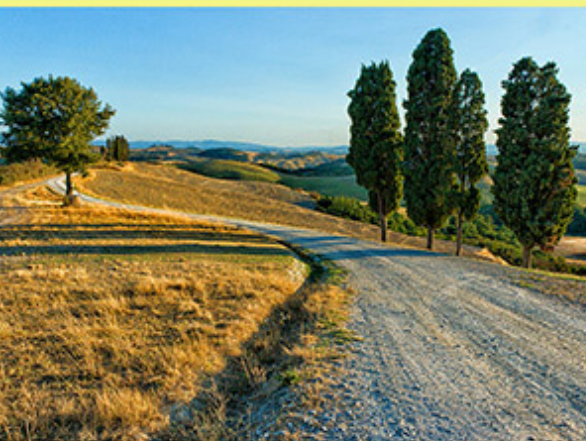


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

Mia West

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

By Mia West

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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SHELTER FROM THE STORM

By Mia West

Photo Description

The photo for this prompt shows a muscular young man wearing a cowboy hat, bandanna, leather work gloves, jeans, and belt. He is looking at a white horse, whose bridle he grips. The man's eyes are shielded by his hat.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've never thought much about taking a wife. Eligible women are scarce here. When Ma died, it took all of our energy to keep the farm going. Pa died last year and I have help in the field but it's not enough. A year of living alone has made me long for the sound of a voice besides my own and a warm body to help stave off the night chill. So I finally put in an ad for a mail order bride. And she's on the next train. She seems perfect. She can cook, clean, tend a garden, and read and write. Maybe too good to be true. But I'm desperate and can't help but hope.

Please make this an 1800s American West mail order bride story with either a transgender bride or a man pretending to be a woman. The farm could be a ranch and the train a stage depending on the decade. I want the bride to have some of the knowledge or skills needed to be a farm wife.

Heat level author's choice but please think outside the box and make any sex appropriate for the time period. No BDSM, menage, cheating, torture, etc.

Sincerely,

Issa

Story Info

Genre: historical, western

Tags: 19th Century, farmer, cross-dressing, disguise, humorous, hurt/comfort, interracial, masturbation, Native American

Content Warnings: violence (off the page)

Word Count: 8,115

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

By Mia West

My dear young man,

If you're reading this, or listening as you cannot yet read, then two things have occurred:

First, you've come to Stormy Ridge for employment or shelter or both.

Second, neither I, Daniel Thomas Cooper, nor my partner, Mr. Isaiah Payne, is able to tell you this tale ourselves.

As these two things have come to pass, a third is imperative: you must read (or listen) to this document in its entirety. If you find you cannot, the foreman will escort you and your belongings to the boundary of the property, and you will not return. If, on the other hand, you prove you have the courage and fortitude to reach the final page, you may yet have a chance for happiness in this world.

All who come to Stormy Ridge are expected to live in a way that reflects and demonstrates the guiding principles of the farm, some of which are illustrated in the following pages. As you read, you may wonder if those values include deception, intolerance, and violence. They do not, though you will find those in this tale. It has been a difficult lesson that to create a life worth living, we must sometimes confront the ugliest and most cowardly faces of our fellow men. But perseverance holds an extraordinary reward.

I promise you that.

Now. I don't know how you heard about Stormy Ridge or how much you know of its founders. But because Mr. Payne's reputation has most likely come down through history to paint him as one of the kindest, most generous men ever to live, while the story that follows my name likely portrays me as a crotchety old coot, you should know two additional things:

First, though I have written these pages myself, with the assistance of my solicitor, Mr. Payne has read and approved them.

Second, any passage herein that causes you to blush red as a coxcomb has been included at Mr. Payne's insistence.

(If you have ever had the glorious misfortune to find yourself in love, you'll know that it is nearly impossible to deny that person anything. I would lay all my weaknesses at Love's doorstep, but they would teeter so high no one else would ever be able to find the knocker.)

