



THE
BRIDE
WORE
BLUE

A Novel



MONA
HODGSON

Author of Two Brides Too Many

THE
BRIDE
WORE
BLUE

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THE
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A Novel
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MONA
HODGSON

Book Three

The Sinclair Sisters of Cripple Creek



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P R E S S

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*For my mother, Stella June Shindlebower Gansberg, and her sisters,
my Aunt Marion, Aunt Pauline, Aunt Alma, and Aunt Nellie*

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

ROMANS 5:1-2

ONE



1 June 1897

See that man over there?”
Vivian had no trouble hearing Aunt Alma over the *clickety-clack* of the train wheels. She poised her pencil over her sketch pad and followed her aunt’s gaze to the man who slouched in the seat two rows ahead of them.

“He’s been chewing and spitting most all the way from Colorado Springs.” Aunt Alma, Vivian’s chaperone, shook her head, causing the penny-colored braid encircling it to rock back and forth. “That’s the kind of man you need to watch out for,” she said. “You’re not in Maine anymore, child.”

The label stung Vivian’s ears. Why did everyone think of her as a child? It didn’t help that she was four or five inches shorter than all three of her sisters. Straightening, she pressed her back against the seat. “I’m not a child. Aunt Alma, I hardly think one can determine which man to watch out for by what he wears or how he looks.”

Nothing in Gregory’s debonair style of dressing indicated he was a cad.

“You can’t be so trusting of men out here in the West. They’re, well...” Blushing, her aunt cupped her mouth with a gloved hand. “They’re quite lonely.”

Vivian tugged the sleeves straight on her percale travel dress. She might be the baby in her family, but she wasn’t a child. She’d lost her mother before she’d lost her first tooth. Her father had left home before she did. So had her sisters, Kat and Nell first and then Ida.

Plus she’d had to leave Sassy in Maine. Her poor cat didn’t understand being left behind any more than Vivian did. And her familiarity with growing up too fast had to remain her secret.

Moving to Cripple Creek hadn’t been her choice. But any plans for a future with Gregory were history, and Father had made it clear as rain-water in his last letter that she wasn’t welcome to join him in France. Even New York’s latest fashions couldn’t measure up to the costume prowess of Paris. There she would have had the opportunity to secure her future as a fashion designer.

But instead Father insisted she reunite with her sisters in Colorado. That would have suited her fine before Gregory. At least the move to Cripple Creek ushered her away from Portland, if not her past. She did miss her sisters and wanted to see them, but she couldn’t bear the thought of them seeing her for what she was.

She returned her attention to the opera gown she’d been sketching. Too much flouncing at the waist. She pulled a pink eraser from her reticule and brushed away the last lines she’d drawn. If only mistakes in life were that easy to erase.

Vivian drew in a fortifying breath. She had to hope her new home could offer her the fresh start she needed. Nell had written more than once about the wondrous growth taking place in Cripple Creek. While an opera house or two did not a thriving metropolis make, perhaps the

move to Colorado wouldn't be as bleak as she had expected. Surely the town was big enough now to host a clothing designer who would value Vivian's eastern fashion sense.

"I'm sorry if I upset you." Her aunt punctuated her whisper with a frown.

Vivian dropped the eraser into her bag. It wasn't Aunt Alma's fault her youngest niece wasn't lovable enough to make anyone want to stay with her. "You needn't worry about me, Aunt Alma."

Aunt Alma patted Vivian's knee. "But you know I do."

Vivian offered her aunt the best smile she could rally. Would her prim and proper aunt care so much if she knew the truth? But she couldn't know. Neither could her sisters. Enough had changed for Vivian already, and she couldn't bear the blame she deserved. Especially if it meant seeing her guilt reflected back to her in the virtuous eyes of her sisters.

While the train's steel wheels screeched and howled, slowing it down for what Vivian hoped was its final descent, her mind stalled on thoughts of her sisters. Ida would be so relieved things didn't work out with Gregory that she probably wouldn't even mention him. Nell would want to match her up with a suitable beau. When she just wanted to forget.

A sharp clanging noise drew their attention to the glass-paned door at the back of the train car. Vivian twisted in her narrow seat in time to watch two men dash up the aisle toward her, their faces covered by bandannas. Both wore soiled dusters. The shorter man in front clutched a large metal box. The man behind him ran bent but still nearly brushed the hanging lights with his straw hat. He wielded a pistol.

