

JANE BONANDER

BESTSELLING
AUTHOR
of
Warrior Heart



Winter Heart

A *Wolf McCloud* NOVEL

"Jane Bonander reaches out to her readers' hearts."

—RT Book Reviews

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Winter Heart

JANE BONANDER

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For my sister Dr. Suellen M. Rundquist. Professor of English linguistics—she knows why.

Could the dark secrets of those insane asylums be brought to light... we would be shocked to know the countless number of rebellious wives, sisters and daughters that are thus annually sacrificed to fall customs and conventionalisms, and barbarous laws made by men for women.

—Susan B. Anthony
and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1860

It is a very fashionable and easy thing now to make a person out to be insane. If a man tires of his wife, and is befooled after some other woman, it is not a very difficult matter to get her in an institution of this kind. Belladonna and chloroform will give her the appearance of being crazy enough, and after the asylum doors have closed upon her, adieu to the beautiful world and all home associations.

—Lydia A. Smith, 1864-1870
institutionalized in New York and Michigan

Prologue

California, 1846

What kind of sick mind would give an infant away to a stranger?

Even in his wildest, most dismal nightmares, Cecil couldn't imagine it. His throat worked with emotion when he realized the infant the older woman held was staring at him. He knew he was a fool but he felt the babe was scrutinizing him, sizing him up. His eyes were a startling shade of blue, circled with a rim of brown. Intelligent eyes. Probing eyes.

Certainly he was giving the babe far more credit than he deserved, he thought with a cynical lift of his brow. After all, the tad was only weeks old.

Beyond the platform, the whipster whistled as he watered his team. Soon the stage would be ready to leave again. There wasn't time to dicker or to be rational.

"I'll pay any price," he told the woman.

Standing beside him, his wife expelled a disgusted sigh. "You'll do no such thing! Why, the idea of taking in a breed ..."

The rest of her tirade fell upon deaf ears. Cecil wanted a son with such intensity, it would have been impossible to explain it to anyone, especially his nagging wife. "Zelda, you and I will never have another child of our own. I want a son."

"You want a son," she mimicked, her voice derisive. "I don't care what you want, Cecil Fletcher. I'm not taking in a breed and caring for him as if he were my own." She sniffed, a sound that ended in an unladylike snort. "What will people think if we show up with someone else's half-breed bastard?"

Cecil ignored her, accustomed to her harping. He usually gave in to her, and she expected it. He would surprise her this time. "If we take him in, he won't be a bastard. He'll be our son."

"May the Lord forgive you, Cecil. *Think!* Think what this will do to Emily."

All he had to hear was his three-year-old daughter's name, and he went soft and vulnerable inside. Even so, Zelda's threat did nothing, for he'd been waiting for her to mention Emily. It often brought him around to his wife's way of thinking, but not now.

His beautiful Emily. A crushing pain squeezed his chest, and he wondered if it was his bad heart or his love for his daughter. God had played a cruel trick on all of them, for she was perfect in every way except for her mind. Even when she was a baby, months old, her eyes hadn't had the quick intelligence of the boy before him. She wasn't an idiot by any means, but she'd been slow to develop. Slow to walk, slow to talk, slow to train. Sometimes painfully so. His heart squeezed again.

Cecil had been willing to try once more, but Zelda had kept him from her bed for years, reluctant

chance having another child, fearing the flaw would be repeated. Praying he would be forgiven the blasphemy, Cecil decided God was capricious.

“Despite her shortcomings, Zelda, Emily will be overjoyed at having a baby in the house. We both know that.” There was no deterring him. “We will take this child and raise him as our own, and you best get used to it.”

She gasped. “How dare you speak to me that way, Cecil. How *dare* you!”

He didn’t have to look at her to know that her narrow lips would be pursed so tightly they would nearly disappear. And there would be a mutinous look in her eyes as well. He would pay dearly for this, but it was worth the risk.

