

Unending
Devotion

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For all of the many women who are
helpless, hurting, and abused:

May you find a way out of the coldness of winter
into the fresh spring of freedom and hope.

Chapter

I

JANUARY 1883 CENTRAL MICHIGAN

*I*t was time. The drunk shanty boys were finally quiet.

Lily Young peered up through the shadows of the early morning darkness to the balcony that ran the length of the hotel. It was higher than she'd thought. Good thing she'd brought a rope.

She drummed her stiff fingers inside her mittens and lifted her gaze to the clear sky overhead. The last stars were fading. The lumber town would awaken with the first hints of light. And soon the woods would ring with the chopping and sawing of the shanty boys, who needed to make the most of each minute of daylight for their hard labor.

Which meant if her rescue was going to succeed, it was now or never.

But where was Edith?

Lily stepped away from the building and scanned the windows of the upper floor. Only yesterday, she'd looked the young girl in the eyes, watched the tears pool in their painful depths, and confirmed the escape plans.

Had the girl changed her mind so soon?

A window scraped open. Each halting inch up, the wooden frame rasped like a dying man gasping for breath. A bare foot poked through the opening followed by a slender bare leg.

Lily released a swoosh of air that made a white puff in front of her. "Good," she whispered. Another life rescued from the pit of hell. Yes, it was only one. And it wasn't her sister.

But it was a life that needed saving nonetheless. How could she stand back and do nothing—especially when her own sister was suffering the same fate somewhere?

The young girl climbed out the window. She took one step forward then stopped and wrapped her arms across her cami-sole. Dressed only in her undergarments, the girl shook like twigs in a winter gale.

"Edith. Here," Lily called softly. "I'm over here."

The girl tiptoed to the edge of the balcony and leaned over, her eyes wide with fear.

"We're fine. Everyone's still asleep." Lily uncoiled the rope. "Tie this on the rail."

She tossed the rope toward the girl.

With shaking hands Edith wrapped the cord around a post, all the while casting glances over her shoulder toward the open window.

"You're going to be fine," Lily whispered. "Just focus."

The girl managed to hoist herself over the banister. With faltering movements, she snaked down the rope until Lily's outstretched arms reached her and supported her the rest of the way.

When the girl's feet finally touched the hard-packed snow,

Lily grabbed the coarse sack she'd left in the snowdrift and dug through it for the items she'd brought for Edith. "Quick. Put these on." She handed Edith her only rubbers and then draped a blanket around the girl's shoulders.

"Curse the men who think women are no better than cattle," Lily muttered. The tavern owner had confiscated his girls' coats and shoes to keep them from running away. Of course, not all the prostitutes wanted to leave their life of degradation. But the minute she'd seen Edith, she'd known the girl was miserable, as miserable as her sister would be by now.

Lily slipped an arm around Edith. If only she could find Daisy . . .

During the past few weeks of living in Farwell's only temperance hotel, Lily had done the best she could to search for her sister among the dregs. And after questioning some of the prostitutes, like Edith, she was confident Daisy hadn't been in Farwell.

None of the shanty boys she'd talked to had seen anyone who fit the description of her sister. And she'd jabbered with plenty of the boys over the past month while helping photograph the lumber camps in the area.

The squeak of cutter blades on the icy road and the jangle of horse harnesses sent Lily's heart slipping downhill. Silently, she stepped to the side of the building and pulled Edith next to her. She put her mittened hand to her lips in warning.

"If Big Joe finds me, he'll beat me." The girl's voice wobbled.

"Stay right by my side," Lily whispered. "I won't let anything happen to you."

The cutter inched down the wide main street of the sleeping lumber town. In the predawn light, Lily could make out the hunched back of the driver. She released a breath and squeezed Edith. "Everything's all right. It's Oren."

Lily moved away from the hotel and waved at the oncoming cutter.

It slid to a stop, rattling the camera equipment that was piled high on the supply sled tied to the rear. Beneath a black derby hat, Oren's bushy eyebrows narrowed to a dark V. He shook his head and muttered, "What in the hairy hound do you think you're doing?"

"Edith needs a ride out of town," Lily said. "And since we're leaving, I figured we could give her a hand."

"Girl, you're going to be the death of me one of these days."

She was sure Oren was remembering the rescue from the previous month over near Averill that had resulted in a chase and several gunshots. "Well now"—she patted his arm—"if you stay quiet enough, we'll be able to get out of town before anyone hears us."

Oren grumbled again. Thankfully his walrus mustache muffled most of his words.

Lily helped Edith into the cutter and draped a thick buffalo robe across her. She brushed the girl's tangled hair out of her face. The heavy locks were in need of a good washing and brushing.

"You're going to be just fine now." She gave the girl the same smile and reassurance she used to give her sister on the many dark and lonesome nights when it had been just the two of them, when she'd been the only one to comb the tangles from Daisy's hair, hold her tight, and wipe the tears off her cheeks. She'd had to be both mother and father for as long as she could remember.

The ache in her heart squeezed painfully. Who was wiping Daisy's tears now?

