

Anne's boots clomped along the wooden sidewalk as she breathed in the clean, crisp air. April's sponge-painted clouds hung in the turquoise sky. Snow-capped peaks from the last storm of the season loomed above Flagstaff to the north.

Ever since her friend Sylvia had told her about the area's peaceful beauty, Anne had wanted to visit. She bet it hadn't changed much since Sylvia had been here in the 1960s. Long-standing downtown storefronts boasted Babbitt Brothers, Macy's European Coffeehouse, and the brick Monte Vista Hotel, with its original neon sign. The stone Nativity Church's steeple appeared as tall as the ponderosa pines that lined nearby Route 66.

Anne hadn't been certain Tweety, her yellow Karmann Ghia, would make it all the way from San Francisco, but it had chugged along the old route without so much as a cough. She'd spent the night in Needles, and this morning, after a good night's rest, she had traveled the short distance to Flagstaff. Tomorrow she'd cruise out to the Painted Desert and through the Navajo reservation, two places Sylvia had spoken of with fondness.

Anne wanted to feel close to her mentor, who'd been gone for more than two years now. She missed her wise guidance. Fortunately, Anne's boss, Priscilla, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where Anne taught, had found a substitute so she could go. Almost a

year earlier, Anne had broken it off with her fiancé, Sergio, for the last time and still reeled from it. She'd been so certain he was the one. She hoped this journey would relieve some of her loneliness.

As she continued along the wooden sidewalk, the window of Really Resale Boutique's shop caught her attention. A mustached mannequin in full cowboy regalia—Stetson hat, checkered shirt with snaps, and suede-fringed chaps—was posed beside a rusty wagon wheel and a life-size plastic cow. Searching for found treasures was one of her passions. Sometimes she'd find a little something for herself, as well as objects for her artwork, still selling well at Gallery Noir.

Anne stepped inside to the tinkling of a bell. A straw aroma from the hay bales strewn around for ambience tickled her nose.

"Morning." From behind the counter, a girl looked up from her books with a smile. She wore a Northern Arizona University T-shirt; her blond braids hung down over it. "Can I help you?"

"Just looking." It was all in the hunt. Anne always let her intuition guide her.

"I'm Lola. Let me know if you need anything." The girl returned to her studies.

Anne looked through a basket of bandannas and flipped through a clothes rack. The 1950s tulle prom dress, the sequined Mexican shawl, and the faded gingham dress didn't do much for her, but she held her breath when she spotted a green corset.

Black lace trimmed the bodice's top edge and moved down its front. A short, flouncy skirt rested over it. Both pieces were the same color as her favorite cocktail dress, the one she'd had on the night she met Sergio.

The corset appeared to be from the 1800s, something Miss Kitty might have worn in that old TV show *Gunsmoke*—a true vintage piece. Rarely could something this old be discovered in a resale shop, especially in such good shape.

Anne pulled the hanger off the rack, held the corset up to the

light, and checked for moth holes and tears. Some of the lace had become loose, but Anne could easily mend it. She ran her hand along the smooth satin and fingered the hooks that marched down the corset's center.

She fantasized about what it would feel like for Sergio to unlatch the hooks, one at a time, slowly. It had been months since she'd seen him. He called occasionally, but when he did, she felt sadder and lonelier than ever. She shook her head. She should be over him by now.

A country song played: "How Do I Live." She didn't remember the singer's name, but she liked the twang and the lyrics. Her eyes welled up. She never knew when a song would hit her.

"Want to try it on?" Lola asked from the counter.

Anne blinked away tears, shook off her emotions, and turned around. "How much for the set?" She searched for a price tag but found none.

Lola opened a ledger and scanned a page. "Don't know. I need to call the owner. Want to try it on in the meantime?"

"Sure." Anne couldn't pass up this opportunity.

Lola took the hanger from her, led her to the back of the shop, and hung the corset on a screen. "Just give a holler if you need help."

Behind the screen, Anne slipped out of her boots, jeans, and sweater. She unpinned the pieces, stepped into the skirt, and tied the side bows. She pulled the corset around her and reconnected the front metal hooks. Good thing she hadn't gained back the weight she'd lost last year after their breakup. Without all that yoga, the hooks would never have closed. She wished she had fishnet stockings to wear with the outfit.

As Anne slid back into her black boots, she heard Lola on the phone, asking, "How much for the green satin saloon number?"

"It's only one hundred dollars," Lola called. "Let me see."

Anne stepped out from behind the screen.

Lola's eyes lit up. "It's made for you."

"Here." Anne turned around. "Would you please tighten the back laces for me?"

Lola tugged on them until they were snug.

"Thanks." Anne leaned over and stuck her hand down the front twice, lifting each breast. "Gotta help the girls up."

Lola's eyes grew wide. "I've never seen that trick before."

"Read it on a blog somewhere." Anne studied her reflection in the standing mirror. Nice. A sexy hint of cleavage showed. She thrust out a hip and drawled, "What can I do for ya, fellas?"

Lola laughed. Anne handed Lola her phone, and Lola snapped a few photos.

Anne set her palms over the lace bows on the hips and slid her fingers down the satin below her belly button. A pale glow emanated within her and swirled slowly. The intoxicating aroma of sage filled the air. It had been so long since she'd been with Sergio.