Digging into the pocket of his waistcoat, he retrieved a double eagle, then turned his attention to the woman who had offered him the baby.

“How much?” He had three double eagles on him. Sixty dollars was a small price to pay for a child, an embarrassment.

The woman’s black eyes snapped. “Children should not be bought and sold like cattle. They’re priceless.”

Cecil frowned at her incongruous behavior. “Why do you want to get rid of him, then?”

The anger in her eyes was replaced by pain. “Because it’s better than leaving him somewhere to die.”

Her accent was thick; he could barely understand her. “But I want to give you—”

“No money.” She thrust the baby at him. “Just take him and go away from here.”

Cecil took the child and held him close. Though wrapped in heavy blankets, he felt solid. Strong. They exchanged glances again, and Cecil gave the boy a grim smile as Zelda muttered her disses beside him. *You will need your strength, Son, but I promise I will love you enough for both of us.*

*Fletcher Ranch. Sierra Nevada Mountains
California, 1858*

“Tristan Fletcher!”

From his perch in the oak tree, Tristan cringed at the keening sound of his mother’s voice. He stopped carving his initials in the trunk and sheathed his knife. If she found him with it, she’d take it away from him, as she had most of his treasures.

Closing his eyes, he leaned against the tree and tried valiantly to shut her out. Ever since Pa’s death she’d been especially mean. She’d boxed Tristan’s ears, pinched his arms, and spewed enough words of hate at him to break the strongest servant. But he wasn’t a servant. At least he hadn’t been one until Pa died.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to work. When he worked she appeared satisfied and didn’t bother him. Now, with Emily gone to a special school, his mother was more demanding of his time.

Tristan missed his sister very much. One of his earliest memories was of Emily rocking him to sleep in a big rocking chair by the fire. She had adored him from the day they'd brought him home. They had been close companions since the time he'd been old enough to feed himself. They'd done everything together. Played the same games. Enjoyed the same things.

It wasn't until his best friend Lucas, the foreman's son, had brought it to his attention that Emily was so much older than he and should enjoy completely different activities that Tristan had imagined she might be different.

She was a great artist; that's what Tristan thought, anyway. She could draw anything he asked her to, and it would miraculously appear on the page. Even when Zelda had raged at Emily, she could be calmed by taking pen in hand and moving it across a sheet of paper. But even then they couldn't let Zelda find Emily sketching. Emily's pictures were, well, on the dark side, and Zelda hated them. She didn't understand that drawing made Emily feel better.

Zelda. If she ever imagined that he referred to her by her given name, he'd see the inside of her long before he died. He couldn't help it. She was no more his mother than the mare out in the pasture.

Today he avoided her because he'd wanted to go fishing with Lucas and she'd refused to let him. He'd learned that he rarely, if ever, got to do what he wanted, but there was a place inside him that refused to back down gracefully. He'd felt that way a lot lately: angry, moody, itching to disobey despite her threats. He thought it was because she'd sent Emily away. No other reason came to mind.

He would pay for his ornery attitude, and it would hurt, but for now, he reveled in her frustration and her fury.

Something jabbed his calf.

"There you are, you worthless half-breed. You've tried my patience one time too many. God will punish you for sneaking away and hiding from me, just you wait and see."

Tristan often wondered about this threatening God of hers. It wasn't the same one his father had worshiped, for Pa had spoken of him kindly, even though his eyes were sad when he did so.

Zelda poked him again with the broom handle, hard enough to leave a bruise but not hard enough to break anything. He'd learned long ago not to react, even though it hurt like the devil. Gooseflesh rose on his skin as the pain radiated through his body. He clamped his jaw shut, swallowing any sound of discomfort.

"Get down from there before I make you sorry you ever came to live with us."

He was already sorry. He ached to rub his sore calf, but resisted the urge. Why did Pa have to die? Tristan had never said it aloud, but he wondered why death couldn't have taken her, instead.

"Why can't I go fishing?"