"Bandits!" Vivian wanted to turn away from them and slide to the floorboard, but her legs refused to move.

“Remain calm.” The bandit carrying the box sounded as if his mouth harbored marbles. “Everybody mind your own business, and nobody’ll get hurt.”

Vivian intended to do just that, but Aunt Alma’s arms encircled her, knocking her off balance. Her sketch pad and pencil fell to the floorboard. She had no idea her foot lay in the aisle until the first man tripped on it.

He lunged forward, snarling as the box crashed into the seat two rows ahead of her, narrowly missing the shoulder of the kind of man she needed to watch out for. The hem of the bandit’s coat snagged on the arm of the seat, revealing a large belt buckle at his waist. Quickly regaining his composure, he turned and glared at Vivian over the filthy blue bandanna tied across his mouth and nose that did little to mask the pungent scent of licorice-root candy.

Vivian clasped her trembling hands and swallowed hard against the lump forming in her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“You tryin’ to be a hero, are you?” His beady eyes narrowed. “Think you’re smarter than us?”

Before Vivian could manage a response, the conductor charged through the door, carrying a shotgun. “Stop those thieves!”

When men in the back of the car began to stand, the taller bandit waved his gun, and the shorter man jerked open the door at the front of the car. He tossed the metal box into the passing brush, and both men jumped from the train. The conductor stopped just short of leaping off the train himself. Vivian watched out the window as the two bandits tumbled down a hill, then disappeared into the scrub and short trees.

The conductor retrieved his shiny black cap from the floor and straightened his vest. His forehead sported a lump the color of a pomegranate. “The danger has passed, folks, and we’ll arrive at the Cripple

Creek station shortly.” He traced the curls on either end of his thin mustache. “Please do all you can to remember what you’ve seen and heard, so the law can bring these criminals to justice.”

Aunt Alma laid a quaking hand on Vivian’s arm. “Now do you understand what I mean about judging by a man’s costume out here?”

Vivian nodded. “I’ll do my best to stay away from men who wear dusters and bandannas.” And gaudy belt buckles.



Carter Alwyn pinched the bridge of his nose. Tuesday was his least favorite day of the week. The *other women* usually created a stir on their designated morning in town. Not that they set out to do much more than shop for baubles and bustles, but the activity never failed to provoke at least one citizen’s self-righteous indignation and drive him—or her—to Carter’s office with his chin in the air. This week’s upstanding representative of the moral community scowled at him from the other side of his desk.

“It’s scandalous.” Mr. Updike stiffened to his full five feet five inches. “And we want to know when you’re going to do something about it, Deputy Alwyn.”

Carter leaned forward. If only he had a nickel for every time he had engaged in this same conversation. He had his own reasons for avoiding the *other women*, besides the obvious moral ones, but as long as they paid their fees and checked in with a doctor regularly, their services were a legal and accepted practice in Cripple Creek—an enterprise welcomed by many influential people here.

Mr. Updike tugged on the lapels of his oversized herringbone suit jacket and glared at Carter. “I’m here as a representative of the

business community, and we want change. We insist you outlaw such depravity.”

If the *business community* really was making such demands, a large segment of the *business* owners were shooting themselves in the foot. A lot of money flowed between Bennett and Myers Avenues. And Carter knew the banker would be the first to whine about the shortfall created by losing that breed of businesswoman. No doubt the man’s zealous campaign was on his wife’s insistence. It wouldn’t surprise Carter to see Mrs. Updike waiting outside the door with her hands planted on her hips, but he resisted the temptation to stand and look out the window.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a file folder, then looked up. “Mr. Updike, you know about the recent rash of bank robberies this side of the divide. I’ve been more concerned with protecting your bank and the money that belongs to the fine people of Cripple Creek than with what our citizens choose to do with their money in the moonlight.”

“Yes, well, I do appreciate that, but—” The whistle on the incoming train blew, and Updike jumped.

It took all the self-control Carter could muster to stifle the laughter camped in his throat. He swallowed hard against it. “Mr. Updike, I suggest you raise your concerns at the next city council meeting.” He opened the folder full of wanted posters.

The banker huffed. “I can see I’m getting nowhere with you.”

Carter looked up. “By the very nature of my job, sir, I am a man with a measure of authority to enforce laws, but little say in the creation of those laws.”

Updike spun on his heels. The force of the door slamming behind him rattled the window and Carter’s nerves. The man was a weasel and probably just as nocturnal as the others.

