted, “Tommy, we would like you to meet our niece, Mary McKissick. She will be staying with us until September.”

“Please to meet you, Miss McKissick.”

With a demure touch of his fingertips, she nodded and smiled without saying a word.

“McKissick . . . Is that of the Boston McKissicks?”

Again she nodded. Wil puzzled over the singer who did not speak. Certainly she couldn't be shy.

“You have come quite a distance.”

“Only from San Francisco actually,” Lou hastily explained. “But I am sure she is exhausted just the same. Aren't you, dear?”

The young woman drew a deep breath with a contented smile on her lips, then vigorously shook her head. Wil watched her expressive eyes, an interesting blend of blue and green, that conveyed a sense of wordless delight. In what, Wil could only guess.

Charlie was the only one bold enough to ask, “How come you ain't said anything yet?”

Unaffected by the inquiry, Mary touched her throat, then tipped her fingers out in a peculiar gesture and shook her head.

“You can't talk?” Charlie asked. “Is it because of the fire?”

As Mary nodded, Lou was quick to explain. “Mary has not actually lost her voice, dear. Just resting it for a few weeks. Doctor's orders, you see.

Didn't we tell them, sister?”

Rita shrugged, unperturbed by their innocent omission. "It must have slipped our minds."

"I'm not the least bit surprised." Charlie planted her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows. "You've been too busy working me to the bone, scrubbing the boarding house from top to bottom. With so much to do, it ain't any wonder you forgot."

"Isn't," Lou corrected. "And I do believe you are right, Miss Charlie. We have been busy little bees, haven't we?"

Charlie shrugged her shoulders, then turned her attention back to the silent Miss McKissick.

"Do you mind my asking if you ever gonna sing again?" she asked, then glanced down as her father's hand grasped her elbow.

"I think it's high-time we got Miss McKissick's baggage on the wagon, young lady."

"But I want—"

"It doesn't matter what you want," he said with a gentle firmness. "What you need is to learn that nosy questions are downright impolite."

When the lady reached out and touched his forearm, Wil tensed at the gentle brush of her fingertips.