"Fishing? You lazy slug. You don't want to work, that's what's wrong with you. Besides, all you kind are alike, lazy, good for nothing. Now, get down from there before I take a belt to your backside."

Tristan stiffened. He wouldn't ask again. He would never allow her to find his weaknesses, for he

instinctively knew she'd feed on them. A militant anger spread through him. He had six more years before he could leave this place and go to college, then he'd be three thousand miles from her harping tongue.

"Did you hear me?"

How could he not? Her strident voice penetrated the air like a freshly honed blade. He continued to ignore her, climbing higher into the tree.

"Get down here this instant! There's work aplenty around here, and your share is collecting dust."

Tristan wanted to run away. Escape. Before Pa died, they had talked about it. Pa had brought the subject up, knowing Tristan would be tempted once he was gone. He'd made Tristan promise not to leave home until it was time, no matter how much he wanted to.

It hadn't been easy, but for Pa, Tristan would have walked through fire. He only wished Pa were alive. He missed him very much, and with Emily gone off to school, he felt completely alone.

*Trenway Asylum, Upstate New York
February, 1875*

Daisy coughed into her handkerchief, knowing without looking that what was there would be blood-streaked. In a few moments, she would meet Dinah Odell, and the plan Daisy had devised would be put into motion. She would not follow orders and place Dinah in the punishment box. With the matron leaving on holiday, who would know? Daisy had other plans for Dinah.

Her lungs ached, had for weeks. She was weak and frail, barely able to carry out her duties. For her life was at a close. For Dinah, it was just beginning. She had to convince the child. Child. A smile cracked her dry lips. Though they were only six years apart in age, Daisy felt ancient. It was the consumption, of course. It had ravaged her body almost beyond recognition.

The night before, she'd stood in front of the mirror and wept. Her small breasts sagged; her hipbones were so sharp she was surprised they hadn't penetrated her skin. The hair that had once been her pride and joy was no longer red but a lackluster carrot color, and it hung in lank strands around her face. She had lost most of the curls that had once grown thick and red low on her belly. What was left was dull, almost gray. She would never know a man's love, a man's passion. She would die dried up like a withered spinster because of the damned disease. She'd even cursed God, for who else was to blame if not He?

Reaching into her apron pocket, she pulled out the letter from the employer who had been going to release her from this hellish job. His proposition was generous, and a stunning surprise. She couldn't fathom why someone would offer so much. She reread the last page, still filled with awe.

...and because of our mutual acquaintance, David Richards, has recommended you so highly for the job of caring for my dear sister, I offer you something as well: marriage—in name only, of course, you have my word as a gentleman—in exchange for five years of faithful and compassionate service. At the end of that period of time, to guarantee your comfort for the remainder of your life, I will present to you a generous monetary settlement in the amount of...

Daisy read the amount again, knowing it was a fortune. A bounteous sum. Had she been healthy, she would have taken it. Had she been healthy, she would have married the devil to get out of this place. When Dr. Richards had approached her with the opportunity, he had assured her that Tristan Fletcher was an honorable man. Marrying a stranger was daunting, but it was done all the time. She had a cousin who had married a rancher in Wyoming, sight unseen. She was happy enough.

But Daisy knew she was dying; nothing would change that. Dinah was not. She was young and

vibrant and full of life. She shouldn't languish in this godforsaken place.

It had been at that moment that Daisy had quietly put together her plan. But knowing the spirit of Dinah as she did, she knew an arranged marriage would not sit well, even though it was temporary and worth a great deal of money.

Daisy held the sheet of paper by the corner over the candle flame, watching it turn to ash. Whatever kind of life awaited Dinah Odell beyond these grim asylum walls was immeasurably better than the one she faced inside them.

A clock somewhere in the cavernous building sounded eleven bells, the echo reverberating dismally, reminding Daisy that the sooner she got Dinah out of this place, the better.