A gust of frigid air slipped under Lily's collar and slithered down her back. She shivered and drew her coat tighter. But the cold tentacles of guilt gripped her insides and wouldn't let go.

How could she have let this happen? It had always been her job to protect her little sister and to make sure she was safe and happy. How could she have failed so horribly?

Lily climbed into the open sleigh and tucked the blanket under Edith's quivering chin. She grazed the girl's cheek. "It's all over now."

The girl nodded, but her focus darted to the open window of the hotel, where the edge of a tattered curtain blew through the opening like a crooked finger beckoning Edith to return.

"By the time the cookee blows the nooning horn," Lily said softly, "you'll be settled safe and warm in your new home."

Home . . .

Tight anguish pushed up Lily's throat.

If only someone had rescued her and Daisy long ago . . . and if only she and Daisy could have had a real home . . . and a real family . . . then maybe Daisy wouldn't have had to run away.

Lily ducked her head to hide the sudden pool of tears that the bitter January air had already turned cold.

The slam of a door somewhere down the street echoed in the hollowness of dawn, and she quickly wedged herself into the tight space left on the seat.

"We best be going." She kept her gaze straight ahead.

Oren grunted. "Now that I'm packed in here like a dill pickle in a pill bottle, I won't be needing this." Before Lily could protest, he shoved aside his buffalo robe and tossed it toward her.

She caught the heavy fur, and a waft of sweet tobacco enveloped her. Of course Oren wasn't smoking his corncob pipe at such an ungodly early hour of the morning, but once the sun rose above the tips of the white pines, the older man was rarely without it.

"You'll be needing the blanket soon enough." Lily pushed the robe back his way. Just because she'd covered Edith with hers didn't mean she expected Oren to suffer.

Oren ignored her outstretched arm and picked up the reins. “I’ve got more blubber than a bear in hibernation.”

“This was my doing, and I’ll bear the responsibility.” She held her outstretched arm rigid.

He flicked the reins at his team and the cutter lurched forward. “If anyone’s going to need the warmth this morning, it’s you two bean poles. Especially now that I’ll have to go out of my way to drop your new friend off at Molly May’s.”

Lily sat back and tugged the robe across her lap. A smile tickled the corners of her lips. Even though he’d grumbled like usual, she’d known he would help. He always did.

Oren caught her gaze above Edith’s head. His eyes shone with admiration. And something else, gentler. He might never say the words, but Lily knew he understood her agony and would do anything in the world to help her.

“Thank you,” she mouthed.

“Oh, don’t thank me,” he muttered. “I’ll be making you work your hind end off at the next place to make up for this here delay.”

“I always work hard. And you know it. Besides, if it weren’t for me dragging those shanty boys over to the camera, you wouldn’t have half as many customers.”

He just snorted.

This time her smile broke free. She might not have a real family, but she had a good friend. And she couldn’t forget to thank the Lord for that.

And she couldn’t forget to thank the Lord that he’d helped her save another poor young girl. If He’d made it His mission to save lost sinners while on earth, then certainly she could do no less with her life. Besides, if she could steal Edith away, then she couldn’t give up hope that someday, somehow, she’d find her sister too.

She’d rescue her or die trying.



Lily tramped up the plank step of the hotel and read the bold capital letters painted above the door: *Northern Hotel Est. 1881*. Out of four hotels in Harrison, the Northern was the only one with temperance leanings. She prayed there would be rooms available.

She refused to stay in any establishment that was “wet.” She’d just as soon set up a tent and sleep in the woods before she supported the drinking and carousing that too many of the lumber-town hotels offered. Even if that meant she’d have to freeze to death or face a pack of wolves.

Of course she was more than ready to get out of the sub-freezing temperature. After traveling most of the day from Midland, where they’d left Edith in the capable hands of Molly May and her home for young girls, Lily was stiffer and colder than one of the long icicles hanging from the slanted eaves above her head.

With a determined set of her shoulders, she pushed the door open. A whoosh of warmth greeted her, along with the thick odor of woodsmoke and overcooked beans.

A gush of wind swept into the room with her before she wrangled the door closed. She swiped off her hood and used her teeth to tug snow-crusting mittens from her numb fingers. She stuffed the mittens into her coat pocket, and only then did she realize how silent the room had grown.

Several kerosene lamps hung from the ceiling and cast a smoky dim light over two long tables half filled with big burly men holding forks poised above their tin plates heaped high with beans, fried potatoes, and salt pork. A dozen pairs of eyes were fixed upon her.

She gave them a nod. “Evening.” Then her gaze found what she sought—the proprietor or perhaps his wife—coming

through the door from the kitchen carrying a steaming coffee-pot in each hand.

“My, my, my. What do we have here?” The husky woman stopped short. Her face was as red as raw beef, likely heated from the six-hole range Lily glimpsed in the kitchen.

“Evening,” Lily said, this time to the woman.

The way everyone was staring at her, she might have believed she was the first young woman they’d ever seen—if she hadn’t known better. The fact was, there were too many women like Edith who lived and worked in the lumber towns. Lily knew she was rare, only in that she wasn’t up on the table dancing in her skimpiess.

