

Oregon country, 1841

It was not impressive. Not that it mattered. Nothing did anymore. Anne turned her back to the scattered log buildings that formed the Banning Mission, brushed the dust from her black wool cloak and walked to the back of her wagon. "Thank you for bringing me, Mr. Thatcher. I am grateful."

The tall man unhitched his horse from the tailgate and looked down at her. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay until you have met Mr. Banning, Widow Simms? I gave your sister my word I would see you safely settled."

"And so you have, Mr. Thatcher. Emma worries overmuch. What possible harm can befall me at a mission?" She gave him a polite, dismissive smile.

He frowned, glanced at the buildings behind her. "Even so. I will wait until you are safe inside."

Anne looked up at the man's set face and the protest on her lips died. Zachary Thatcher had guided their wagon train all the way from Independence Missouri to the site of the new town of Promise the emigrants were founding here in Oregon country. Now he had brought her on to the mission. He would not yield his position as protector on her whim. "As you wish, Mr. Thatcher. But I assure you, it is quite unnecessary."

She turned back toward the buildings. The one on the right had a large addition that formed a T on the far end. Smoke poured from chimneys at the gable ends, and from another centered at the juncture of the wood-shingled roofs. There was a beaten track through the grass that divided at the end to reach two doors. She lifted the front of her long skirts clear of the exposed soil and followed the path to the plank door in the main building. Its red paint was streaked and faded. And dirty. She gave the back of her skirts a shake to free them of any soil adhering to their hems, adjusted her bonnet and knocked.

The late October sun glinted off three small windows spaced along the length of the building. Dust encrusted windows. Her fastidious nature reared. She jerked her gaze back to the door and knocked harder.

A reluctant hinge squealed in protest as the door was yanked open. "What for you knock? Door open, you come in!"

Anne jerked back at the imperious words, then squared her shoulders and stepped into the dim interior. Behind her, hoofs thudded against the ground as Zachary

Thatcher rode off. The stiffness in her spine relaxed. At last. Her final link with her family was broken. There was no one here she cared about. Her heart was safe.

"You sit. Mister come soon maybe."

The Indian woman issuing the order, closed the door, crossed the room and disappeared through a doorway at the other side of the fireplace.

Anne stared after her, stunned to silence and immobility by the unaccustomed rudeness. She swept her gaze over the room, took in the crude furnishings made of wood and hide. Even in the dim light offered by the smoldering fire and one of the small, dirty windows she could see the dust that covered them. *And* the dirt and bits of dried grass on the plank floor. Her training to be mistress of a home surged to the surface. Why would Mitchel Banning's wife allow such neglect?

The hinge on the door behind her squealed its protest. She turned, flinched as the flung-open door banged against the wall.

"By heaven, William, it is past time you got here!" A man charged into the room, stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her. The glad smile curving his lips and warming his eyes died. Confusion took its place. He glanced around the room, frowned, looked back at her and made a visible effort to gather himself. He brushed at his shirt sleeves and ran his hands through his hair scattering dust and tiny particles of some sort of grass or grain into the air. She could see them glittering against the sun coming in the open door behind him as they drifted toward the floor. He turned, grabbed a jacket off a peg beside the door and shrugged into it.

"Forgive my appearance, I was at the grist mill when I heard the wagon pull in, Miss...er...Mrs...."

"Widow Simms."

He turned, swept his gaze over her black clothing and made her a slight bow. "Mitchel Banning, at your service. I beg your pardon for my...er...explosive entrance, Widow Simms. But when I heard your wagon arrive, I thought..." He gave a little shrug.

"That my brother William Allen had arrived?"

"William is your *brother*?" Mitchel Banning's broad smile returned. "Where is the scalawag? In the wagon?" He turned and peered out the door.

"No, Mr. Banning. William is in Philadelphia. His wife is with child and she took ill and was unable to make the journey."

Mitchel turned back, confusion on his face, a question in his eyes.

Anne straightened to her full height, which brought the top of her head

somewhere close to the level of his chin. "William was loath to disappoint you, so I have come to teach school in his stead."

The man's reaction was instant and acute, his disappointment palpable. It washed over her like a wave. A frown drew his brows together. He lifted a hand and kneaded the muscles at the back of his neck. Her stomach clenched in a sharp spasm. If he should disapprove... "I am well qualified to fill the position, Mr. Banning." Her quiet words drew his gaze back to her. There was a harried look in his eyes.

He nodded and lowered his hand to his side. "Forgive my poor manners, Widow Simms. You must be weary after your long journey. We can continue this discussion later. If you would care to refresh yourself before dinner, William's— There is a spare room up those stairs." He gestured across the room. "I will have Sighing Wind bring you water. And if there is anything more you have need of..." His voice trailed off, left the words hanging there in indecision.

Anne took a deep breath. It would be of no advantage to delay. She must make her expectations clear. "I should like my trunks and personal belongings brought from the wagon to my room as quickly as possible, Mr. Banning."

Another frown darkened his face, was quickly erased. He made no answer, merely sketched her a polite bow.

Her stomach clenched tighter. Surely, he was not considering refusing her the position. She firmed her voice. "My teaching supplies can be carried directly to the schoolroom. I will begin organizing them tomorrow. For now, as you say, I am weary. But I should like to pay my respects to Mrs. Banning and express my gratitude for her hospitality before I go upstairs."

Something about him changed, went...still. He turned, closed the door, shutting out the fading sunlight.

"I see William did not tell you my wife has departed this earth for her heavenly home. It was her death that prompted me to write and ask William to come and help me in my work." He turned back to face her. "I wasn't sure William ever received my letter. It is over two years since her passing."