That is quite enough preamble. If you have heard of Mr. Isaiah Payne, perhaps you know of his patents for wind-driven water pumps, or have read his treatise on the mistreatment of his birth people, the Cherokee, by the federal government, or it may be you heard of the time he leapt onto the back of a bull gone berserk at a stock auction and used his strength and his wits to calm the beast.

What you may not know is that when Isaiah Payne first stepped off the coach here, he wore a woman's dress and introduced himself as Isabel.

Have I got your attention?

I thought so.

I was a young man and a lonely one.

Ma and Pa had died the previous year, one close after the other, as longtime companions often do. I had help with the harvest, but when that was squared away, and it was only me and my dog on the farm for five long, snow-socked months, I grew sick of my own self. As soon as the ways of communication opened in the spring thaw, I posted a letter of advertisement to a reputable newspaper back east, indicating my interest in a wife.

They were called mail-order brides, and I don't mind telling you that ordering a wife sight unseen was a hell of a lot more nerve-jangling than ordering a plowshare.

I'd never given much thought to marrying while my parents lived. My mother fed me, and my father employed me. I had a few friends, a good hound, and a strong right hand that knew my own business, so skipping the courting rituals some of the other fellows had to get up to was just fine with me. All I would have to do was read the sacks of applicant letters I was bound to receive, choose the best candidate, and arrange for her transportation. No courting, no fuss.

Well, hear this: wooing is something like loan interest. If a man shirks his early payments, he'll have double the work to do down the road.

I did not, it turned out, receive sacks of letters. I received exactly four. One woman hated horses. Another was already sixty years old. A third had attended a women's college, where she had studied philosophy and sculpture, and thought that life on the frontier of the United States sounded extremely romantic.

The fourth letter, and the only one I didn't burn, came from a Miss Isabel Payne of Georgia. Isabel was the daughter of a farmer, so she was familiar with the work that would be required of her, in the house and out. She could read and write, and preferred newspapers to novels. She claimed to be virtuous but not sanctimonious. She was roughly my own age. And she liked to sing mountain tunes by the fire on cold, winter evenings.

She sounded perfect.

And so it was that I found myself fidgeting at the station on an oppressively hot afternoon in the late summer of 1837. Everyone in town knew why I was there, and I had a steady stream of well-wishers stopping by to gawk and be generally useless. By the time the coach rolled up, I was shaking in my boots and wishing I had arranged to pick up Isabel in a town down the road. I shooed away my pests as best I could and watched for her to disembark.

She was easy to spot, being a young woman traveling alone. A bonnet obscured her face, but even from where I stood, I could see that she was trim, almost rail-thin, but stood straight in a way that projected determination and fortitude. She gripped a carpet bag in her gloved hands, and I wondered if her knuckles were white under the fabric.

Mine were.

I approached her cautiously, half expecting to be interrupted by the person she actually meant to meet, but no one else showed up.

"Miss Payne?" I asked.

She jumped a bit and turned. I was surprised to find she was only an inch or two shorter than myself, so her eyes found mine quickly. They struck me dumb for a moment because they were a shade I'd never seen on anyone before, a color I've since come to think of as strong coffee with two dollops of fresh cream in it, along with a secret nip of whisky.

"Mr. Daniel Cooper?"

Her voice was huskier than I had expected, but soft around the edges, and I felt an instant urge to protect her. The angles of her face were strange, as you

can imagine and are no doubt having a chuckle over, but my only thought was that they were compelling. Her skin showed the effects of working in the sun, but it was clear of blemishes, and I was just arrogant enough to think to myself that I approved. “Yes, ma’am,” I said. “How was your trip?”

“Fine,” she said. “I’m sorely glad to be here. Emphasis on sore.”

I could see that her arms were shaking and reached for her bag, realizing only when she’d relinquished it that she might have preferred the comfort of holding it. “Your trunk?”

“I don’t have one,” she said.

I chalked it up to frugality, an excellent quality in a young wife, and steered her off the platform and away from our audience forthwith.

If I had known that the dress she wore and the spare in her bag were stolen, that she owned almost nothing at all, well... to be honest, I might not have acted any differently. I was already drawn to the skinny thing.