“I’m checking to see if you have any rooms available for lease.”

“If there aren’t any, don’t you worry,” one of the men said. “I can make a spot for you in mine.”

A chorus of guffaws rounded the tables, but Lily didn’t bother to acknowledge the crude comment. After the past several months of living in various lumber towns, she was used to the depravation of the men.

The big woman ambled to the closest table and thumped the coffeepots down, sloshing some of the dark liquid onto the oilskin table covering that looked like it already had plenty of spills. “Now, boys, you know Mr. Heller and I run a good Christian establishment here. My husband and I won’t put up with any nonsense under this roof.”

“But if the girl needs a bed,” the man continued, “I’m just doing my *Christian* duty by offering to share.”

“You don’t get her in your room,” another man growled. “If anybody gets the girl, it’s gonna be me.”

“I think you’ve just been itching for a fight all day, ain’t you, Jimmy?” The first man pushed back from the table and rose to his feet.

“Boys, now don’t you upset dinner.” Mrs. Heller crossed her thick arms across her grease-splattered apron. “I won’t stand for it.”

But Jimmy was already rising. Before Lily could think to move, he’d come toward her and grabbed her. Within seconds she found herself in a tug-of-war between the two shanty boys.

“Let go of me!” she demanded, but they were too busy yelling at each other to notice.

Mrs. Heller abandoned the coffeepots and charged toward the men. She pulled a thick wooden spoon from her deep apron pocket and wielded it in front of her. “Boys, enough! This is just enough of this nonsense! If you don’t stop, you’ll force me to give you a whoppin’ with my spoon.” But they didn’t pay attention to her either.

For an instant, alarm shattered the usual calmness of Lily’s spirit. Maybe she’d been wrong to disregard Oren’s hesitation when she’d first insisted he take her along during his itinerant picture taking among the lumber camps.

“Those towns are loaded with danger,” he’d muttered. *“They’re infested with graybacks and deadbeats. And if one doesn’t get you, the other will.”*

So far she’d avoided both the lice and any encounters with rowdy men. But there were plenty of shanty boys who had referred to Harrison as “Hell’s Waiting Room.” What if they’d been right?

“Take your hands off the young lady.” A stern voice rose above the clatter.

The two men ceased their struggle, and silence fell over the room.

A broad-shouldered muscular man had abandoned his plate and risen from the bench. An unruly lock of blond hair fell across his forehead above dark green eyes. There was something commanding about his expression.

“I don’t think this is any way to treat a guest,” he said, “do you?”

None of the men said anything, but the two holding her made no move to unhand her.

“Connell’s right.” Mrs. Heller huffed. Her face was a shade redder than it had been before—if that were possible. “This one looks like she’s a decent God-fearing girl. And even if she’s not—”

“Oh, you can rest assured that I am,” Lily said quickly, struggling to free her arms from the tight grip of the men.

Mrs. Heller pointed her spoon at the two men. “I’ve a mind to write home to your mamas about your foolishness. And you know as well as I do, my letters would bring those poor women to tears.”

One of the men released her, but the other—Jimmy—just gave a short laugh, revealing a black space where he was missing a top front tooth on one side with only half of a jagged tooth on the other. His fingers dug into her arm, and his smile was hard with the lust she’d seen often enough.

But she’d never worried about the boys before. Oren had always been there to scare them away.

She glanced at the door. He was probably still across the street chatting with a couple of local business owners about the lumber camps in the area. Maybe she shouldn’t have been in such a hurry to get inside and get warmed up. Oren was always warning that her impatience was going to get her into trouble eventually.

He would come looking for her before too long—of that she had no doubt. She could only pray it was sooner rather than later.

Connell took a step forward. “Let the girl get back to her business, and we’ll get back to our meal before it gets cold.”

He wore the usual short woolen mackinaw, a bright red-and-

black-plaid coat that many shanty boys wore, allowing them to be better seen in the woods and protected against the many accidents that abounded in the camps.

He'd unbuttoned the light coat revealing suspenders stretched across a thick cotton shirt. He looked just as rugged as any other shanty boy she'd seen, but from the expectant way the men stared at him, he'd obviously earned their respect.

Except, of course, the respect of the man still holding her arm.

Lily gave a rough yank, trying to dislodge herself.

But Jimmy's pinch sank through her flesh and reached her bone.

She gave a yelp of protest.

Connell took another step forward. "Let go of her, Jimmy. Now." His voice turned ominous.

Jimmy jerked her against his armpit into the sour odor of a day's worth of hard labor. "And if I wanna keep her, what're you gonna do about it, McCormick?"

"You know I don't want any trouble," Connell said. "But you're taking this too far."

Lily just shook her head. She'd had enough. She wasn't the type of person to stand around waiting for help. She believed that if you wanted something done, then you better just roll up your sleeves and do it yourself.

"I don't take kindly to any of you shanty boys touching me," she said. "So unless I give you permission, from now on, you'd best keep your hands off me."

With the last word, she lifted her boot and brought the heel down on Jimmy's toes. She ground it hard.

