

✧ *Sisters at Heart* • 2 ✧

When the
HEART
Heals

A NOVEL

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NOBLE SPRINGS, MISSOURI
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Rosemary Saxon startled awake. Downstairs, her dog sounded like he was attempting to burst through the front door. His bark was one continuous “rawr rawr rawr,” interspersed with deep growls.

A glance out the window told her daylight waited somewhere beyond the horizon. She flung her wrapper over her shoulders and tiptoed down to the entryway. Her heart thudded in her throat at skittering noises on the porch.

Crouching next to Bodie, she placed her hand on the raised fur along his back. “Shh. We’re fine.” She inched to the window and peered through a corner of the lace curtain. Blackness.

Bodie growled low in his chest. Her pulse gradually slowed as she stroked his velvety ears, reassured by his solid presence next to her. Anything that got through her locked door wouldn’t get past Bodie.

“I hope you didn’t wake me because you smelled a raccoon.”

The dog relaxed against her and licked her fingers. After a moment she turned and walked to the kitchen, her steps sure in the darkness.

She struck a match against the surface of the cookstove and lit a lamp, then returned to the sitting room to glance at the case clock atop a bookshelf.

“Oh, Bodie, why today? It’s five in the morning.” She massaged her temples. “I need to be alert when I call on the doctor.” A ripple of nervousness tingled across her chest. So much depended on Dr. Stewart’s response.

Resigned to wakefulness, Rosemary opened the firebox and tossed several chunks of wood over the banked coals. As soon as the sky lightened, she’d step out the front door to investigate the reason for Bodie’s excitement.

She considered the possibilities. This section of the state remained in some turmoil since the war, with refugees occasionally coming through town seeking assistance. Maybe someone had stopped to ask for help.

“At this hour? I doubt it.” She rubbed the dog’s ears. “Most likely one of those critters you like to tree.”

When dawn approached, she padded to the entryway, slid the bolt aside, and opened the door. She glanced up and down the deserted street. The houses across the way remained dark.

A scrap of paper protruded from beneath the rug she kept on the porch for Bodie. When she bent to retrieve it, she noticed footprints in the frost that bristled on the wooden porch. A trail led from the gate in her picket fence to the door and away. Someone *had* been outside. Those weren’t animal tracks.

Rosemary grabbed the paper and backed into the house, slamming and bolting the door. With shaking hands she unfolded the wrinkled brown page.

I no wat yore up to with yore witchs brew. Be warned.

Shocked, she stared at the message. What witches' brew? Someone went to a great deal of trouble to deliver a warning to the wrong person. She'd lived in Noble Springs for over a year and no one had gone this far to make her feel unwelcome.

She paced to the window and watched the day awaken. Thin sunshine touched the frosted landscape with tentative fingers, as though one willful storm cloud would be all the discouragement it needed to disappear. After a moment, Rosemary shrugged. She had more to do today than worry about a misdelivered, misspelled message. Later she'd go to Lindberg's Mercantile and show the paper to her sister-in-law, Faith Saxon. Now she needed to prepare for her call on Dr. Stewart.

After letting Bodie back in the house following his morning romp, Rosemary climbed the steep staircase to the second floor, rehearsing what she'd say to the doctor. Everything depended on his opinion of women as nurses. *Please, Lord, give him an open mind.* She'd had enough disrespect from Dr. Greeley, the town's elderly physician, to last her for eons.

She dressed carefully in a dove-gray watered silk dress with a high white collar. Seeking a practical look, she arranged her thick black hair in a bun at the back of her head, careful to pin loose strands in place, then settled her gray spoon bonnet over her coiffure.

After a final check in the mirror, she wrapped a green paisley shawl around her shoulders and descended the stairs. Bodie sat next to the door.

"Not now, boy. You wait here."

Rosemary straightened her shoulders and stepped into the frosty morning. Despite shrugging off the message, she examined the area for strangers before leaving the security of her picket-fenced yard. A horse-drawn buggy clipped by on the frozen road. No threat there. She strode toward Second Street, chiding herself for being overcautious.

When she reached the corner, she turned south toward the railroad tracks, her destination a building that had been the quartermaster's headquarters during the war. Now converted to business space, a new doctor had set up an office at the east end, facing the railroad tracks.