I took her home.

Which is to say, I drove the team in near-silence, bound up by nervousness. I couldn’t get the image of my bed out of my mind, and the fact that the woman beside me would soon co-occupy it. Yes, marriage is much more than what takes place under one’s quilts, but a young man sitting next to his first likely sleeping companion will have a difficult time pondering anything else.

Isabel was not hindered by nerves, or rather they unleashed in her the words they held back in me, and she chattered the whole way. About the various coaches. About a hawk that had flown alongside for several miles. About how different this place was from Georgia. About her life so far on her family’s farm and how she preferred to let her churned butter sit an extra day because it made it tangy, and did I have a milk cow (she had forgotten to inquire in her correspondence), and were there many hands on the farm and people in the town, and did I attend church because she thought she might be too tuckered out for such an obligation on the morrow.

I can’t recall the exact moment I realized that Isabel wasn’t who she said she was. I began to steal glances at her, attempting to root out the cause of my misgivings. I figured the talking would settle down once she had something useful to do, and if it didn’t I would just tell her that, as her husband, I expected solitude in my home. (As I said, I was something arrogant.) But little by little,

small things about Isabel and her demeanor, her carriage, began to add up. How she sat with her knees apart. The way her hands gripped the edge of the seat instead of each other in her lap. That she wore a neckerchief despite the heat, and because of the heat it had lost its starch, revealing an Adam's apple more prominent than mine.

You might rightly wonder how I could have not seen the truth, but we see what we expect to see. And I expected the person next to me to be a woman, as much as that thought on its own discombobulated me.

We reached the farm before I reached a conclusion, and so the next few hours were spent acquainting Isabel with the place and with her responsibilities in it. She nodded briskly at every "You will" direction, not bridling until "You will bake me an apple pie every week." Her dark eyebrows drew together before she could school her expression into a more amenable one. I confessed a moment later to my joke, made in an effort to lift the tension of the day, and her shoulders eased.

There wasn't much for Isabel to do that first afternoon, or so I thought, considering myself a tidy bachelor farmer. She put me to rights, however, by depositing her carpet bag next to Ma's old rocking chair and proceeding to clean the pantry from rafters to floorboards. Her industry pleased me, such that by the time the sun had set, I'd decided to offer Isabel a trial period of one month, during which we would remain unmarried in every sense except that we would occupy the same house.

"Where will I sleep?" she asked.

"In my bed," I said.

"And where will you sleep?"

"On the porch."

I was happy that the sleeping arrangements had been as concerning for her as they had been for me.

I just didn't realize why, on either account.

We got down to the business of harvest.

The hired hands and I kept busy during the day, cutting grain, gathering it into shocks, and standing them to dry until the time came to haul them to the

grange. The skies cooperated, dawning bright, peaking hot, and resting dry overnight, and I dared believe that the harvest might proceed as planned, undamaged by rain or hail for the first time in several years.

At the house, Isabel took on the vegetable garden, eschewing any assistance. She gathered the produce efficiently, carrying it into the kitchen in startlingly heavy loads. Every evening, I watched her for signs of strain, but she showed none. She was simply strong, and capable, and if the work did tire her, uncomplaining. In just two weeks, the shelves of the root cellar and pantry groaned with our winter store. After a couple of days to clean the house thoroughly, Isabel insisted on helping in the outer fields.

She worked as hard as any of the men, usually choosing to do her cutting and stacking on the far edge of the day's field. I took it for modesty, and the virtue she had claimed, and called out any man I caught watching her.

When I had called out half the men on the crew, I began to fire them. They didn't take kindly to that approach, but when I asked each one what he found so interesting about my affianced, he invariably refused to speak, shaking his head and walking away.