Like most of the other shanty boys, at the end of a day out in the snow, he'd taken off his wet boots and layers of damp wool socks to let them dry overnight before donning them again for the next day's work.

Jimmy cursed, but before he could move, she brought her boot down on his other foot with a smack that rivaled a gun crack.

This time he howled. And with an angry curse, he shoved her hard, sending her sprawling forward.

She flailed her arms in a futile effort to steady herself and instead found herself falling against Connell McCormick.

His arms encircled her, but the momentum of her body caused him to lose his balance. He stumbled backward. “Whoa! Hold steady!”

Her skirt and legs tangled with his, and they careened toward the rows of dirty damp socks hanging in front of the fireplace. The makeshift clotheslines caught them and for a moment slowed their tumble. But against their full weight, the ropes jerked loose from the nails holding them to the beams.

In an instant, Lily found herself falling. She twisted and turned among the clotheslines but realized that her thrashing was only lassoing her against Connell.

In the downward tumble, Connell slammed into a chair near the fireplace. Amidst the tangle of limbs and ropes, she was helpless to do anything but drop into his lap.

With a thud, she landed against him.

Several socks hung from his head and covered his face. Dirty socks covered her shoulders and head too. Their stale rotten stench swarmed around her. And for a moment she was conscious only of the fact that she was near to gagging from the odor.

She tried to lift a hand to move the sock hanging over one of her eyes but found that her arms were pinned to her sides. She tilted her head and then blew sideways at the crusty, yellowed linen. But it wouldn’t budge.

Again she shook her head—this time more emphatically. Still the offending article wouldn’t fall away.

Through the wig of socks covering Connell's head, she could see one of his eyes peeking at her, watching her antics. The corner of his lips twitched with the hint of a smile.

She could only imagine what she looked like. If it was anything like him, she must look comical.

As he cocked his head and blew at one of his socks, she couldn't keep from smiling at the picture they both made, helplessly drenched in dirty socks, trying to remove them with nothing but their breath.

"Welcome to Harrison." His grin broke free.

"You know how to make a girl feel right at home." She wanted to laugh.

But as he straightened himself in the chair, she became at once conscious of the fact that she was sitting directly in his lap and that the other men in the room were hooting and calling out over her intimate predicament.

She scrambled to move off him.

But the ropes had tangled them together, and her efforts only caused her to fall against him again.

She was not normally a blushing woman, but the growing indecency of her situation was enough to chase away any humor she may have found in the situation and make a chaste woman like herself squirm with embarrassment.

"I'd appreciate your help," she said, struggling again to pull her arms free of the rope. "Or do all you oafs make a sport of manhandling women?"

"*All you oafs?*" His grin widened. "Are you insinuating that I'm an *oaf*?"

"What in the hairy hound is going on here?"

She jumped at the boom of Oren's voice and the slam of the door.

The room turned quiet enough to hear the *click-click* of Oren

pulling down the lever of his rifle. She glanced over her shoulder to the older man, to the fierceness of his drawn eyebrows and the deadly anger in his eyes as he took in her predicament.

A breeze of relief blew over her hot face. She was safe now—not that she'd been all that worried before. But she counted her blessings that Oren was on her side.

His heavy boots slapped the floor until he stood over her. With a growl, he lowered the barrel of his rifle and pushed it against Connell's temple. "Mister, you're a dead man."

Chapter

2

*T*he steel pressed hard and cold against Connell's head. He'd been in plenty of dangerous situations, but this was the first time anyone had ever threatened to blow out his brains.

The twenty-four-inch-long rifle with its octagon barrel chambered fifteen ready-to-fire cartridges. But at this range, all it would take was one shot and he'd be a dead man.

“No one touches Lily”—the man jabbed the tip into Connell's temple, grinding it into his throbbing pulse—“and lives to tell about it.”

The old man grabbed the rope that entangled them. He grunted and twisted it before finally pulling it free. Then he extended a hand to the woman and hoisted her to her feet. All the while, neither his Winchester nor his murderous eyes shifted so much as a thousandth of an inch from Connell.

Finally, in all of the shifting, the dirty socks fell away from his head and gave him a clear glimpse of the woman.

She untangled her skirt and smoothed down the folds of flowery calico, but not before he caught sight of her long knit socks, which strangely enough were striped in parallel rows of bright yellow and orange and green and purple.

“Now, Oren, there’s no need to kill him.” She patted the man’s arm. “At least not tonight.”

He muttered under the big mustache that hung over his upper lip but didn’t move the gun.

“I agree,” Connell said. “And really, I don’t see that there’s *ever* going to be a need to kill me.”

“I decide who to kill and when.” Oren jabbed the barrel again, and his finger on the trigger twitched. “And right now I’m in the mood to make someone eat lead.”

Connell’s mouth went dry. So this was it. He was going to die.

He’d already calculated the amount of time he spent in the woods and had given himself a twenty-five percent chance of dying from a lumber-related accident—being crushed by a falling tree or being buried by rolling logs. But a dining room brawl? Over a girl he didn’t know? That had never entered any of his equations.