Carter's energy needed to go into keeping his town safe. He thumbed through the stack of posters. Robert LeRoy Parker, also known as Butch Cassidy. Clean shaven, square jaw. Rounded chin. Harry "Sundance Kid" Longabaugh. Narrow oval face. Dark eyes. And a guy known only as Pickett. Six foot two. Lean and lanky.

Carter tipped back in his chair and scrubbed his face, already stubbled by this time of day. Witnesses to the bank robberies over in Divide had described one of the three robbers as lean and lanky.

As soon as Jon, one of two deputies under the authority given to Carter by the El Paso County Sheriff, returned to the office, Carter would ride to Victor for a chat with Gilbert about the bank robbery there yesterday. None of the criminals pictured on these posters would spend any time in his town. He had to make sure of it.

Carter had just closed the folder when the telephone on his desk jangled. He lifted the earpiece from the hook and spoke into the cone.

"Deputy Alwyn speaking."

"Yes, good afternoon." As usual, the young woman's voice sounded too sweet. "Deputy Alwyn, you have a call from Mr. Wilbert Ratcliff."

"Yes, thank you." Why would the agent at the Midland Terminal Railroad be calling him?

A click followed, then a sentence that made no sense to Carter, but its fevered pitch burned his ears and set his heart racing.

"Mr. Ratcliff, you need to slow down."

"The train's in. Bandits got the cash box. Jumped off just north of town."

Carter leaped from his chair, knocking it against the wall. "Anyone harmed? You need a doctor down there?"

“I sent for one. But except for a nasty lump on the conductor’s head, no one was hurt.”

“Good.” Carter slapped the folder on his desk. “No one else steps foot off the train. I’ll be right there.”

On his way to the depot, Carter saw Jon walk out of the boot shop and waved him over. While they took long strides to the depot at the far end of Bennett Avenue, Carter briefed his fellow deputy on what little he knew from the station agent. Jon went inside the depot to let the agent know they’d arrived while Carter made his way through the crowd gathered on the wooden platform.

“Deputy Alwyn?”

Carter recognized the woman’s voice that rang loud and clear. He turned to see Mrs. Raines—his friend Tucker’s wife—standing in front of him, flanked by her two sisters, one holding a baby.

“Ladies.” He touched the brim of his Stetson and then glanced at the folder in his hands. “I have duties to attend to.”

They fell in step with him as he walked toward the train’s passenger car. “We have family on that train,” Mrs. Raines said. “No one will tell us anything. What has happened? We need to know if they’re all right.”

Carter climbed the metal stairs to the deck of the train car. Turning, he faced the impatient throng. “There’s been a robbery.” The murmurs rose to a hum, and he raised his hand for quiet. “No passengers were harmed. We need your full cooperation while we try to gain pertinent information from those on board. We’ll release the passengers and ready the train for its continuance as soon as possible.” He turned and pushed open the heavy steel door.

In contrast to the charged anticipation on the platform, the atmosphere inside the smoky car was solemn. He could have heard a feather drop on the hardwood flooring.

“Folks, I’m the sheriff’s senior deputy stationed here in Cripple Creek, Deputy Carter Alwyn. I need to speak to any of you who saw or heard something that may be useful in capturing the bandits.”

“Sir.” From a window seat several rows back, a matronly woman waved a gloved hand. “My niece here...” She glanced at the young woman sitting beside her. “She tripped one of the outlaws.”

Carter’s jaw tensed. “You did what?” He didn’t care that he’d shouted. This girl who had tried to play the hero couldn’t be a day over sixteen. He’d seen similar circumstances, and being reminded of their outcome soured his stomach. “Young lady, do you have any idea—”

“First of all, Deputy Alwyn...” She squared her shoulders and glared at him, her eyes a fiery brown. “I am not stupid. Nor am I heroic. I didn’t trip the man on purpose, so you can save your lecture. I haven’t the time or the patience for it.”

Perhaps she was older than she looked. Sassy, no matter her age.

“Secondly, bandannas covered the two men’s faces, and they wore long coats. None of us saw very much, so this is clearly a waste of time.”

Carter choked down his frustration. “Miss—”

“Sinclair.”

He met her defiant gaze. “Miss Sinclair, I am the professional here, and I’ll be the judge of what *very much* includes.” He had outlaws to track down. He didn’t have time to bicker with a petulant female.