ELIJAH STEWART, PHYSICIAN, OFFICE HOURS 8:30 TO 5:00, MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY was painted in black on the white-washed wall next to his door. Rosemary paused and drew a deep breath before stepping inside.

On her right, a stove threw off waves of heat. A sofa upholstered in horsehair sat under a window at the rear of the room. Uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs shoved against the windowless left wall faced two closed doors. She supposed one led to the doctor's private office and the other to an examining room. A murmur of voices seeped from behind one of the doors.

Rosemary settled on the sofa, pushing her toes against the floorboards to keep from sliding forward on the slippery covering. Her hands perspired inside her tight gloves. To calm herself, she closed her eyes and rehearsed what she'd say when her turn came.

After several minutes, the door closest to the entry opened and a youth limped into the waiting room.

A burly man wearing a black waistcoat over rolled-up shirt-sleeves followed him. "Keep a fresh bandage on that cut, and stay off your feet as much as possible."

"Thanks, Doc." The young man tipped his hat at Rosemary as he left.

"I'm Dr. Stewart. Sorry to keep you waiting, miss." The doctor gestured toward the open door. "If you will step inside, we can discuss your complaint."

A shock of recognition rippled through her. Dr. Stewart had been a surgeon at Jefferson Barracks during her first

weeks as a nurse. He'd been there only a short time before being called to the front lines, but she remembered his distinctive height, his mop of curly hair, and his eyes, so dark they were almost black.

"Miss?"

She rose and extended her hand. "My name is Rosemary Saxon, and I didn't come with a medical complaint."

He took her hand and bowed. "Miss Saxon. Then how may I assist you?"

"I'm here to offer you my assistance." She held her voice steady. "I spent the war years as a nurse, and now I'm seeking employment as such." She pasted a determined expression on her face.

He crossed to the second door and swung it open. "Come into my office and tell me why you think I should employ a nurse in my practice." One wall of the room was lined with glass-fronted bookcases. A skeleton hanging from a hook on the wall took up space between the window and what had to be the interior door to the examination room. Dr. Stewart flung himself into an oak armchair on casters and pointed to a straight-back chair facing his desk.

Rosemary settled herself, folding her hands in her lap and willing them not to tremble. "As I said, I have several years of hospital experience in tending to wounds, administering medicines, and assisting doctors. I do not faint at the sight of blood."

"Neither do I, Miss Saxon."

"I believe there's a need for a woman's presence when doctors have female patients, and that's where I'd be most valuable. Of course, I'd be prepared for any other duties as necessary."

"You must know this is irregular." He rocked back in his chair with his arms folded across his broad chest. "I called on

Dr. Greeley when I first contemplated Noble Springs for my practice. He doesn't employ a nurse, neither male nor female."

"If I may be blunt, Dr. Greeley is an old man who's been a physician practically since the turn of the century." She sat straighter. "The war has changed many things, but Dr. Greeley isn't one of them. He believes women have no place in medicine. I disagree."

His lips twitched. "Miss Saxon, although you present a good appearance, I don't know you. You could be seeking access to my laudanum supply."

"Dr. Stewart! I assure you—I have no need of laudanum."

He waved a hand at her, chuckling. "Please excuse my humor. With your permission, I'd like to speak to someone who could vouch for you, then we'll talk again."

"I have a brother here, and the pastor of our church knows me." Her confidence wavered when she realized how weak that sounded. Of course her brother and her pastor would speak well of her. She dropped her gaze to her lap. "If you're seeking a professional recommendation, I could write to my supervisor from the Barracks. She remained in St. Louis after the war." Mentally, she berated herself for not thinking of this long ago. She should have had the information ready for him.

She knew why she hadn't. That part of her life had ended. Or so she'd believed.

After Rosemary returned home, she exchanged her silk dress for a serviceable blue and gray plaid wool skirt with matching bodice. Unless Dr. Stewart hired her, which seemed unlikely, she'd continue to volunteer her mornings at Lindberg's Mercantile while she searched for a salaried job. She heaved a deep sigh. Tonight she'd compose a letter to Alice Broadbent, and pray for a speedy response.

Bodie bounced and wiggled next to the door when she prepared to leave. She smiled at his enthusiasm.

"Of course you're coming with me. You'd be missed if I left you behind."