The fact was, he wasn’t ready to die. Not yet. Not in the middle of the busiest time of the lumber season. Not when he had so much work to do.

“I wasn’t doing anything indecent,” he said. “In fact, I was just trying to help her—”

“And I suppose that’s why your hands were stuck to her like a coon holding a coin.”

“That’s not true. She fell against me and we toppled into the socks. That’s all.” His focus darted to Vera Heller, still armed with her eighteen-inch-long wooden spoon. “Right, Mrs. Heller?”

The woman nodded. “Connell McCormick is one of my best boarders and one of the nicest boys in this town. If you wanna shoot somebody, then you take aim at Jimmy Neil over there. That boy is full of trouble.”

Jimmy had already backed up to the stairway, and at Vera’s words, he spun and took the steps two at a time, disappearing like he usually did whenever it was time to take responsibility for his actions.

Oren’s finger stroked the trigger.

Connell swallowed hard. Did he dare make a move for his knife? The hard leather of the scabbard rested underneath his shirt against his ribs, so close and yet so far away.

“I think you’ve taught him his lesson, Oren.” The young lady pushed the barrel away from Connell’s face. “I don’t think he’ll manhandle me again.”

When she gave him a “so-there” look and then raised her chin, a spark of self-pride flamed to life in his gut. His mam had always made sure he knew how to treat a girl, but this was obviously no ordinary girl.

“If anyone was doing the manhandling, it was you.” Connell rubbed the sore spot on his forehead. “I didn’t ask you to sit on my lap.”

Her eyes widened, revealing a woody brown that was as dark and rich as fine-grained walnut. The color matched the thick curls that had come loose from the knitted hat covering her head.

Oren stood back, tucked his gun under his arm, and tapped his black derby up. His eyebrows followed suit.

The girl opened her mouth to speak but then clamped it shut, apparently at a loss for words.

A wisp of satisfaction curled through Connell. After the way she’d let the old man humiliate him, he didn’t mind letting her squirm for a minute.

But only for a minute.

Mam's training was ingrained too deeply to wish the girl ill will for more than that. He shoved himself out of the chair and straightened his aching back.

"Look," he said, plucking a last dirty sock from his shoulder. "Can we start over? I'm Connell McCormick."

She hesitated and then tilted her head at him. "And I'm Miss Young."

"I sure hope you'll forgive me if I've caused you any . . . discomfort."

Surprise flitted across her elegant, doelike features. "Well now. With that polite apology, how could I refuse to forgive you?"

He gave her a smile and waited. The polite thing for her to do was offer her own apology and perhaps even a thank-you for his attempts to save her from Jimmy Neil.

But she only returned the smile, one that curved her lovely full lips in perfect symmetry but didn't make it into the depths of her eyes.

She took a step back and thrust a hand into her coat pocket.

"Just make sure you don't lay even the tip of your pinkie on Lily again," Oren said, having the decency to look Connell in the eyes and nod at him. If the old man hadn't been so stooped, Connell guessed he'd add another three—if not four—inches to his height. Oren was gruff all right, but there was also something in his expression and about his fierce protectiveness of the young woman that Connell liked.

As if Oren hadn't scared the other men in the room enough already, he turned abruptly and swept the barrel of his gun across the wide eyes that stared at him. "And if any of you other shanty boys so much as thinks about touching Lily, I'll see it in your eyes and come hunt you down. Then I'll shoot you full of holes and feed you to the wolves."

Lily patted the man's arm and laughed, the sweet ring full of affection. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Oren grumbled under his mustache. His gaze swept hungrily over the table and the plates of untouched food.

"Mrs. Heller, we'll need two rooms," Lily said, "and the use of your cellar for a darkroom, if it's available."

"Then you're planning on taking pictures while you're here?" Vera asked the question that was on the tip of Connell's tongue.

"That we are, among other things," Lily said cheerfully.

Oren snorted and shook his head. Then he plopped himself down on the nearest bench and growled at Mrs. Heller. "How about serving me a meal before the food gets cold enough to grow legs and walk itself out the door?"

Connell made quick work of restringing the sock line and then situated himself back at his spot at the far table in the corner, where he could usually eat in solitude and work on recording and computing the day's figures in his ledgers. His books lay open and his pen was dry, with a half-inch ink splotch on the page where he'd dropped the pen and tossed his spectacles.

He stabbed the tip of his knife into a slab of salted pork. The greasy gravy had already cooled and congealed. For several seconds he twirled the meat and stared at it. The minute Lily Young had walked into the door he'd forgotten his hunger.

And now, he was ashamed to admit, he was much more interested in studying the vibrant Lily Young than doing anything else.



She'd slept too late. From the sliver of light between the thin curtains, Lily could see that morning was already chasing away the darkness of the long winter night.

Hurriedly, she tucked the last of her unruly curls into a knot.

She hadn't gotten used to the long winter nights of central Michigan, where the light disappeared at five in the evening and didn't show itself again until about eight the next morning. Even long after the rooster crowed, the skies were usually cloudy and dark, making it seem that night lingered forever.

If only the sun could break through the dismal covering more often.