Jon stepped into the train car, and Carter rested a hand on his partner’s shoulder. “Folks, this is Deputy Jon Ondersma. He’ll accompany those of you going on to Victor to hear your statements concerning the matter. The conductor will get the names and contact information from those of you planning to depart the train here.” Carter looked at the young woman sitting in the aisle seat five rows back. “And I’ll

“speak to any of you who may have critical information. Miss Sinclair, if Cripple Creek is your destination, I’ll begin with you.”

“It is.”

Shifting his attention to the others, Carter walked toward the door. “Deputy Ondersma and the conductor will direct the rest of you. Please meet me inside the depot, ladies. Directly.”

His mother had taught him to get the most unpleasant tasks out of the way first, and he’d learned his lesson well.

TWO



Young lady!

Were all lawmen in the West this cocky and sarcastic, or was this just her unlucky day and Deputy Alwyn happened to be part of its ill will? Vivian retrieved her satchel from the floorboard and followed the snappish deputy down the narrow aisle.

They made their way to the back of the car, and the deputy stepped out onto the platform and offered his hand to Aunt Alma. “Ma’am.”

Once her aunt had both feet on the platform, he held out his hand to Vivian. She didn’t need the man’s help but accepted it anyway. His firm grip matched the stern expression on his face.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” He let go of her hand and tugged his leather vest straight. Taking their satchels from them, Deputy Alwyn glanced toward a small brick building about two train-car lengths ahead of them. “We need to be quick about this. I’ll only detain you a few minutes.”

The promise had no sooner left his mouth when the crowd began closing in on them, her three sisters in the lead. Vivian waved.

“You’re Reverend Raines’s sister-in-law?” Placing far too much emphasis on the first word, the deputy quirked a dark eyebrow.

“Yes, one of three.”

Nell reached them first. "Are you all right?" She wrapped Vivian in a tight embrace, transporting her to a time and place that was familiar and freeing.

"They're well, Mrs. Archer."

The deputy was apparently acquainted with at least two of her sisters. It made sense that a lawman would know the preachers and mining officials in town. Probably the doctors too.

He brushed a midnight black curl under his hat and looked at her sisters. "I just have a few questions, and I'll be quick about it. I have outlaws to track." The deputy met Vivian's gaze and motioned for them to make haste to the depot.

She hurried to keep up with him. Yet another instance in which a height greater than five feet two inches would prove useful.

The crowd around the depot hummed like a beehive. Inside, a man with deeply hooded eyes waved them toward an open door behind the ticket counter. "You can use my office, deputy."

"Thank you, Wilbert."

The office felt more like an oversized wardrobe. A small desk, one file cabinet, and two spindle-back chairs in front of the desk.

"Please have a seat, ladies." Deputy Alwyn set their satchels on the floor between the chairs and pulled a notepad and pencil from his shirt pocket. Settling into the desk chair, he looked at Vivian. "Miss Sinclair, did you notice anything else about the two men, besides the bandannas?"

"They both wore soiled dusters. The taller man wore a flat-top straw hat and waved a pistol. I didn't hear him say anything. The shorter man came through first, carrying a large metal box."

Aunt Alma squared her shoulders. "Which narrowly missed hitting a man in the head when my niece tripped the thief."

The deputy smoothed his mustache as if he were trying to hide a smile and met Vivian's gaze. "Unintentionally, if I remember correctly."

Her cheeks grew warm. "That's correct." Sitting a little straighter, Vivian forced herself to remember as many details as she could. "The surly one carrying the box was thick in the middle, spoke as if he had something in his mouth, and smelled of licorice root."

The deputy flipped a page in his notepad and wrote feverishly before looking up at her. "Good details. Was he wearing a hat?"

Aunt Alma straightened. "A dusty derby."

"I apologize, ma'am. I didn't get your name."

"Alma Shindlebower."

His pencil snapped as he wrote her name.

Vivian pulled a pencil from her satchel and handed it to him.

"Thank you." He busied himself writing the results of his questions and then regarded Vivian with a sideways glance. "Where will you be staying while you're in town, ma'am?"

"Miss Hattie's Boardinghouse on Golden Avenue."

"I know the place." Another notation. "Should I need anything further, I'll contact you there."

Vivian nodded, hoping that wouldn't be necessary. She'd just as soon toss the whole trip behind her, especially this last leg of it. Starting now. She stood and retrieved their valises from the floor. "Good day, deputy."