The air held the biting snap of a forthcoming snowstorm. Iron-gray clouds smothered the horizon. Grateful she had only two blocks to walk, Rosemary wrapped her cloak around her and covered the distance between her home and the store with rapid strides.

When she entered the building, she didn't see Faith in her usual place behind the counter. On her left, colors from bolts of fabric on display brightened the area under one window. Two cookstoves shared space with new plows in the center of the rectangular room.

Faith's "woodstove regulars," Mr. Grisbee and Mr. Slocum, looked up from their checker game next to the box stove. They'd been fixtures at the store long before Rosemary arrived in Noble Springs. Mr. Grisbee lived up to his name, with grizzled whiskers and a growly manner. In contrast, Mr. Slocum kept his gray beard neatly trimmed, and his thinning hair was regularly barbered. As Faith's grandfather's friends, they took it upon themselves to act as substitute uncles.

"Morning, Miss Rosemary," Mr. Slocum said. "You looking for Miss Faith? She's in the storeroom." As he spoke, he rose and strode to the burlap curtain hanging across the opening in the rear wall. Poking his head around the door frame, he called, "Miss Rosemary's here. You can quit your worrying."

Faith hustled past the curtain. "When you didn't arrive at nine, I was afraid you were ill. I was planning to call on you during the dinner hour."

"I went to see Dr. Stewart first thing this morning. I'm sorry to worry you." Rosemary hung her cloak on a peg and tied an apron around her waist.

Faith's lake-blue eyes widened with concern. "You went to see the new doctor? What's wrong? Why haven't you said anything?" She gestured toward the front counter. "Come and tell me."

Gratitude for her friend swept over Rosemary. "I'm healthy as a horse." She followed Faith past shelves stacked with cookware and china. Once they were out of earshot of the woodstove regulars, she lowered her voice and said, "I went to see Dr. Stewart to ask if he'd hire me to assist him as a nurse."

"A nurse? You said you'd put all that behind you."

"I know, and I meant it at the time, but now that you and Curt are married, I want to earn my own living. Curt's salary from the academy should go for the two of you, not to keep a roof over my head."

“We’d love it if you’d move in with us. I’ve told you that before.”

“Your house is already overflowing.”

“Just Grandpa and Amy and Sophia,” Faith said, referring to the young widow and her child who stayed with her grandfather while she and Curt were at work.

“Plus you and Curt. That’s a houseful.”

Faith’s expression brightened. “The mercantile is doing fairly well. I’ll pay you for your help.”

“I told you from the beginning I didn’t want to be paid. Besides, that would be no different than taking part of Curt’s salary.” She squeezed Faith’s hand. “I love spending mornings here. But I need to look after myself. Nursing is what I know.”

“When does Dr. Stewart want you to come to work?”

Rosemary looked down at their clasped hands. “Never, I’m afraid. He didn’t seem to take my request seriously. Then when he asked for recommendations, I couldn’t think of anyone but Reverend French and Curt. Not very impressive.”

“Did he say that?”

“No. He just said he’d let me know soon. I think that was a polite way to get me out the door.”

“Let’s say you’re right, and he doesn’t hire you. There are bound to be places in town where you could work. Why don’t we make a list?” Faith leaned on the counter, winding a loose strand of her straw-blond hair around one finger. “How about a paid companion for an elderly lady?” She scribbled some notes on a sheet of paper.

“What elderly lady? I don’t know any.”

“Could you be a seamstress?”

“I hate sewing.”

“You’re a wonderful cook.”

“None of the ladies who could afford a cook would want

me. Most everyone who knows I was a nurse thinks I'm vulgar for having touched men's bodies."

"That's bound to pass in time."

Rosemary slid an arm around Faith's waist. "I'll think of something. Please don't worry."

The bell over the door jingled as Mrs. Raines, one of the mercantile's steady customers, entered. Her gaze slid past Rosemary and settled on Faith. "Mrs. Saxon, the druggist told me you have several excellent shaving soaps. Mr. Raines would like to try something different."

Rosemary watched while Faith showed the woman an assortment of round pots, each bearing the name of the company that produced the soap. She thought of the shaving compound she prepared for Curt. Maybe she could . . . No. She'd have to sell dozens each week. As if that were likely to happen.