She shivered and crossed the frigid unheated room to the window. She yanked open the curtains, letting in the dull light, longing for the bright sunshine that could warm her soul, if not her body. Oren claimed that it took a couple of winters for Easterners to grow thicker skin and adjust to northern winters. But after two years, her skin was apparently still as thin as the day she'd arrived from New York.

With her fingernail, she scratched a circle in the frosted pane and caught a glimpse of Main Street, mostly deserted. She didn't doubt the shanty boys were already hard at work. They didn't spare a single second of daylight in their quest to strip the earth of its treasures—namely white pine trees.

At the clomping of horse hooves on the hard-packed snow and the whistle of a distant train, Lily spun away from the window and crossed the room. Oren had probably been awake for several hours and was hard at work setting up his makeshift darkroom in the cellar.

And here she'd been, snug under heavy quilts, lazing the day away. She stepped over the pile of her discarded clothes and the grain-seed sack that held the rest of her earthly possessions. The contents spilled out of the bag, the result of her hurried attempt at her morning toilet in the freezing room.

The glint of silver stopped her, and she reached for the oval picture frame among the folds of her wearing apparel. She held the miniature portrait to her mouth, huffed a breath of warm

air onto the cold glass, and with the edge of her sleeve, wiped away the smudges.

In the dim light, she glanced around the small room. A chair with blue-chipped paint sat in one corner. Two pegs on the whitewashed wall awaited her clothes. Next to the sagging twin bed was a square bedside table holding a dusty lantern.

She stepped to the table, wiped off a layer of grime, and then gently set the frame on the clean spot, angling it so the picture faced the room.

Folding her arms across her chest, she stepped back and inspected her one attempt at making the room into the home it would become for the next several weeks. The silver frame was spotted with corrosion, but it outlined the dear faces of her mother and father. It was the portrait they'd had taken on their wedding day and was the only tangible reminder of the family she'd once had.

Lately, every time she looked at the picture, her parents' unsmiling faces seemed to accuse her of losing Daisy, of not doing everything she could to take care of her little sister, of not keeping her safe enough.

"I'm sorry," Lily whispered to the picture, her breath coming out in a white cloud. "I'm doing my best to find her. And once I have her, I promise I won't ever lose her again."

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. Her parents had every right to blame her. When the orphanage had told them they were getting too old to stay, she'd pushed Daisy to go with the Wretchams. She'd thought Daisy would be happy there, that she'd have a good life with a big loving family on a farm until she and Daisy could find a way to make a home of their own.

Lily had gone to Bay City with Oren, hoping to earn enough money to eventually afford a place. She hadn't known then that

the grumpy old man and his sick wife would be two of the kindest people she would ever meet.

She'd faithfully written letters to Daisy, and Oren had even taken her to visit her sister on two different occasions. She'd always known Daisy wasn't happy, but she'd just assumed it would take time to adjust.

She'd never expected Daisy would run away. Until she'd received Daisy's last letter in October.

By then it had been too late. When she'd arrived at the Wretchams', Daisy had been long gone.

Lily gave one last nod at her parents' portrait. "I'm getting closer to finding her."

Silence was their only answer—just as it had always been.

With the weight of guilt pressing down on her, she lowered her head and exited her room. The second floor hallway was empty, and the tap of her footsteps echoed as she made her way down the long passageway to the narrow staircase that led to the dining room.

Today she would investigate Harrison. Find out all she could about the brothels. And try to discover if anyone had seen her sister.

She stepped into the dining room, and the acrid scent of burnt coffee drifted toward her.

"There's the morning glory." Mrs. Heller paused in wiping a table, holding a dirty dishrag in midair.

"Oh no, Mrs. Heller. I'm most definitely not a morning glory." Lily glanced around the nearly deserted room. Only one man was working at a corner spot, his head bent over his books. "I'm really more like an afternoon crocus. I prefer daylight and sunshine, both of which are far too rare in these parts."

"But you're a burst of sunshine this morning." The woman gave Lily a smile that was the medicine she needed to chase the gloom from her soul.

“Why, thank you, Mrs. Heller—”

“You can call me Vera.”

“And I’m Lily.”

“Give me a minute and I’ll rustle up a plate of pork and beans for you.” Vera resumed her efforts at cleaning the oilskin covering, her large hindquarters wiggling in motion to the swirls of the rag on the table. “They won’t be too warm anymore, but they’ll be filling enough.”

“Don’t trouble yourself with me.” The thought of a heavy meal for breakfast made Lily’s stomach churn. “I’ll be happy enough with a cup of coffee—if you have any to spare.”

Vera stopped in midswirl and took in Lily’s appearance. “Coffee? My, my, my. You need more meat on your bones, girl. You’ll blow away with the slightest breeze. Don’t you agree, Connell?”

Lily glanced to the corner spot, only to find the young man she’d met the previous evening staring at her above spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

He quickly looked back at the open book in front of him, but the slight reddish tint creeping up his neck above his collar was evidence that he’d been paying more attention to her than to his books.

