

CHAPTER FIVE

Some of the best instrumental music is of a descriptive nature, reflecting vividly the incidents of every day life.

Peculiar fingerings of the string, close harmonies . . .

EMMA BELL MILES, *The Spirit of the Mountains*



Next morning Lizzie pulled me from my sleep and insisted we wash every dress, petticoat, and pair of drawers in the cabin.

“But it’s Friday!” I protested. “Monday’s washday.” It seemed Lizzie and I were all tangled. Most days I played the role of the big sister, even though I was younger, but when it came to social doings, Lizzie would stamp her foot and become queen of the cabin.

“Strip the beds, Viney, and start hauling water. I’ll light the fire under the kettle,” Lizzie commanded.

Eight trips later, steam and the smell of lye soap smarted my eyes as I dumped the last bucket into the rinse tub. Lizzie stoked the fire and sang:

*“I wonder when I shall be married,
Oh, be married, be married,*

*I wonder when I shall be married.
For my beauty's beginning to fade."*

I rolled my eyes.

We scrubbed until my knuckles smarted. Lizzie added a heap of starch to our drawers and petticoats, and we spread them over bushes in the sun. She gloated, reckoning we'd have the fullest skirts at the raising. In truth, our drawers would be the scratchiest. Now that we had clean clothes, she demanded that we fill the tub for baths.

"Can't see why," I muttered. "All this fuss for foreigners."

Lizzie splashed and sang. Her singing had a way of softening my spirit, like wakening on an April morning to a bluebird's call. What I could do with my hands, Lizzie created with her voice as she warbled out the words to "Shady Grove." Finally she ordered me in and rubbed the soap across my scalp, making my skin tingle.

"Leave off!" I threw water at Lizzie and ducked down, my hair floating behind me like a mare's tail. I sank to my chin and watched the sunset lick the clouds drifting over the hills.

Jacob had taken his tools and gone early, but Lizzie insisted we arrive after most of the work was over. She was aiming at making an entrance. I looked forward to seeing Mrs. Hill, but I dreaded seeing those heaps of tree stumps.

"Tighter!" Lizzie clung to the door frame as I laced her into the corset Mrs. Hill had given her. "I just have to make me a bustle. Do you reckon Mrs. Hill could find me a pattern?" She craned her neck to look at her plump bottom.

“Why in tarnation do you want a bigger behind? Isn’t holding your breath bad enough?” Red flooded her face, and Lizzie looked ready to clobber me.

“You are *impossible*! You don’t even have the sense to clean your fingernails!” Lizzie attacked my hair with her tucking comb. “When are you going to start wearing something decent? It’s mortifying to be seen with you . . . unlaced and unkempt. At your age, still wearing your hair in a braid! And in front of *gentlemen*. Ain’t proper.”

“Git!” I grabbed the comb. She’d have yanked every hair out of my head. I braided my hair and tied it with a bit of blue yarn. “If’n we don’t hurry a mite, those fellars might take a shine toward the first girls they spy. Not many of them, and lots of us.” Lizzie blanched and strode off.

A score of foreigners carried lumber, drove in nails, teasing each other, but I noticed that only a handful of mountain men offered their labors. Later, more highland folk might come for the dancing, but like me, most mourned the mounds of brush and stumps heaped at the edges of the clearing. Lizzie surprised me and walked straight to where the women were arranging food on makeshift tables. After unloading our pies from the baskets, she sidled up to Mrs. Hill.

“Fine afternoon, isn’t it, ma’am?” Lizzie gazed up at a sky the shade of wool lifted from an indigo dye pot.

“’Tis lovely. And you look so fresh and fair in that rosy frock. Is that the lace collar you knit this winter?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for teaching me. Only wish I could have bought calico for a new dress instead of having to baste it to this thing.”

“You three young folk do tolerably well, but I reckon you don’t see much extra cash.”

“No, ma’am.” Lizzie looked down demurely, but she did not fool me. I knew where this game was headed. Mr. Hill would not refuse Lizzie a job if his wife thought the idea was hers.

Mrs. Hill examined Lizzie. “You are such a tidy young lady. And trustworthy, with an appreciation for fine ways.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Lizzie murmured.

“Lizzie, once this boardinghouse is completed, the cook will be needing kitchen help. I wonder if Jacob would give his blessing for you to live here and work? And later the inn will need maids. Mainly you would earn credit at the commissary, but that would help your family.”

“Oh, Mrs. Hill! What a generous thought. But I don’t know if he and Viney could spare me from the chores.”

“You’re right about that, Lizzie,” I hurried to interject. “I don’t know *how* we’d make it without you. Corn and beans need hoeing. Milking, churning, cheese making—tuckers me out just to think on it all.”