Rosemary drew the hood of her cloak around her face as she made her way home through blowing snow. Frozen droplets struck her nose and cheeks, melting to run down her neck. Bodie trotted at her side, his eyes squinted against the swirling flakes. His feathery collie-like fur hung in limp strings. She'd stayed longer at the mercantile than she'd planned and now dusk had settled over the streets. Even the horses that passed on the road seemed in a hurry to get out of the storm.

She paused in front of the barbershop at the corner of Second Street and peered in the direction of her house. A shadowy figure moved eastward beyond her fence, then disappeared into the gray twilight. Bodie growled low in his throat.

"That's enough. We're almost there." The last thing she needed was to have her dog chase after a fellow pedestrian.

Bodie didn't weigh more than forty pounds, but he didn't know that.

Rosemary crossed the street and covered the remaining distance to her front gate, stepping with care over icy patches on the boardwalk. When she unfastened the latch, her gaze fell on fresh tracks leading to her porch and back to the street. The person she'd seen must have been inside her yard.

Drawing her cloak to one side, she placed a foot inside one of the tracks. The outline dwarfed her small boot. A man's shoe, no doubt. But who? If Curt had stopped by, he would have waited.

Shivering, she followed Bodie up the brick pathway to the porch steps, then paused at the foot of the stairs. Another set of footprints led around the house. Partially filled in by snow, they remained distinct enough for her to see they were made by a smaller shoe. Two people inside her fence. Three if she counted her predawn visitor. A chill ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the snowy evening. She dropped her hand to Bodie's collar and held him close until she had locked and bolted her door.

With shaking hands she built up the fire in the kitchen, then draped her cloak over a chair to dry. She'd been on her own since Curt and Faith married last October. Until today, she hadn't given much thought to her vulnerability. Perhaps Faith was right. She could join them in the large home at the west end of town and give up her notions of independence.

Rosemary sank into a chair and rested her chin on her closed fist, considering the idea. If she moved in with her brother and his wife, how long would it be before people pitied Curt for being burdened with his spinster sister?

She shook her head. She would take care of herself. By herself.

Water bubbled from the spout of the teakettle and sputtered

on the stovetop. She stepped into the pantry and brought out a glass jar containing a special jasmine tea mixture that she used when she needed to focus her thoughts. After measuring leaves into a white porcelain teapot, she poured hot water over them, savoring the perfume-like fragrance of jasmine flowers.

Bodie had wriggled behind the cookstove and lay there panting with contentment. The sable patch around his left eye gave him a mischievous appearance. Rosemary grinned. As long as she had her watchdog, she'd stay right where she was. If the Lord wanted her to have a husband, he'd send someone her way. And if not, she believed he'd show her how to support herself without burdening her brother.

The dog stirred and pricked one ear up. Growling, he crawled out from his retreat and darted to the front door. His deep barks shattered the fragile peace.



Elijah Stewart took a step away from the door. From the sound of the barking, Miss Saxon must keep bulldogs in her sitting room. Footsteps approached. In a moment the door opened a crack and she peeked out at him.

“Dr. Stewart?” Her voice rose to an incredulous pitch. “What are you doing here?” Face reddening, she stepped back, motioning him to enter. “I mean, I didn’t expect to see you.”

A sable and white dog stood at her side eyeing him, hackles raised. The animal looked smaller than his bark. He held the back of his hand toward the dog’s nose, then moved with caution into the closet-like entryway. A flight of enclosed stairs rose directly in front of him. To the right, a lamp burned on a table in the tidy sitting room.

Miss Saxon gestured toward a pair of cushioned chairs beneath the front window. “Please, sit.”

He removed his hat and settled onto one of the chairs. She

opened the curtains, then remained on her feet, facing him. Surprised, he raised an eyebrow. “Am I to be on display?”

“I’m alone here. It’s not proper for me to entertain a gentleman caller. With the curtains open, anyone can see we’re not behaving in an unseemly fashion. It’s a beastly night, or we would have talked on the porch.”

“You didn’t tell me you lived alone.”

“You didn’t ask,” she said, with a testy edge to her voice.

Prickly women made him nervous. Turning his hat in his hands, he surveyed her plain wool dress. So she didn’t spend her days dressed in silks—that much was to her credit. “I stopped by a bit earlier, but no one was home. I apologize for not leaving my card.”