“I’m sure Miss Young would appreciate whatever you’re willing to provide.” The young man pulled out his pocket watch and peered at it. “Especially considering the fact that breakfast has been over for exactly one hour and twelve minutes.”

His hair was neatly combed, except for one sun-bleached streak that fell across his forehead. He’d shaven the scruff from his face, revealing skin that was rough and bronzed from long days outdoors.

“Connell McCormick.” Vera thumped her hands onto her hips. “You sure don’t seem to mind when I sneak you an extra

doughnut or two. I think half the reason you loiter here in the mornings is because you hope I'll feed you more.”

The faint red streaks climbed up to the base of his cheeks. He didn't say anything and instead dipped his head and scribbled something into one of his books, as if there were nothing more important at that moment than the page in front of him.

Vera winked at Lily. “I'll get you that coffee, but how about one of the doughnuts I fried up this morning too?”

Lily couldn't keep from smiling. “Well, only since you're already in the habit of sneaking them . . .” She had a feeling she was going to like Vera.

The woman disappeared into the kitchen, and Lily plunked onto the nearest bench. Too late she realized she had situated herself so that she was looking almost directly at Connell.

She fidgeted but refrained from rudely repositioning herself altogether, as she was tempted to do. She wasn't in the habit of staring at or making small talk with strange men—or really any men, for that matter. At eighteen she was old enough to begin thinking about a husband and marriage and that sort of thing. But she'd always been too busy worrying about Daisy to be even the slightest bit interested in romantic involvements.

Thankfully, with Oren scaring all the men away, she hadn't had to worry about anyone showing ongoing interest in her.

Anyway, what kind of man would be interested in her, a poor orphaned girl with no family, no money, and nothing to bring to a marriage except herself?

Connell barely lifted his eyes, as if trying to peek at her without her knowledge, and for an eternity of a second their gazes caught.

A spark lit his eyes, almost as if he were remembering their encounter of the previous evening and the draping of dirty socks they'd both worn.

An odd flush of pleasure wrapped around her middle, and she wanted to smile at the memory of how silly they'd both looked. But she shifted her gaze to the bare walls and drummed her fingers against the table. This time it was her turn to pretend nothing had transpired between them.

"Here you are." Vera ambled back into the room holding a pannikin in one hand and a coffeepot in the other. She dropped the pint-sized tin cup to the table, and inside was the promised doughnut.

Lily lifted out the doughnut before Vera poured a thick brew of coffee into the pannikin.

"You're a dear." Lily lifted the cup, and out of habit she blew on the steaming liquid.

"Don't you worry none." Vera bustled toward Connell, sliding another doughnut out of her apron pocket. "I've got an extra for you too."

Connell reached for the doughnut, but Vera pulled it back and held it out of reach. She pointed to her ruddy cheek. "You know what you owe me first."

To Lily's surprise, Connell grinned, leaned toward the older woman, and planted a kiss in the spot she'd touched.

Vera handed him the doughnut and then gave the round flesh in his cheek a pinch. "You're a good boy, Connell."

Lily smiled at Vera's compliment. Connell was definitely no boy. His shirt stretched across his shoulders and around his thick arms. He had the rugged build of a man accustomed to cutting and hauling heavy logs. He might have earned the nickname of shanty boy, like all the other men who came north to work in the woods, but he was all man as far as she could see.

She took a sip of her coffee, only to find it was gritty and strong enough to choke a horse. She nearly dropped the pannikin on the table and couldn't keep from sputtering into her hand.

One of Connell's eyebrows shot up and his grin turned lopsided, as if he knew from personal experience just how awful the coffee was.

She swallowed the bitter mouthful and smiled back—a secret smile that gave her a strange sense that maybe this man had the potential to be a friend.

“Mrs. Heller sure does make the best doughnuts this side of the Tittabawasee River.” He took a bite, easily chomping half the circle.

“You’re only getting one from me this morning.” Vera wagged her finger at him. “And no amount of flattery will get you more.”

He shrugged at Lily, still grinning. “Doesn’t hurt to try, does it?”

Vera pulled out the bench across from Lily, and her eyes danced from Connell's compliment. She sidled in, bumping the table and causing coffee to slosh out of Lily's cup.

Maybe with enough jostling, Vera would spill more and save her from having to drink it.

When she met Connell's gaze, his eyebrow quirked again.

Lily nibbled on her doughnut and tried to stifle a smile.

Vera fished another doughnut out of her pocket, brushed off a stray potato peel, and then took a big bite—a bite that rivaled Connell's.

“So tell me about yourself,” she said with her mouth full. Her dark hair, threaded with gray, framed her splotchy face in a frizzy disarray. The woman had likely been up since the wee hours of the morning and had already put in a full day's worth of work. “Tell me where you're from. And all that good stuff.”

Lily set her doughnut on the table. Where should she begin? How could she go about explaining the complexity of her past? And did Vera really care to know?

She looked into the woman's eyes and read genuine kindness there.

“Well . . .” Lily hesitated and then opted to give the abbreviated version of her life history. “We came up from Bay City. Oren has a photography studio there.”