She found the other letter, the one she'd written exonerating Dinah of all guilt, and tucked it into the hidden pocket in her travel bag, the one she would give Dinah. Daisy had many things to tell Dinah, so many things to say. Her mind wasn't working as it once had. She hoped she would remember everything.

With difficulty because of her weakness, she closed her travel bag and went to meet Dinah in the remote storage room.

"It's the only way, dear."

Dinah stared in horror at the black metal discipline box, tearing her gaze from the shackles at the bottom. She remembered the times she'd felt the cold, cruel metal bite into the tender flesh at her wrists and ankles. Even now, they throbbed at the visual reminder.

Nurse Jenkins leaned against the wall, her face pale and drawn, her eyes swimming with feverish tears. She was thin and frail and appeared far older than her twenty-six years. She coughed and doubled over, clutching her stomach.

Dinah pressed her fingers to her mouth, as if doing so would banish her sympathetic pain. It wasn't possible. Fear, gratitude, and compassion clogged her throat. "But to willingly take my place, Daisy? Why?"

Daisy Jenkins coughed again, the sound deep and painful. What she brought up was pink and frothy, and she folded it into a handkerchief. "It means your survival, Dinah. I have little time left." She took a deep breath, one that rattled from her lungs. "You've seen how weak I am. I can barely carry out my duties here. I couldn't fool the matron another hour let alone another day." Coughing again, she scanned the room with her fever-laden eyes.

"I detest this place and everything it stands for. I would rather die saving you than live another moment having to serve the matron's whims."

The flickering candlelight hollowed out her already sunken cheeks, making her appear cadaverous. "You don't belong here. I know it and Matron Doppling knows it. You've been punished for being a free spirit. I've seen how you hide your pain behind your tough facade."

She laughed, but it turned into another fit of coughing. When she recovered, she gripped Dinah

arm until she caught her breath. “Had you not been so gently born and raised, you’d have had a successful run on the stage.”

Dinah was unable to watch Daisy’s swift deterioration. “I didn’t know I was that transparent.”

“To no one but me, perhaps. You’re a chameleon.”

It was true. Dinah had held on to her sanity in large part because of her ability to become whomever her jailers thought she was. If she could make them laugh, so much the better for her. Unfortunately, most of them thought she was merely cheeky. In part, they were right. But she also kept her spirit alive because to lose it meant to die. Death was a constant. It visited the inmates daily.

“You’re here because Martin Odell wanted to get rid of you. Don’t forget that.”

At the sound of her uncle’s name, thoughts of freedom became elusive, shuddering through Dinah like flickering aspen leaves in the wind. She kept her face turned away so Daisy wouldn’t sense her feelings. “Yes, I know. But if Martin discovers I’m gone, he’ll just find me and drag me back.”

Since the untimely death of her parents, Martin had changed. No longer the doting uncle, he had first put her dear sister, Charlotte, away, claiming her fits required treatment she couldn’t get at home.

That in itself should have been a warning to Dinah, but how would she have known? Since childhood, Charlotte had been sickly, and grieving for Mama and Papa had weakened her more. Even the doctor who came to call agreed that Charlotte would get better care in a sanitarium. Dinah had no way of knowing then that the sanitarium was actually an asylum for the insane, the very one from which she was now planning to escape.

It wasn’t until Charlotte’s death that Dinah discovered what kind of place Trenway actually was. Even so, it was hard for her to believe her sister had intentionally taken her own life. It was no wonder that Martin wanted Dinah out of the way. Her caustic tongue and fearless need to discover the truth about Charlotte’s death had prompted her uncle to pack her off to the asylum, too. How effortlessly he’d done it! No one had questioned his motives or her state of mind. Not even the doctors.

“Yes,” Dinah repeated, her heart heavy, “he’ll just find me and bring me back.”

“Not if he doesn’t know.”

She swung around. “How can he not discover I’m gone?”

“Oh, he may. Eventually.” Daisy dug into her apron pocket and pulled out an envelope. She handed it to Dinah. “In the meantime, you’ll be long gone, safely away from here.”