She nodded. “As I said, I didn’t expect you at all after our meeting. I’ve had no opportunity to contact my supervisor.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I thought not. Well, thank you for hearing me out this morning. I wish I could offer you some refreshment before you leave, but I’ve only just returned from town.” She moved toward the door.

He shook his head at her haste to send him away. “Do you always jump to conclusions?”

“Pardon?”

“I came here to tell you I’m willing to give you a try as a nurse in my practice. Of course, most of the time you’ll be occupied with duties other than nursing. Preparing medications, keeping records current, tidying the office.” He waved a hand. “Things like that.”

Miss Saxon left the doorway and sank onto the chair facing him. “Tidying the office? You want a housekeeper, not a nurse.”

Elijah ran his finger under his too-tight collar. Definitely a prickly woman. Her words about being present when he saw

female patients had convinced him he needed her help, but if she was going to work for him, she needed to understand who was in charge.

“Miss Saxon, as you no doubt experienced at Jefferson Barracks, nurses were called upon to do everything from writing letters to changing soiled linens and scrubbing floors. If you’re willing to perform those same duties in my office, you’re hired.” He rose and replaced his hat. “I’ll expect you at half past eight on Monday morning. If you have any qualms, then I wish you well in your future endeavors. Good evening.”

Rosemary rummaged in a back corner of her wardrobe and removed a rust-colored calico dress. The sight of the plain frock brought the smells and sounds of the Barracks hospital to her memory. She bit her lower lip, wishing she knew another way to support herself. Any acceptance she'd gained since arriving in Noble Springs would surely disappear once word spread that she was employed as a nurse.

The winter chill in her bedroom offered little incentive for reflection. She dropped the gown over her petticoats and fastened the buttons on the bodice, then dashed downstairs to her warm kitchen. The dried thyme and rosemary hanging from the ceiling beams lent the room a savory aroma. She sniffed with appreciation, pinching a bit of her namesake herb between her fingers to stir into her breakfast cornbread.

As she slid the pan into the oven, she heard the sound of a key in the lock. Bodie scooted out from behind the stove and ran into the sitting room, his tail fanning the air. Rosemary hurried after him.

“Just a moment. I need to move the bolt,” she called.

Her brother, Curt Saxon, bent to kiss her cheek after the

door opened. “I stopped by to wish you well.” He stepped back, his large hands gripping her upper arms. “Are you sure you’re ready to do this?” A corner of the faded scar on his neck showed above the high collar of his shirt. His dark brown hair bore the fresh tracks of a comb.

She hid a thankful smile. His teaching job at the academy had done wonders for his spirit, shattered after wartime experiences.

“I’ll be fine. A local practice won’t be anything like hospital wards.” She took his hand and led him to the kitchen, talking as she went. “I don’t know about Dr. Stewart, though. I think he studied arrogance in medical school.”

He snickered. “As long as you keep a tight rein on your temper, all should be well.”

“I told you what he said when he was here Friday evening. If he continues to talk to me like that, I can’t guarantee anything.” She placed two cups on the table and poured tea for both of them.

He inhaled the steam rising from his cup. “Chamomile. This should help keep you calm.”

“Stop teasing. I’m not that bad.”

“Sorry.” He sipped his tea, a slight frown creasing his forehead. “Why did you have the door bolted? Usually you have trouble remembering to lock it.”

Rosemary stood and lifted a flowerpot from the windowsill. She removed the folded piece of brown paper tucked beneath the pot and handed the scrap to Curt. “This was left on my porch before daylight Friday morning. I think whoever wrote it has mistaken me for someone else. Regardless, the thought of a trespasser frightens me. So I bolt the door.”

He scanned the brief message. “Witches’ brew, eh? No wonder you’re frightened. The writer sounds unhinged. I wish you’d agree to come and live with us.”

“I don’t want to be dependent on anyone. You know that.”

“This changes things.” He tapped the message.

“No it doesn’t.” She locked eyes with him. “Give me a year. Then we’ll discuss this again.”

“A year from when Faith and I were married, not a year from today.”

“Promise you won’t bring up the subject in the meantime?”

Curt stood, blowing out an exasperated sigh. “Maybe.” He winked. “But the offer stands, anytime you change your mind.”