Vera stuffed the rest of the doughnut into her mouth and nodded at Lily to continue.

“He does good business during the winter months traveling around the camps taking pictures of shanty boys.”

“And?”

“And I help him.”

Vera brushed the crumbs off her hands and then folded them in front of her. “And . . . ?”

Lily smiled. She’d been right. She was going to like this woman. “And I’m trying to find my sister.”

Vera swallowed the last bite of doughnut but didn’t say anything.

“In her final letter to me she said she was heading north to the new lumber towns to look for work.”

“Work?” Vera’s eyes turned grave.

The ache in Lily’s heart flared to life. “She told me it wouldn’t be the kind of work I’d approve of. But apparently she’d heard girls could make a fortune during one winter season.”

Vera shook her head and pursed her lips.

“She wrote that she wanted to earn money so we could afford a place for the two of us to be together again.” Lily pressed the ball of her hand into her stomach to stave off the pain.

“Sounds like one foolish little girl.”

“I have only myself to blame.” She should have seen it coming, should have done more.

“Well, if you’re looking for her among the spawn of the devil, you’ve certainly come to the right place.”

Connell cleared his throat. “Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh, Mrs. Heller?”

The woman tossed him a glare that could have melted ice. “This town has less than two thousand permanent residents but over twenty taverns. And with all the sporting that goes on at almost every single one of them, I’m actually being kind in my description of this town.”

“Twenty taverns?” That was more than any of the other small lumber towns she’d been to. She’d best start visiting them right away.

“And then there’s the Stockade,” Vera lowered her voice to a hush.

The name sent a chill crawling over Lily’s skin.

“The place is on the edge of town, up on a hill, surrounded by a tall stockade fence. You can’t miss it. And it’s run by the devil himself in human flesh—James Carr.”

Connell pushed away from the table, his bench scraping against the floor. “Harrison’s like any other lumber town that’s sprung up in these parts. It’s got both the good and the bad. And that’s just the way of things.” He pulled off his wire spectacles and folded them closed.

Vera heaved a sigh and climbed back to her feet, bumping the table again and spilling more of Lily’s coffee. “I don’t like it. I wish we could do more to clean things up in this town.”

“Why can’t we?” Lily asked, pushing aside the odds. “I’m a part of the Red Ribbon Society in Bay City, and with enough publicity and pressure we got the Wolverton House to close its doors—and it was one of the bawdiest on the lower end of the Saginaw River.”

In the spring after the river drive, most of the shanty boys ended up in Bay City, often spending every last dollar of their winter earnings on drinks and women. The port city had more than its share of debauchery. If she could help fight problems there, she could do the same in Harrison.

Connell shook his head. “The Wolverton was closed because it was falling apart and had become a fire hazard. Besides, there are still dozens of other taverns along Water Street that your Red Ribbon Society won’t ever be able to close.”

“In time and with enough effort, we’ll make a difference.” Enthusiasm sprang up like a spring blossom, despite Connell’s negativity. “We can form a group here and hold meetings. We’ll make the public aware of what’s going on. And come up with a plan to help close the taverns.”

Vera paused, as if weighing Lily’s idea. “I wonder . . . maybe that’s just what we need.”

“If we try to rid the town of women, booze, and card playing,” Connell said, “the men are going to try to sneak them into the camps. And we know how much trouble that will cause.”

His words crashed into Lily, nearly knocking her from her bench. For a long moment she couldn’t speak, but then finally managed, “I don’t think I heard you right.”

He stacked up his books and tucked them under his arm. “There’s bound to be some evil in every town. It’s just a fact of life.”

She shook her head in utter disbelief and rose to her feet, her ire rising with her. “Are you telling me, Mr. McCormick, you’re unwilling to do anything about the debauchery that runs rampant in this town, that you’re content to turn a blind eye to the sin right under your nose?”

“If you were somehow able to miraculously close down all the taverns in this town, ninety-nine point nine percent of those owners would pick up and move to the next county and keep right on doing what they’re doing.”

“So why even try?”

“Exactly.”

Too bad he’d missed the sarcasm in her voice. She thumped

her fingers against the table in rhythm to the angry thudding of her heartbeat. “Your philosophy appalls me.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m just explaining the reality of the situation.”

“Well then, please don’t say any more.” She picked up the doughnut she’d hardly touched. She’d save it for Oren. “There may always be sin and evil, but that doesn’t mean God wants us to sit back and turn a blind eye to the problems.”

“Amen,” Vera said.

“I, for one, refuse to give up hope that I can do my part to make the world a better place.” Lily glanced to the big window across the dining room that overlooked Main Street. Where would she start her efforts?

Of course, she wouldn’t neglect the work she had with Oren in the darkroom and all the pictures that still needed developing. But first chance she had, she’d begin her crusade to find Daisy. And in the process, she’d do everything she could to clean up Harrison.

How could she do anything less?

She squared her shoulders and shot Connell a look she hoped contained the contempt she felt toward his attitude.

“My sister is out in the middle of all that evil somewhere. And every night I get down on my knees and pray that it will be the last one she has to spend in her living hell.”