

TRACIE
PETERSON

A

CHOICE CONSIDERED

THE HEART of CHEYENNE

2

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APRIL 1868

CHEYENNE, WYOMING

What do you mean they stole the fire ladder?" Melody Doyle asked her father over breakfast.

"Well, just what I be sayin'," her father replied. "Judge Kuykendall has run an ad in the paper sayin' somebody stole it, and he wants it back immediately."

"Seems like sneaking off with a large ladder would be difficult—and even harder to hide." She poured hot coffee in her father's cup.

"For sure it would be, now." He downed half the cup in one gulp, then folded the paper. "No doubt someone will be findin' it. Hopefully before the next fire. Oh, I forgot to be tellin' ya, I'm gonna go to the prizefight tonight."

"Are you sure you're feeling up to it, Da?"

Ever since late January when her father fell at work, his back had been giving him nothing but trouble. He couldn't even get clearance from the railroad to return to work because of the problems it was causing him.

"I'm sure to be just fine, daughter. Don't ya be worryin' none."

But Melody did worry. Da wasn't his usual self. All her life, he had been the very image of strength and resilience. These last few weeks, however, he'd seemed so weary, and Melody was certain he was in pain.

She knew her father was frustrated after taking that fall. He'd been quite high on the ladder when he'd lost his balance and hit the ground on his back. The doctor said it was a wonder he hadn't hit his head, but Da had only laughed and said if he had then there wouldn't have been any injury at all. He was a hardheaded Irishman who'd definitely gone through worse, but for some reason, this fall had taken its toll.

"There is something I was hoping we could discuss." Melody pushed back her empty plate. "Do you feel up to it?"

"For sure I do. Don't be worryin' about me. I won't be coddled."

She smiled and reached out to place her hand over his. "You've never allowed anyone to coddle you, and I won't insult you by trying to start now. In fact, what I want to say is about as far from coddling as I can get."

"Then speak. What would be on yar mind?"

For as long as Melody and her father had lived in Cheyenne, they'd called a tent home. It was the way of most section hands and their supervisors since the railroad kept them moving along the line.

Melody hadn't minded in the beginning. It was fairly comfortable—at least as much as they could make it. The entire tent wasn't much bigger than ten by ten, but it was all Melody had known for some time. Now, however, she was more than ready to enjoy the comforts of a real house with windows she could look out of and a nice large fireplace. Da seemed most content when he was living like a nomad, but not Melody.

Melody straightened. “I want to stay in Cheyenne. I know the railroad is moving out and that your job will take you west with it, but I’ve had my fill of moving from place to place. I like Cheyenne and the people we’ve come to know. Marybeth and Edward, the Taylors, Dr. Scott. They’re all good people, and I want to be a part of their lives. So I’d like to remain here when you go.

“And you won’t be that far away. They won’t get down the track more than a couple hundred miles, and you can always take the train back here on the weekends. I could find a nice place to stay and have room for you as well. Just think how pleasant it would be for you to leave the chaos of the end-of-the-tracks town and come back here to rest. You wouldn’t get to go to church with me since services are still held in the evening, but at least we’d have some time together.”

“So ya have yar heart set on staying in Cheyenne? I cannot say that this is surprisin’ to me,” Da began.

She nodded. “It’s been on my mind since Julesburg.”

“I cannot be holdin’ against ya the desire to settle yarself near friends. The folks ya named are good and godly people.” He tossed down the other half of his coffee and held out the cup for more. “But I cannot have ya stayin’ here without a man to protect ya. There will still be dangers even after the rowdies pull out.”

She refilled his cup. “But our friends will keep an eye on me. Marybeth even said I could come and live with them. I could stay in the house or in the little shed out back where they were living before the Hendersons sold them the house.”

Her father shook his head. “No, ya’ll be needin’ a husband, Melody. I’ve been feelin’ that way for a long time now. Ya need a man of yar own and children. Yar made for love and family—like yar ma.”

Melody only had vague memories of her mother. She'd died when Melody was barely ten years old. Now, almost sixteen years later, the memories were cloudy. She could hardly remember what her mother looked like, although Da said she was the spitting image of her mother.

"And while I know yar old enough to decide for yarself, I'm still yar da."

"I respect that, Da. I don't want to do anything against your wishes. I just hadn't thought of marrying anyone. You'll soon be heading west, and finding a husband in that short time is going to be difficult. After all, there's no one special in my life."

"Not that I don't have men askin' me all the time if they can be courtin' ya. Of course, they know there's a risk in approachin' me, but that's the first part of the test. If they're brave enough to come and discuss it, it shows strength of character." Da chuckled. "Yar a beauty like yar mother, and ya could have yar pick of suitors. We've only to put out the word."

"Advertise for a husband? Is that what you're suggesting?" She was surprised not to feel more appalled by the idea.

"And for sure it could work. We could be lettin' folks know that yar of a mind to marry and live here in Cheyenne. I could take this time away from me job to inspect each man and listen to his story. Then I could be pickin' a few suitors for ya to choose from. Ya know for yarself that I have God's gift of discernment. I can be tellin' when a man is truthful or false."

Melody shrugged. "I suppose we could give it a try. It's not like I must marry any of them. I can always head west with you if none of them appeal."

"And for sure ya could, and ya would, for I'll not be leavin' ya here without protection and security. After all, how would ya make yar way and pay for all that life costs ya?"

“Well, I supposed I’d get a job. I can clean house, and I’m a fair cook, as you well know.”