Dinah took out the letter, read it, sifted through the other items in the envelope, then dropped it in the chair by the old, battered desk. “Your train ticket is in here. And money. You want me to take your new position?” A fresh flood of fears surged through her. “I couldn’t get away with it. They know your name, don’t they?”

“Of course. But things change, dear. I’ve been meaning to write them and explain why someone else is coming in my place, but I’ve just not had the strength. Anyway, you’ll think of something. You’re a clever girl.”

Dinah stared at the letter in her lap, running her fingers over the page. “I couldn’t get away with it,” she repeated.

“You can and you will. Would you rather stay here? Think about it. You have no future here. None.”

Frowning, Dinah bit down on her lip, knowing she couldn’t bear to stay behind asylum walls if there was any chance at all she could escape. Every day she felt as though she were suffocating. “I know, but—”

“You have a wonderful sense of humor, Dinah, and your instinct to survive is the only thing that has kept you sane. After I’m gone, there will be no one here to act as a buffer between you and the matron.”

Dinah blinked, hoping to stem her tears. “But if I leave, you’ll die.” She was suddenly struck with an idea. “Why don’t we both leave? Oh, Daisy, let’s both go!”

With the effort of one scaling a rocky cliff, Daisy hiked a bony hip onto the edge of the desk. “I’ve already thought of that. I would only slow you down. Whether you want to believe me or not, I’m going to die. The efforts required to travel would be too much for me. Trust me, Dinah, I’m not trying to be a martyr. I have very little time left, and I think it’s important that at some point, a body be found they can assume is yours.” She pressed her handkerchief over her mouth. “We’re of similar height. Though your hair is a more vibrant red than mine, it’s comparable.”

“But you’re not going to die this minute, you’ll—” Her argument was broken off by another fit of Daisy’s coughing. This time, she actually slumped to the floor.

“Daisy!” Hurrying to her side, Dinah lifted her head into her lap.

Daisy’s eyes were bright. “I don’t have much strength left, Dinah Odell. Or time.” Her voice was but a whisper, her breathing labored and bubbly. “Do this for me. Do this for *all* women.”

“But, how can I possibly pass myself off as a nurse?” Dinah had a sense of panic. Her dreams of freedom dwindled further amidst the harsh reality of what Daisy wanted her to do.

“It’s not so difficult. All most patients need is a lot of understanding. And love.”

“But what if she’s truly insane? What if... what if she’s violent and mad and I’m not able to control her?” Suddenly the whole idea of escape seemed ludicrous. Farfetched. Fanciful.

“You’ve seen what goes on here, Dinah. Just remember that physical punishment never makes things better. It only compounds the problem.” Daisy coughed again and her eyes rolled back, exposing the jaundiced whites.

“Oh, Daisy. Dear, dear Daisy.” A breath-robbing tightness seized Dinah’s chest as she stroked Daisy’s hair.

Daisy’s coughing became worse. “I won’t last until morning. If you don’t do as I say, they will somehow find a way to blame you for my death. And your uncle will gladly join the throng. At least leaving will give you a good head start.”

Each word was spoken with great difficulty. Dinah had to bend close to hear. “Count on that, Dinah.”

In spite of my efforts to be deceptive about our relationship, the matron has seen how familiar we've become. Were I to leave you here, she would exact her most heinous punishment on you.

"She's gone for a few days to visit her no-account son, Edward. Now is the time to do this. Freedom is yours." Although her words were halting and barely audible, the message was clear.

Dinah said nothing. She sat on the floor and rocked Daisy in her arms long into the night, as a mother holds a dying child, grateful that no one disturbed them.

Freedom is yours. She couldn't count the number of times she'd prayed for release from the hole in which she now found herself. Thoughts of her sometime suitor, Charles Avery, flicked through her mind for the first time in weeks.