“Get on with you.” She gave him a mock shove. “Your students are waiting.”

After he left, she ate a quick breakfast, left Bodie in the house, and headed for Dr. Stewart’s office. She needed to prove herself to her brother, as well as to her new employer. It wouldn’t do to be late.



The doctor met Rosemary at the door, impressive in a black coat and dark gray waistcoat. “So you decided to take the job. I wasn’t sure.”

She stifled the tart reply that rose to her lips. “I appreciate the opportunity. Thank you. Now if you’ll show me my responsibilities, I’ll begin.”

“We discussed your responsibilities on Friday evening. What we didn’t discuss is salary. Will you accept twenty percent of what comes in every week?” A rueful smile crossed his lips. “Sometimes I’m paid with a ham or venison. You’d get a share of that too.”

“A percentage would be satisfactory. Thank you.” The piddling amount she received from her grandparents’ trust fund covered her rent but didn’t leave much for food and other necessities.

“Excellent.” The doctor exhaled with a huff. He sounded like he’d been holding his breath.

He pointed to a small slant-top desk that had been added to the room since her visit. “This will be your station unless I need your direct assistance. Last week’s receipts are in the drawer and need to be entered. That’s the ledger on the corner of the desk.”

His face took on a boyish look and he grinned at her. “I hope you’re better with figures than I am. I can compound medications all day, but my brain reels at columns of numbers.”

“My brother is a mathematician. Some of his skill has rubbed off on me.” She fought down disappointment. She’d expected to don an apron and assist him with patients, not to act as a clerk tucked away in a corner. Still, if she wanted to live without being dependent on others, she couldn’t let pride stand in the way of employment.

Dr. Stewart must have sensed her inner struggle. “Never fear. When ladies seek my advice, I’ll summon you to the examination room immediately. In the meantime, please tap on my door when a patient arrives.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

When the door to his office closed, she hung her cloak on a hook and tied her apron over her dress. She’d be ready when she was needed.

Rosemary settled behind the desk, realizing he’d positioned her against a windowless wall. A lamp hung from the center of the ceiling. The flame threw light in a broad circle but left her work area in shadow.

After studying the area, she decided to move the desk under the rear window and place the sofa against the wall. She rose and shoved against its horsehair-upholstered back. The ball feet screeched across the floorboards as the couch traveled to

the center of the room. Leaving it there, she pushed up her sleeves and steered the desk toward the window.

The door to Dr. Stewart's office flew open. "What are you doing?" His eyes widened when he saw the disarray in the waiting area.

She gestured toward the window. "If I'm to work with figures, that light is far better."

"Miss Saxon . . ." He shook his head. "You haven't been here for half an hour, and you're assuming control. I wanted you against the side wall so you could greet patients when they entered."

"This is a small room. No one is going to sneak past me." She hoped her amusement wasn't noticeable.

Apparently she didn't succeed, because he shot a sharp glance in her direction. "Anything else you want changed while I'm here?" His voice carried an edge of sarcasm.

"No."

In moments the doctor had moved the sofa from the room's center to the wall opposite his door. After arranging her desk under the window, he gave a mock bow. "I trust this is to your liking. Now if you'll excuse me, I do have more important things to attend to."

Her hospital training rescued her. "Thank you, Doctor," she said, keeping her tone respectful.

"You're welcome." A glint of humor flashed in his eyes before he turned away.



On Thursday, near the end of Rosemary's first week as Dr. Stewart's nurse, the entry door opened and a middle-aged man entered the reception area, holding his right arm close to his body. His hand was bound in cloth strips.

She jumped from her chair and hurried toward him. “My goodness. What happened?”

“Burned myself. You ain’t the doc, are you?”

“No. I’m his nurse.” A sense of pride swept through her as she said the words. She *was* a nurse, and a good one. Her service during the war had proven the fact. “Please have a seat. Dr. Stewart will be with you in a moment.” She tapped on the door to his office before returning to her desk.

He chuckled. “Figured you was too pretty to be named Elijah.”

“I’m Miss Saxon.” She opened the receipt book to a new page. “May I have your name?”

“Eldridge. We’re new here.” He raised his bandaged hand. “I was trying to burn some brush behind the house. Shouldn’t of threw kerosene on it.”