Standing, he pinched the brim of his hat. "Ladies."

As she and Aunt Alma stepped out of the office, a woman with a small child, the next person in a line of weary travelers from their train, brushed past them through the open doorway. Deputy Alwyn had a busy day ahead of him.

Finally, the Sinclair sisters' reunion. If only Father were here too. If only...

Ida waved from where Vivian's sisters waited near the depot door. Her baby niece bounced in Kat's arms, and she couldn't wait to get a good look at her. How was it possible that all three of her sisters were married and one had a baby? Where had the time gone?

To Gregory.

Her oldest sister wore the blue serge skirt and embroidered jacket Vivian had designed especially for Ida's job interview with Mollie O'Bryan last year here in Cripple Creek. Nell swiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks and offered Vivian a smile that would brighten the darkest night. The snood at Kat's neck added to her motherly appearance, a role in which she seemed quite comfortable.

All her sisters looked good. Healthy and happy. Cripple Creek and marriage seemed to agree with them. As Vivian closed the gap between them, she hoped Cripple Creek would be enough for her. At least until she'd earned enough money to be able to move on to somewhere she could truly make a name for herself.

"Let me take those." Ida took the bags from Vivian. "I made arrangements to have your trunk and Aunt Alma's second valise delivered to the boardinghouse."

"Then we don't have to go back to the platform to search out our bags. Thank you." Vivian could always count on Ida to tend to any details. And, although she wanted to be able to take care of herself, the help felt mighty good right now.

"My carriage is right out front, but first, Auntie Viv, I'd like to introduce you to your niece." Kat held the baby out to her. "This is Miss Hope Joyce Cutshaw. Hope, this is your Aunt Vivian Dee Sinclair."

Vivian stared at the pink knit bundle. “It’s wonderful to meet you, little Miss Hope.”

Kat raised an eyebrow and lifted baby Hope closer. “Take her.”

A shiver scampered up Vivian’s spine. “I’ve never held a baby.”

“Well, you’re not getting any younger.” With far too much ease, Kat placed Hope’s head in the crook of Vivian’s right arm.

Vivian’s breath caught. Life felt especially fragile wrapped up in this little one, and she felt inadequate to tend it. The infant began to fuss and squirm.

“Just hold her tight, and she’ll feel safe,” Kat said.

Her insides quivering, Vivian pressed Hope to her bodice, then sealed the baby’s bootie-clad feet in her left hand. The infant instantly relaxed and began to peep like a baby chick.

“Isn’t she delectable?” Nell’s blue eyes shone like sapphires as she trailed her fingers across Hope’s rounded cheeks.

Vivian gazed at her niece. Wide brown eyes like her mama. Dark lashes. Auburn peach fuzz on her soft head. Vivian blinked back tears. “She’s adorable.” It came out a reverent whisper.

“I cried too when I first held her,” Kat said. “I felt as if I’d just unwrapped a most precious gift.”

Vivian felt her tears spill over. Tears of wonderment in response to the thrill of being an aunt. But that wasn’t all that caused her heart to cry. Her sisters’ babies were as close as Vivian would ever come to having one of her own to hold. Not so long ago she’d been lovable like this little one, but her imprudence had swept it away forever. And along with it, any hope of experiencing the joy she glimpsed in her sister’s eyes.

Nell glanced toward the office that contained Deputy Alwyn, then leaned toward Vivian’s ear. “He isn’t married.”

That was bad news. “Ever the matchmaker, you are. But I’ll have you know that the man is incorrigible.” She turned toward the others before Nell could respond. She’d just gotten into town, and Nell was already at work on her. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Kat opened the depot door. “Aunt Alma, you get to sit up front with me, and you can hold Hope all the way to the boardinghouse.”

“Fair enough.” Aunt Alma led the way out the door. “As long as you drive real slow to give me more time with her.”

In mere minutes, Aunt Alma was seated in the front of a white carriage and reaching for Hope. Vivian breathed in the powdery scent of her niece, then handed her off to Aunt Alma before climbing into the carriage. The train whistle blew, and the locomotive chugged up the hill away from town.

Vivian planted her feet on the floorboard. Mule-drawn carts, horses carrying a rider or pulling a wagon, and men on foot created a maze outside the depot and up the street lined with brick buildings. Kat sat directly in front of her, guiding a mare full of brio around a corner and up a steep hill. In sharp contrast to Portland’s flat ocean-front property, this place sat nestled amongst hills and mountains of varying size and stature.