His words touched the rawness of her grief. *Over two years.* An eternity. How would she ever survive it without her beloved Phillip and their precious baby Grace? The memories she struggled to keep buried surged upward. Familiar bands of pain clamped around her chest and throat. Her fingers twitched. "I am sorry for your loss, Mr. Banning." The words came out a broken whisper. It was the best she could manage

with so little breath.

He stepped away from the door, came closer to where she stood in the center of the room. "And I, for yours, Widow Simms. May Almighty God grant you His peace and comfort during this time of your bereavement."

*God.* Every muscle in her body went rigid. Her face drew taut. It was *God* who had taken her husband and child from her and left her to walk this earth in unbearable anguish. She wanted no comfort. Certainly not from God. Not from anyone. She wanted only to be numb. She swallowed, tried, but could not force polite words through the constricting barrier of her anger. She gave Mitchel Banning a small nod, thankful for the long brim of the scoop bonnet that hid her face from him, raised the front hems of her skirts off the dusty planks and walked toward the stairs, aware of his gaze on her every step of the way.

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He was trapped. His choice a privilege that bowed to circumstance. Mitchel listened to the sounds of her things being carried to her room and stole another glance at William's sister. Her hair had been smoothly drawn back into a bun at her crown when she joined him for dinner. But all through the meal her curls had been popping free of any restraint and now formed a riotous halo around her head. Not a golden one, but one the deep-russet color of oak leaves in autumn. Color of such bold contrast to the rest of her solemn appearance it seemed almost to make it a lie. As did her eyes. They were the violet-blue of a bottle gentian, startling in a face with skin that put him in mind of the prized alabaster vase that had sat on his parents' mantel all his growing-up years. It gave him a shock every time she lifted those long, brown lashes and looked up at him. But those were not the only contrasts he had discovered in William's sister.

Mitchel scowled, stabbed his fork into the last bite of beef on his plate and carried it to his mouth. The woman's nature was strongly opposite of her fragile appearance. No matter what argument he set forth to prove her best interest lay in returning to the emigrant town being formed by those with whom she had journeyed to Oregon country, she would not be dissuaded from her determination to remain and teach school. And by heaven he did not need another person to look after! He had enough on his plate. He had been living on the hope of William's arrival expecting succor, not more responsibility. But what was he to do? Cast William's sister out into the wilderness? He did not have time to leave the mission to escort her to the emigrant

town or Fort Walla Walla. There was too much work to be done in preparation for winter. And he dare not leave Hope in the care of the Indians. Their cures for sickness would kill her.

His heart seized at the thought of his toddler daughter lying ill in her bed. He had tried all he knew to help her, but— *Wait!* His heart lurched, pounded out an accelerated beat. In that last letter he had received before leaving to come west, William had written that one of his sisters was studying with their adopted father to become a doctor. Which one? Anne? No. Emma. He cast a speculative glance at the woman across from him. Which one was she? Had God answered his prayers for Hope's healing by sending— No. That was senseless. Emma was working with their physician father in Philadelphia. Why would she come to the Oregon wilderness? Unless...unless she had married and lost her husband. *Please, Almighty God, for Hope's sake, let it be Emma.*

Mitchel put his fork down, looked across the table. The woman seemed so *delicate* to be a doctor. Still... *Please, God...* "Have you skill at tending the sick, Widow Simms?"

She placed her fork on her plate and looked over at him. "There is illness here at the mission, Mitchel—I mean Mr. Banning?" Pink tinged her face, crested on her high cheekbones. "Please forgive my lapse of manners. William always refers to you by your given name and I am accustomed to thinking of you that way."

"Ah, William. I miss him and our deep philosophical discussions greatly." Fondness for his friend swelled. He pushed away his disappointment that William had been unable to make the journey and smiled. "As your brother is our connection, why don't we consider ourselves properly introduced and dispense with formality? Please call me Mitchel."

She gave a small nod. "You are very kind, Mitchel. Thank you for your graciousness in the face of my lapse." The merest wisp of a polite smile touched her lips, disappeared. "Please call me Anne."

Not Emma. His heart sank. He stared down at his plate, sought to find something encouraging on which to hang hope for his daughter's recovery.

"You were speaking of illness here at the mission?"

"Yes. My daughter, Hope." He cleared his throat of the lump lodged there. "I have done all I know to do, but she...does not improve." He looked into Anne's astonishingly blue eyes and silently willed her to be God's answer to his prayers. It was

unfair, but he could not stop himself. "She is a baby, only two years old."

Anne Simms went as white as the snow on Mount Hood. Her long, dark-brown lashes swept down to rest against her colorless cheeks, and her pale lips parted as if she could not breathe in enough air. Mitchel leaned forward. "Are you unwell, Anne?"

She gave a slight shake of her head. "No. I—" She opened her eyes, glanced at him, then looked down and placed her hands in her lap. "I am sorry to disappoint you, Mitchel, but I will be of no help to you. I know nothing of caring for the ill or...children. Now, if you will excuse me I am weary and should like to retire." Before he could stand, she rose and hurried from the room.

He stared after her, bitterness rising on a swell of anger at his dashed hope. For a moment he had thought— He gave a snort and shoved back his chair. It was impossible that Anne was the answer to his prayers. He'd prayed for *help*, not a frail beauty who looked about to swoon at the mere mention of Hope's illness. It was obvious Anne Simms was not strong enough to handle life on the wilderness mission, let alone teach Indian children. Well he would not accept another burden! William's sister or not—when Adam Halstrum returned from his trip to Oregon City—Anne's belongings were going back in her wagon. Adam could take her back to the emigrant village.

"P-papa... P-papa!"

His heart squeezed at his daughter's sobbing call. He spun on his heels and hurried toward her room to comfort her.