How childish she'd been all those months ago, when she thought he might intercede on her behalf with her uncle. She'd been just a girl then. A little girl who thought of parties and dresses and sweet kisses stolen on balconies. She'd clung to those sappy notions, wanting the sort of life her mother once had because she knew of nothing else.

That had been over a year ago. Such things no longer found a place in her mind; she had all she could do to think about survival. But to escape ...

Daisy had been scheduled to leave the asylum for her new position in California, and at first, Dinah had thought she was meeting her to say good-bye. But when Daisy told her she meant Dinah to escape, Dinah could not have imagined the extent of her plan.

Dinah closed her eyes. California. The entire charade was worthwhile if it got her to California. Unfastening the top of her prison gown, she reached inside and pulled out Charlotte's diary, which she carried close to her body for safekeeping.

With Daisy's feverish head in her lap, Dinah opened the journal. Charlotte's spidery scrawl leaped out at her, causing her heart to lurch in her chest again, as it did each time she saw the writing. *He was here again today, my Teddy was, promising to take me away. To California.*

Dinah flipped to the last entry. *He has abandoned me and our unborn child. I have no reason to go on living.*

Tears blurred Dinah's vision, so she closed the book, returning it to the pocket Daisy had stitched inside her tattered camisole. Poor, darling Charlotte. Dinah hadn't had the chance to say good-bye. Yes, maybe it was worth the risk if it got her closer to finding out what had really happened to Charlotte. She might have been weaker than Dinah, but she wouldn't have killed herself. Even Daisy hadn't been able to find out exactly how Charlotte had died. *I have no reason to go on living* didn't automatically mean she'd taken her own life, did it?

Once again her gaze found the black metal box. She shuddered, for the box looked like a macabre black coffin. Even the lid came down and latched like a coffin lid. But instead of a silk lining and a fine pillow for one's head, there were noisy shackles for the limbs. Cold, heavy, iron shackles.

Because of her rebellious ways, she'd spent more time in the device than most of the other women. It was a harsh and cruel punishment, not fit for criminals, much less helpless, hapless women. If the

matron had thought to drive her mad by putting her in the box, she'd made a mistake, however, for each new form of punishment made Dinah stronger. But she knew of women who went into the box and were never seen again.

Once the box was shoved into the bowels of the dark, dank room and out of sight, the person being punished could go undiscovered for weeks. Months. It had happened before. An easy way to dispose of a troublesome patient whose family didn't want her free. And with the matron on holiday herself, she would not be around to make sure Daisy had done her job.

It was nearly dawn, and everything was quiet when Daisy drew her last breath. Dinah expelled a satisfied sigh and hugged her one last time. She put Daisy on the floor and undressed her, replacing the nurse's clothing with her own. Then, with difficulty, she lifted Daisy into her arms, struggling to press her body into the box. She cringed and almost cried out when Daisy's lolling head banged against the side.

Dinah placed the shackles around Daisy's ankles and wrists, shoving away her anguish at having to treat the body so. She said a prayer for Daisy's perfect soul, then crossed herself before closing the lid on the box and locking it.

She searched through Daisy's travel bag, which was now hers, and gasped in surprise. "My bear," she whispered, memories swamping her as she lifted the bear from the bag. She pressed her nose to the fur, its scent still familiar. She'd slept with the bear long before she'd come to Trenway, long after the time when a young woman should sleep with dolls or stuffed animals. The toy had been confiscated, along with everything else she owned, when she'd arrived here.

A week after that, Dinah saw one of the matron's fat daughters wearing her own velvet cloak. The matron's favorite nurse, a scrawny bitch with a pocked, red complexion, wore Dinah's pink and lavender gown as she left the building one day. Even her new slippers were gone, and her new stitches unmentionables. She had nothing but the rags on her back, which were forced upon her the day she'd arrived. Tears, memories, and emotion tangled in her throat. But Daisy had saved her bear. She gave it a squeeze, returned it to the travel bag and snapped the bag shut.