As far as Vivian was concerned, they couldn’t arrive at the boardinghouse soon enough. She’d spent the better part of a week on one *clickety-clacking* train after another with far too many ups and downs. Aunt Alma’s callow warnings about men. Clumsy train robbers. A deputy as intense as a summer thunderstorm. So far, her introduction to Cripple Creek left much to be desired. She’d best work on lowering her expectations if she didn’t wish to be endlessly disappointed.

Kat gave the reins a tug, and the mare smoothed out her cadence. Ida leaned forward to catch Vivian’s attention. “We planned a family

welcome dinner at the parsonage for tonight, but you and Aunt Alma are probably all in but your shoestrings. If you need to rest this evening, we can have the big supper tomorrow night.”

They *had* been delayed, and she did have some unpacking to do, but now that she was here, she was more anxious to catch up with her family. Many of them she hadn’t even met. “Aunt Alma?”

Her aunt sat beside Kat, chattering to baby Hope. She twisted in the carriage seat. “Visiting with all of you and this precious baby is my idea of restful.” A smile warmed her hazel eyes.

Vivian nodded. “I agree.”

“Tonight it is then,” Nell said. “I’m bringing a big bowl of my peanut cabbage salad.”

Vivian’s mouth watered. “Perhaps we should go straight to supper.”

“We don’t dare.” Kat wagged a finger. “Your new landlady would chide us all something awful.”

“The boardinghouse is right up there.” Ida waved toward the top of the hill. “Besides, Hattie loves to bake while she waits and is sure to serve a tasty morsel or two that will tide you over.”

At the end of the next block, Kat made another turn. “This is Golden Avenue.” Flower beds in full bloom skirted the yards of bright, neat houses. She pulled the carriage up in front of a springtime-yellow house with a crisp white trimming. “Here we are.”

Ida climbed down first and reached for Hope. “Come on, little one. Let’s go see Nannie Hattie.” She watched Vivian climb down. “Hattie Adams is practically family, you’ll see.”

“Why, this boardinghouse has become a Sinclair sister tradition. Now we all will have stayed here.” Kat tapped Hope’s dainty nose and reached for her. “Viv, you’re going to love Miss Hattie.”

Wanting to make a good first impression, Vivian smoothed her sleeves and skirt and took her satchel from Nell. Right now, she loved the idea of having her feet planted on solid ground again. Kat tied the mare to the hitching rail, and the five of them made their way up a brick walkway. Vivian surveyed the lush yard and colorful window boxes. Her eyes and her spirit feasted on the white and lavender flowers. By the time she arrived at the porch, lively music reached her ears, and she slowed her steps toward her new home.

Nell raised a thin, blond eyebrow, her eyes a slightly darker shade of blue than the late afternoon sky. “We didn’t warn you about that?”

“Warn me?” In their letters, her sisters had written of the woman’s kindnesses, but she’d not received any warnings. Vivian shook her head.

“About Miss Hattie’s phonograph. Her music is one of her many endearing qualities.” Ida reached for an electric doorbell. “Just be thankful I bought her new cylinders this last Christmas. Now she has five songs in her repertoire.”

Kat giggled. “You don’t know how lucky you are, Viv. We only had three songs.”

When Hope began to fuss, Kat pushed the doorbell again. This time the music shut off.

“On my way, dears.” The words puffed out just before the door swept open. A wide smile filled the face of a woman of ample portions, top and bottom. Her friendly gaze locked on Vivian. “I’m Hattie, and you must be our Vivian.”

Before Vivian could answer or even nod, the woman enveloped her in a robust hug. She smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. Welcoming. Comforting. So undeserved.

Sighing, Miss Hattie stepped back as if she sensed Vivian’s unworthiness, then gripped her shoulders at arm’s length. “You’re a smaller

version, for sure. But right adorable. And so fashionable in your travel dress. I love the straighter lines and full-length jacket.”

Vivian nodded. “Yes ma’am. Thank you.” The woman had an eye for fashion. Vivian already liked her.

Miss Hattie released Vivian’s shoulders. “The Sinclair sisters are at long last together again.”

Together, but for how long? They’d only been apart for two years, but it was long enough for her to do something stupid, something that would place an immovable wedge between them. Vivian looked at her sisters. How long they would be together depended upon her ability to keep her sordid history a secret. Her sisters were good girls and now upstanding women, married to pillars in the community, revered by the deputy and her landlady. Why couldn’t she have been more like them?