She just had to get over him. Maybe they weren't meant to be, but she now longed for a connection with someone special. Someone who would appreciate a green lace corset like this.

"Do you take credit cards?" she asked.

Missouri, 1885

Sally Sue's heart felt as cold as the frozen river the train crossed over. Last night Mama had called her an old maid again. It wasn't her fault that at twenty-five, she'd never been proposed to. And here she was, with no prospects, on her way to Emporia to take care of her sick aunt Sarah for a week once again.

A hazy morning sun shone outside over the vast prairie. Nearly the end of March; the grasses would sprout again soon. Face reflected in the train window, she felt her cornflower-blue eyes holding back tears. She removed her bonnet, put it on the rack above, and ran a finger through a ringlet. Mama said her hair looked like the color of dirty dishwater: "Comes from your father's side of the family." Sally Sue grabbed her tatting from the basket.

A toddler sitting across from her started to cry. His mama picked him up, rocked him, and passed her hand over his peach-fuzzed head. "Hush, Sampson."

Sally Sue smiled at his ironic name. He soon quieted to a slow gurgle, grinned at her, and waved his tiny fingers. She put out her gloved hand, and he grasped it. Sadness clutched her heart. Without a husband, she'd never have a child of her own.

They both knew it was on account of her father's having left them that they had such troubles, but her ma always pinned it on Sally Sue. *Your father just didn't like having a child around. You were*

*always underfoot. That's why he left. It's your fault I had to take in laundry to make ends meet. You can't sew worth beans; too bad your laugh is so loud; if you were prettier, you'd be married by now.*

Ma had told folks father had been killed in an accident while away on business selling anvils, but the whole town knew the truth. He had run off with a hootchy-cootchy girl from the big city of Chicago.

The train blew a forlorn whistle as it pulled into a depot and stopped. The woman got up with her son, nodded at Sally Sue, and exited, leaving her alone in the car.

As the train chugged out of the station again, a tall man ducked inside, placing his hat and a leather saddlebag on the rack behind him. He sat across from Sally Sue, set a boot over his knee, and opened a newspaper on his lap.

She tried to tat. The man flipped a page in his newspaper. Out of the corner of an eye, she noticed that the nails on his long, strong fingers were neatly trimmed. She examined his spotless white shirt. The cutaway jacket revealed a neat vest and gold watch chain, but the bottoms of his striped trousers and boots were mud splattered. She liked the smell of him, though—hay and horse—and he sure was handsome. Was he the marrying kind? The kind Mama wanted her to get hitched to? He might even be in the cattle business.

Right before she'd left for the train depot that morning, they'd had another spat.

"Now, don't talk to any strange men. You mind your p's and q's, girl." Her mama had straightened Sally Sue's bonnet.

"Mama, you know me better than that."

"We don't want neighbors' tongues wagging about you." Her mama always wagged her tongue about them with scowling gossip. If she despised them so much, why did she care what they thought, anyway?

In fact, since the robbery, Sally Sue hadn't spoken much to any-

one. Her mama was always telling her how to behave, but she was a woman now and could take care of herself. She'd made it through that incident, hadn't she?

*Whoo-whoohoo*, the whistle warned, as the train careened around a bend, slamming her knee against the man's thigh. She took her time pulling away, tantalized by the firm feel of his strong muscles rubbing against her.

He chuckled and kept his eyes on the newspaper.

She had a hankering to slip off her gloves, put her thumb in his carved cleft chin, and run her hands along those clean-shaven cheeks.

"I'm Sally Sue Sullivan from Kansas City." She struggled to keep her voice from quivering. "What's your name?" Mama would have a conniption if she knew how forward Sally Sue was being and that she'd lied. They didn't really live in Kansas City proper; they were on the outskirts.

He didn't look at her. "Cliff. Cliff from nowhere." His gravelly voice sounded familiar.

"I've heard of that town but never been there." She grinned.

He peered at her and broke out into a belly laugh.

"Lived there long?" she teased.

"Forever."

"I'm on my way to check on Aunt Sarah, who suffers from a lung condition. She's real needy these days. Where're you going?"

"West."

"Where west?"

"Toward the Pacific."

She'd heard out West there was an ocean bigger than any lake she'd ever seen and that one could never get all the way across it.

"Maybe even San Francisco," he said.

She unwrapped her sandwich, ham on rye, and offered him half.

He closed his eyes, took large bites, and swallowed. "Thank you kindly." His eyes looked directly at her.

Her heart kicked like a bucking bronco's. She'd seen those steel-blue eyes before. That day in the bank. That day she'd never forget. It just couldn't be the same person. This was a gentleman. That bandit had been filthy, rough, and terrifying.

He blinked at her with what might be a flicker of recognition. She struggled to remain nonchalant and focused her eyes on her sandwich. What if it was he?

After the robbery, she had described what she could recall to the sketch artist. Because the robber had worn a kerchief, all she could recall were his brown Stetson and those eyes. The artist had been able to capture the coldness in them. Every time she saw one of the posters with those eyes above the kerchief in a post office, bank, or depot, her hands broke out in a sweat and her body shook. She could still hear that shot and smell gunpowder.

Now, as she glanced up, his eyes pierced hers and he grinned. A chill loped up her spine. She was sure it was him. Did he recognize her too?