The squeaking wheels of the death cart as it rounded the corner en route to the basement brought her up short, forcing her heart into her throat. She searched the room, frantic for a place to hide in case the attendants glanced inside. Spying a pile of dirty laundry, she dove under it, burrowing deep. She pinched her eyes shut and held her breath.

The death cart stopped.

"Is this lamp supposed to be lit?"

"I don't know. Looks like Jenkins's travel bag, though."

"Oh, yeah. She's leavin' tonight. Lucky whore. Wish it was me," said one attendant.

"Yeah," the other responded. "I wouldn't spit in the face of an opportunity like that."

Dinah heard the women shuffling about the room.

"Christ. Do you suppose someone's in the box?"

Dinah's heart nearly stopped.

The other attendant snickered. "Wanna find out?"

"Me? Hell, no. It ain't my responsibility."

Dinah heard one of them kick at the metal box. "Hey! Anyone in there?"

Both women cackled. "If someone was, they'd sure as hell be screamin' to get out, don't you think?"

"Yeah, they always do. I wonder where Jenkins went off to."

"Who knows."

"Should we grab this laundry while we're here?"

Dinah clutched herself to keep from shaking. The smell from the linens began to claw at her throat and she swallowed repeatedly to keep from retching, both from the odor and from her own fear.

The other woman snorted. "It ain't our job."

"You're right. Well, Jenkins can't go any place without her clothes. She'll finish up in here. Let's get this body to the basement." The woman made a disgusted sound. "I ain't fond of this job."

"Yeah, but sometimes I'd rather take care of the dead. They ain't nearly so much trouble as the loonies upstairs."

Dinah waited until she was certain they were gone, then crawled out from under the laundry. She took a deep, purging breath. Her thoughts were scattered with fear of discovery, and she had to force herself to stay calm.

She quickly pushed the discipline chest into an obscure corner, hiding it behind chairs, chests, and mouse-eaten blankets, willing back feelings of guilt and tears of remorse.

After dressing in Daisy's traveling clothes and extinguishing the lamp, Dinah crept from the building, Daisy's travel bag clutched to her chest. Once outside, her pulse quivered in the crisp February air.

The train's beckoning whistle blew in the distance. Pulling the hood of Daisy's cape over her hair, Dinah hurried, head bent low, toward the sounds of freedom.

Fletcher Ranch, Sierra Nevada Mountains

Lucas held the last board in place while Tristan hammered it. After they were done, they stood back and examined the long, low building, their warm breath forming clouds before their faces. Erecting a bunkhouse in February was no easy task.

"How many of the children do you figure will be able to sleep in here?"

"No more than ten. There are eight of them now; that gives us two beds to spare in case we find others." Tristan pointed to a thick grove of oaks. "I want to build a stable over there, but I don't want to start it until the children return from the reservation school. They can help with it."

Lucas stroked his chin and shook his head. "It'll take longer if the children help."

Tristan dropped the hammer into the tool chest and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

Despite the cool air, they had each worked up a sweat.

"Doesn't matter. I would have had them help with this building if there had been time, but they need a place to sleep when they get here. I hated like hell to have them sleeping in the stable last summer, but there wasn't time to do anything else. I want to start on the addition to the house as soon as possible, too. By next winter, they'll have rooms there."

"It sounds as if you'd like to arrange to have them schooled closer to home."

"I'm working on it."

Tristan shaded his eyes against the harsh February sun and squinted at the temporary bungalow they'd finished. "I don't imagine they'll mind sleeping out here, but damn it, Lucas, it makes it look like I'm running an orphanage, and I'm not. They'll all be Fletchers soon enough, and they will all live like Fletchers, not like orphans being given a handout."

"Each has a hell of a lot more now than he did when we found them," Lucas offered, "thanks to you. They consider you their hero, you know. Especially Little Hawk. Do you ever think you'll break him of his nasty habit of picking pockets?"

"He can always become a politician."