Aunt Alma stepped around them. “Miss Hattie, I’m Alma Shindl-bower. And I’m most pleased to make—”

“Aunt Alma!” After embracing their aunt, Miss Hattie waved them all inside. “Land sakes if I haven’t heard a boatload about you.”

“And I about you. I understand you’ve taken real good care of our girls.”

“I try.” Miss Hattie’s wink deepened the webbing at the corners of her blue-gray eyes.

“And a fine job you’ve done. Even found first-rate husbands for them, from what I hear.”

Vivian could abide hearing the same five songs again and again, but matchmaking was an entirely different matter. A complete waste of the woman’s time.

“Can’t take much credit,” Miss Hattie said. “They have the good Lord to thank for those matches.”

Vivian's stomach clenched. She'd frustrated the Lord's match for her.

Miss Hattie offered Vivian a warm smile. "I say we rest and visit for a spell in the parlor while we wait for your trunk to arrive."

Vivian followed her new landlady into an inviting room with flocked wallpaper and a polished mantel. A hint of lemon oil tickled her nose. The Edison phonograph she'd heard about posed in the corner. A teacart stood at the end of the sofa, complete with a teapot puffing steam and a full platter of cookies. Ida poured tea for each of them while Kat handed everyone a plate.

Miss Hattie set her teacup and cookies on a side table near the window and settled into the Queen Anne chair beside it. She pulled a footstool in line with her chair and propped up her feet, shoes and all. "Was your train late?"

Breathing in the scent of peppermint tea, Vivian carried her dishes to the sofa table and joined Nell and Aunt Alma on the sofa. She expected her aunt to respond to the woman's question, but apparently she was just as weary of the recounting as Vivian was. "I apologize for the delay, ma'am. We were late disembarking due to bandits."

"On the train?" Miss Hattie shoved the footstool away and planted her feet on the ground.

"Yes ma'am." Vivian reached for her plate. "Two men wearing bandannas."

"At Cripple Creek?" Her brow pinched, Miss Hattie glanced from Vivian to Aunt Alma. "And you two are all right?"

"'Twas an ordeal, for sure." Aunt Alma pressed her collar. "Our Vivian tripped one of the hoodlums."

The landlady's eyes widened. "You don't say. They were apprehended, then?"

“They jumped from the train before the conductor could catch them. They hit him on the head before fleeing to our car.” Vivian bit into a cookie. Perfectly warm. Chewy. Lemony. Her favorite.

“That long ole ride from the East, and then bandits. Of all the things.” Miss Hattie shook her gray head. “Here I was baking sweets while you were facing down hoodlums.”

And a snappish deputy.

Kat held Hope against her shoulder and patted the baby’s back. “To think I considered mine and Nell’s introduction to Cripple Creek dramatic.”

“I’m thankful I wasn’t in your situation—two missing misters.” Vivian folded her hands in her lap. “At least I had Aunt Alma with me and three sisters waiting for us.”

“Well, thank you, dear.” Her aunt turned and winked at her. “And here I figured myself for a mere tagalong.”

Vivian offered her aunt a crooked smile. “I may not have been keen on having company at first, but I’m glad you came.” Although she would’ve gladly forfeited the lectures on wily men.

“Well, I for one am delighted you’re both here.” Miss Hattie lifted her teacup off the table. “Vivian, dear, your sisters tell me you design clothing.” She raised her cup to her mouth. “And wedding gowns too, I’m told.”

“I do.” Vivian nearly choked on the words she’d expected to say at the front of a church, face to face with Gregory. “I aspire to have my own shop one day, but...”

“Perhaps you could work with the fashion designer we have here in the valley.”

Vivian sat straighter. “You do? I mean, there’s a designer here?”

“Indeed, there is. Etta Ondersma.”

“Ondersma? On the train, at the depot, I met—”

“Deputy Jon Ondersma?”

“Yes.”

“His mother owns Etta’s Fashions in Victor.”

She glanced at her sisters. “Victor?”

“The train ride takes nearly an hour, with stops in Anaconda and Elkton.” Ida’s teacup clinked against the saucer. “Too far for you to go every day to work.”

Leave it to Ida to disapprove. Vivian wanted to ask if Victor had lodging available, but since staying with Miss Hattie was a Sinclair sister tradition, the question might not set well on her first day in town.

She’d wait until next week to ask.