“Aye, that ya are, and I know ya enjoy workin’. It’s havin’ ya alone that torments me.”

Melody knew he was just concerned about her well-being. She patted his hand. “If you want to pick out some suitors for me, then I’m not opposed. I love and trust you. I don’t want to stay here to be rid of you. I’m hoping, in time, you might even want to come back and settle here as well. My children will need their grandda.”

“Could be. But ya know me wanderlust.” He beamed her a smile. “Yar a good daughter, Melody, and God has given ya sound judgment. If ya have a young man who has caught yar eye, ya might be lettin’ me know. I can talk to him and give ya my opinion. After all, the choice is gonna be yars.”

She got up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Da. I know that together we should be able to figure it out.”

He nodded and picked up his paper. “Now, didn’t ya say ya were gonna go visit Marybeth?”

“Aye. After I do up the dishes, I’ll be on my way.”

“*Is é do mhac do mhac inniú, ach is í d’iníon d’iníon go deo.*” He went back to reading.

Melody smiled at the old Irish saying. *Your son is your son today, but your daughter is your daughter forever.*

“Aye, Da. I’m yours forever.”



“And so Da said he’ll put out the word that I’m looking for a husband. I figure we have about forty-five days to find one because the doctor said Da can rejoin the workforce in June.” Melody glanced from Marybeth Vogel to Granny Taylor. These two women were her dearest friends in the world.

“That doesn’t give us a whole lot of time,” Granny Taylor observed. “Are you sure you want to choose a husband this way?”

“It wasn’t my idea. Da won’t let me stay if I’m not married.”

Marybeth had been frowning since Melody first told them of the situation. “Maybe Edward can speak to him.”

“My Jed could do the same.” Granny Taylor picked up her knitting. “I can’t abide for you to marry without love.”

“Nor I. The very thought is abominable,” Marybeth added. “You deserve love, Melody. You above all people.”

The latter comment made Melody laugh. “Why me above all? I’m nothing special.”

“But of course you are,” Granny Taylor replied. “You are God’s own child, and your heart is one of the kindest and most loving. You deserve a husband who will adore you—love you and make you happy.”

“I won’t marry a man unless I think I can love him in time.” To be honest, Melody had been somewhat concerned about this very issue. She could always refuse to marry any of the men her father chose. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if she had to push on with Da. She could always make her way back to Cheyenne. Still, the thought of leaving the friends she’d made nearly broke her heart.

“But I want more for you. I want passion and romance,” Marybeth said, sounding as if she might soon be moved to tears.

“Marybeth, you married to save your little sister from being taken away from you. You married a man for convenience.”

“Yes, but I loved him. I didn’t realize just how much, but I knew that I loved him at least as a friend.”

“Love is important, Melody. Isn’t there anyone who has

caught your eye? Made you think he might be the one?" Granny asked.

Melody thought about it for a long quiet moment. "No, there's no one. I know we live in a town where the men probably outnumber the women forty to one, but I've honestly not found myself thinking that way about anyone. You forget, I've been with Da all along the way on building this railroad. I've seen the antics of the men working the line. I know a lot of them, but they're like brothers or wayward relatives." She laughed. "Definitely not men I would consider as a husband."

"We need to get to praying about it, then," Granny said, once again setting her knitting aside.

She'd picked it up and put it down so many times that Melody thought it a wonder she ever got anything accomplished. Still, she was right about praying. Prayer was the answer for getting answers, as Granny Taylor was always saying.

"I hadn't even thought to pray yet." Melody smiled and folded her hands. "That's why I come to you, Granny. You always know the right way to handle a matter."

"Not only do we need to pray, but we need to be keeping our eyes open. I'm sure Jed might know a fella or two who would make a decent husband."

"I can also ask Edward. He spent most of his time with Fred Henderson. . . ." Marybeth's words faded.

"We all miss Fred, to be sure," Granny Taylor said. "And we'll miss Eve and the young'uns."

Fred had worked with the town marshal's office and had hired Marybeth's husband, Edward, to be a deputy in Cheyenne. Unfortunately, Fred had been shot and killed not even two weeks back, and his sweet wife had fled the town she hated. The loss was still keen, and none of the women had quite been able to move on.

“I find myself still expecting Eve to come through the door since it was her house to begin with,” Marybeth admitted. “She was such a dear friend.”

“You can’t blame her for leaving. This town would only serve to remind her of what she lost.” Granny shook her head. “I am heartily sorry for that woman. Left with two little boys and a babe soon to be born.”

“She’s got a good family,” Marybeth threw in. “They love her most dearly and will see to it that she has everything she needs. They’re quite wealthy.”

Granny gave a sigh. “But money can’t bring back the one thing she truly longs for. We need to remember her in prayer as well.”

The women were used to getting together to pray on a regular basis. Often they would talk with one another for an hour or more before speaking to the Lord, so Granny’s comment was expected.

“Yes, and we should pray for my da,” Melody requested. “His back is hurting him something fierce. He doesn’t say much about it, but I know he’s in pain.”

“And pray for my Jed. His arthritis is causing him grief in his hands. A mechanic with bad hands won’t be much use to the railroad. And while we’ve saved a good bit of money, it won’t last that long if he finds himself out of work. Of course, we could go live with one of the children and make ourselves useful to them.”

“I’d hate to see you leave Cheyenne.” Having Granny Taylor here was one of the reasons Melody wanted to stay. She was a sort of mother figure to the younger woman, and after so many years without her own mother, Melody cherished Granny’s advice.