They both laughed, and Tristan's smile lingered as he remembered his first meeting with the boy with the crippled foot. He'd watched him work the streets of Sacramento, picking shoppers clean. When Tristan had grabbed the little guttersnipe by the ear and hauled him into an alley, the lad pretended Tristan was hurting him and screamed loud enough to bring the law.

"Is that what you want to do? Bring the police?" Tristan had asked, close to the boy's ear. "How will you explain the bounty bulging your pockets?"

Little Hawk's black eyes had snapped with intelligence. He had a quick tongue and a fine vocabulary. In the end, though, he'd come with Tristan willingly. Not that day, certainly, but over the next week, Tristan continued to witness his behavior until the day another gentleman, not nearly so generous as Tristan, had hauled Little Hawk off to the sheriff. After allowing the boy to fidget uncomfortably for a satisfactory period of time, Tristan intervened, claiming responsibility for the boy's actions. Little Hawk had been the first child to come and live on the ranch.

"I've had a good life, Lucas. I want to give a little back."

"You had a good life in spite of Zelda Fletcher?"

To this day, Zelda's name filled Tristan with immeasurable anger, and not only because of what she'd done to him. She hadn't seemed happy unless she made everyone around her miserable. Including his father. Especially his sister. "I despise her more for what she did to Emily than for anything she did to me. Or even my father."

Lucas sputtered a sound of disbelief. "Combing the countryside for homeless half bloods would"

have anything to do with learning about your real mother, now, would it?"

They hadn't discussed his lineage openly. Tristan had wondered when Lucas would bring it up. Discovering that the woman who had given him birth had disposed of him and his twin brother like garbage had breathed new life into Tristan's complacent one. Learning that his brother had been left to die and was miraculously found by a kindly trapper made Tristan realize how lucky he'd been, in spite of the woman who had raised him.

"Knowing Wolf and I could have been two orphaned half bloods bordering on delinquency was reason enough for me to do something, Lucas. What I see in the eyes of those children I could easily have found in myself."

Lucas emitted a sigh. "Aw, and you refuse to call yourself a hero."

In spite of himself, Tristan allowed a reluctant grin. "Kiss my ass."

Lucas feigned an adoring look. "Ooooh, with pleasure, my lord." Sobering, he added, "Having eight extra children around all spring and summer will put a burden on Alice. She says she won't mind the cooking, but Leeta senses Alice doesn't feel up to it." He muttered an oath. "She's nearly sixty, Tristan. She's got problems she'd never complain to you about. Like her gout. Did you know she suffers from gout?"

Tristan felt a squiggle of discomfort. Alice Linberg had been old and a part of the family since he could remember. He didn't like to think about his life without her. She'd had the warmth and compassion Zelda hadn't.

"She's never complained to me about anything."

"And why would she? She'll be making your breakfast the day she keels over and dies."

Tristan vowed to lighten her load. The problem would be getting Alice to agree to it.

"Anyway, Leeta's already offered to help as much as possible with the children and in the house."

"Leeta deserves better than you. Why she puts up with you I'll never know." Tristan lifted the extra boards off the ground as if they were twigs, and swung them onto his shoulder.

Lucas picked up the tool box and followed him to the smithy. "Jealous?"

Tristan couldn't stop his smile. They'd been over this dozens of times before. "Not of the noose she has around your neck."

Lucas uttered a laugh. "I've told you before, you pitiful bachelor, it's only a noose if you're miserable, and I'm a happy man."

Coralee's defection so close to their wedding date still burned in Tristan's gut. He'd done a complete turnaround since. "Marriage isn't a natural state for a man."

"Didn't you say you've offered the new nurse marriage?"

"But that's different," Tristan explained, ignoring Lucas's expression of disbelief. "It's only a noose if you're miserable. David has assured me that this woman I've hired is obedient, even-tempered, and reliable."

Lucas's shoulders shook with quiet laughter. "You've described your hounds."

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