“If you can find comfrey growing around, make a poultice of the root for your burn. It will help with healing.”

Dr. Stewart stood in the doorway of the examination room. He fixed her with a stern gaze. “If you’re quite through dispensing medical advice, I’ll see the patient now.”

Mr. Eldridge rose. “She wasn’t doing no harm, Doc. My granny used comfrey. Worked good.” He preceded the doctor into the room.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Rosemary tidied her desk and prepared to leave. If she hurried, she’d have time to stop at West & Riley’s for a few groceries before dark. She suppressed a groan when the exterior door opened. A young woman stood silhouetted on the threshold.

As soon as the caller stepped inside, Rosemary recognized her. “Cassie Haddon. It’s been weeks.” Rosemary hurried across the room and seized Cassie’s hands.

“I’m so glad I found you. I went to the mercantile and Faith said you were employed here.” Her gaze took in Rosemary’s

plain dress and severe hairstyle. "As a nurse?" Her voice spiked higher.

"Yes. Whenever possible. Most of the time I'm a clerk." She tried to keep from sounding offended at her friend's incredulous tone. "Please sit and tell me what brings you all the way across town."

"Mother sent me on an errand." She twisted her hands together. "I don't have much time. My stepfather will expect me at the mercantile by half past five. I don't dare keep him waiting." Her green eyes misted, reflecting the color of the emerald ribbons on her bonnet. "Mother needs more of that tonic you prepared for her. Living with Mr. Bingham is . . . difficult."

"I can have some ready for you tomorrow."

Cassie shook her head. "At best, it will be next week before I can ask to come to town again."

"Then I'll bring it with me on Monday." She patted her friend's hand. "Suggest to your mother that she take long walks. Fresh air—"

"Are you treating my patients again, Miss Saxon?" The doctor stepped into the reception area.

Rosemary jumped to her feet. "Miss Haddon is a friend of mine, Doctor. This is a social call." She sucked in her lower lip. He had the most irritating habit of popping out of his office at awkward moments.

Ignoring her, he nodded in Cassie's direction. "Is your mother in need of medical attention? If necessary, I'll pay a visit to your home."

Cassie paled and scrambled for the door. "No. She's fine." She cast an anxious look at Rosemary. "I'll be here Monday." She whipped through the door in a whirl of green plaid taffeta.

Dr. Stewart stared after her, then ambled to the sofa and

settled against the cushioned back. He waved a hand at Rosemary. "I need to get to know folks here. Sit a moment and tell me what that was all about." In shirtsleeves, with his hair ruffled, he looked far less imposing than he had when she first called at his office.

"I met Miss Haddon and her mother last summer. They were passengers on a train that derailed. They stayed with me and my brother while the tracks were repaired." She leaned forward in her chair, caught by the interest in his dark eyes. "After they returned to St. Louis, I thought I'd seen the last of them, but by a strange coincidence, this past July Miss Haddon's mother married Elmer Bingham, a local farmer, so here they are again."

"From Miss Haddon's demeanor, it would appear all is not well?"

She stared at her hands, hesitant to gossip. "The Bingham's courtship was quite brief and their sudden marriage took place in St. Louis. From what Miss Haddon has said, she and her mother were not exactly welcomed by Mr. Bingham's servant when they arrived here. The man treats them as interlopers. As a result, Mrs. Bingham apparently suffers with nervous spells from time to time."

He stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles. His black boots were scuffed and well-worn. "So you're prescribing long walks? Then why is Miss Haddon coming back on Monday?" The tone of his voice was casual, interested.

"I prepared a tincture of valerian root for her in the past. My friend reports it had a calming effect on her mother."

His eyebrows shot up. "You can't use my practice as a dispensary for your home remedies. What if someone sickened from their use?"

"I've never sickened anybody." She stalked to the center of the room and faced him, hands on hips. "If it'll put your

mind at ease, I'll tell my friends to come to my house and not endanger your precious practice.” Rosemary swept her cloak from its hook on the wall and flung it over her shoulders. “It’s past five. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

He stood, towering over her. Up close, she noticed gray strands woven through his hair. The war had taken a toll on the young doctor she remembered. His dark eyes smoldered at her.

“Your friends may visit here at any time. Just leave your potions at home.”

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