Lizzie glared at me. Her look could have split kindling.

“Well,” Mrs. Hill said. “I’ll talk to Jacob and Amos about my idea. Maybe one of the lads apprenticed to us could come to your farm and help now and then.”

I grinned while Lizzie stood frozen. Ooo, wouldn’t that irk her if I had the company of a foreign fellar all to myself.

“Now, that’s a thought, ma’am,” I said. “Surely, a young man’s hands would be a blessing and could do more work than a girl.” I glanced at Lizzie, who looked like she had been sipping vinegar.

“Then I’ll speak to the men, and Mr. Hill will inform you when you should come for training.” Mrs. Hill patted Lizzie’s shoulder.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Lizzie said, and marched off to where a few of her girlfriends sat.

“I know it’s hard for you to celebrate all this.” Mrs. Hill’s eyes searched mine. “But trust me, dear, good will come from the settlement.”

“Yes, ma’am.” But for once, I reckoned Mrs. Hill was wrong. I wondered why I’d even bothered to come to the raising. I wandered over and looked at the oxen staked out to graze. If I had their strength, I’d hitch myself to yonder house and pull it down. But even that would not drive out the English.

At sundown we gathered in the finished boardinghouse. The dining room smelled of fresh-cut pine, and the honey-colored boards glowed in the reflected lantern light. Mr. Tompkins tuned his fiddle while Mr. Lloyd readied his banjo. The black-haired lad I had seen driving the wagon rosined his bow. He must have been the one fiddling when I came rescuing plants.

The eight foreigners stood near Mr. Hill. Lizzie and her girlfriends flounced about the lads, chattering, making them laugh.

“Couple up four!” Mr. Slone called out. The locals nodded to girls and took their hands, but the Englishmen had the strangest ways. A lad with blond hair came up to Lizzie and *bowed*. Made my jaw drop.

I was so busy watching that I jumped when the auburn-haired boy touched my arm. Mercy, did he recognize me?

“Miss, may I have the pleasure of this dance?” he asked. Before I could find my tongue, he grasped my fingers lightly and led me to the center of the room.

“These are country dances?” he asked in his crisp accent as we joined a ring made of two-couple sets. His blue eyes scanned my face.

“Yes.” I blushed. I felt like a moth in the lantern light and wondered if he recognized me from that night in the clearing. “We’ll dance with Sam and Janie here, and when the caller says to, we’ll move on to the next couple. We being the active pair.”

“Circle left!” Mr. Slone called. “Now back by the right.”

“I see,” he murmured in the odd accent.

“Birdie in the cage!” Mr. Slone shouted. “Cage that bird, that pretty little bird!”

I hopped into the center of our foursome, and the others joined hands and circled left around me.

“Birdie hop out and crow hop in!” Sam pushed the foreigner in, and I stepped out.

“Couples move on!” I grabbed the boy’s hand, and we slipped on to the next couple.

“Swing that girl across the hall, come back home and swing them all.” Tom twirled me and gave me to the foreigner, who turned me with two hands. He was half a foot taller than me.

“Do you have a name?” he asked.

Should I have a little fun or give him the truth? ’Twas a sin to lie.

“Viney Walker.” Most times, I liked my name. Puts me in mind of blossoming honeysuckle sweetening the air, with vines strong enough for weaving baskets. But it wasn’t one he’d forget.

“Viney?” His frown crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“Short for Lavinia. And you are?”

“Charlie. Charles Breckenridge.”

“Duck and Dive,” Mr. Slone called.

We bowed under the arching arms of a couple and raised our own arms to sail over the next couple. The foreign fiddler sat on a stool, his boots slapping the floorboards as he drove that tune into our bones. My breathing rose and fell with the beat of the music, and our feet drummed out a rhythm. For a moment we were the heddles and treadles of my loom, weaving a cloth of bodies and music.

“Swing her home!” Mr. Slone barked out.

Charlie placed one hand on my shoulder and another on my waist. “Do the same,” he said.

I followed suit, and we swung in a circle like a twirling spindle. Whatever this swinging was called, it surely beat a two-hand turn! When the fiddle stopped, we stood panting.

“Thank you,” Charlie said. Once again he grasped my fingertips and guided me away from the center of the room. A group of mountaineers snickered.

“Do you fellars treat all women like royalty?” I bit my tongue when I saw him stiffen. I’d used the same snotty voice he’d heard that night. Might as well have called out: “I’m the one!”

“And did the plants survive the transplanting? I would like to learn which ones you took.”

He *had* recognized me! My face reddened. “Goldenseal and ginseng,” I mumbled, then threaded my way through a cluster of couples and slipped out into the dark, once again fleeing from that foreigner.