The response was so consistent that I began to watch Isabel myself. But all that came of that was that I felt myself more and more drawn to her. I couldn't have explained it in any usual sense. She was thin, as I've mentioned, wiry of muscle. She had no bosom to speak of at all. And she seemed to have difficulty keeping her hair pinned up under her bonnet. If ever I noticed her standing still during the day, I would find her with her hands raised, sweeping long, dark strands of hair off the nape of her neck and back into her cap. With her head bowed and her elbows thrown wide, I found myself taken by the long curve of her spine, from the knobby bones at the top to the dip above her apron strings. And, if I'm being honest, down over the small curve of her *derrière*.

Evenings were no less fascinating, and I could hardly wait for the hands to leave each day. At the finish of work, I would make my way to the stream that bisected the southwestern fields to bathe. Before Isabel had arrived, I had done so at the well behind the house, but now removed myself in the interest of her modesty. When I returned, she would meet me with a jug of cold water laced with a few cucumber slices, and I would rest on the back porch.

One evening, I decided I would watch her prepare supper, but she wouldn't have it, said, "Daniel Cooper, if you can watch, you can help."

By the by, to this day I am “Daniel Cooper” in our household, and I can tell you it makes a man feel fifteen feet tall to be given the respect of his full name.

Unless, of course, he’s in trouble. Which I often am.

So I helped the stern creature in my kitchen prepare supper. I found I wanted to make Isabel laugh, for it was a deep, rich laugh she had. Moreover, when she smiled, the long line of her nose seemed to point to her white teeth, which grew straight but for one charmingly crooked eye tooth. God help me, I tarnished the reputation of my deceased mother, telling Isabel slight fibs about my mother’s proficiency in all matters cooking and preserving. But I was young, and I had a chance to make someone feel at home, and I figured I wouldn’t have to answer to Ma until we met in Heaven (or until she waved from the Gates as I was escorted away).

Helping make supper soon included helping to clean the dishes and pans afterward. Then, as she did each night, Isabel would take her turn to go to the stream, and I would do small repairs, or whittle, or just pat the hound’s head because I couldn’t concentrate well enough to do repairs or whittle without injuring myself. Soon her voice would float back ahead of her in the dark, soft as a fine-grained rasp, singing a song from her people back home. I would gesture to the other rocking chair, and she would rock and sing, and if I asked politely, allow me to sing along on the choruses.

“Leave the verses to me, Daniel Cooper,” she would say, and I would.

As you can imagine, I had begun to anticipate the end of Isabel’s trial month with fervor. She had made my house feel like a home again, and she seemed content herself. She would stay, I was certain of it.

But, as you likely know, patience is not the strong suit of many young men. Some of us are further burdened by sneaky natures. And so it was that on an evening with a full moon, I bided my time until I figured Isabel had reached the stream, and then I followed her.

My belly was in a turmoil the whole walk there, and well it might have been. I was a scoundrel, a no-good sneaky deceiver, and a despoiler of maidens’ virtues. I had no excuse for it. I followed with the intention of watching her bathe.

And I was repaid with the second-greatest shock of my life.

Her singing masked my approach. Crouching behind the tall grass that grew along the stream, I watched Isabel as she knelt in the current, splashing water

under her arms. Her long hair hung loose down her back, the tips catching in the flow of the creek. Her arms were even more sinewy than I had imagined, her shoulders broader. When she turned to dunk her head, I saw that her chest was smooth and flat but for the muscle that moved under the skin. The sight of dark nipples had me breaking out in a fresh sweat. Then Isabel rose out of the water.

I didn't understand what I was seeing, at first. I had expected the hair at her crotch, dark to match her head. Tales get around among young men that women have hair in the same places we do. What I couldn't reconcile was that Isabel had a cock, and under it a pouch heavy with two balls.

I stared as she dried herself. How could this be? Was it possible for a woman to have a man's workings? Wouldn't such a possibility have come down through the whispering, snickering grapevine of young men along with the knowledge of female pubic hair? Isabel put a halt to my questions when she began to stroke herself.

She started slowly, dreamily, sliding her open hand down the length of her member. Soon, though, her fingers curled around the cock, which had become stiff. She spit into her palm, a jarring action, and then began to pull harder on herself. Her other hand tucked up her sac, kneading it, and her posture hit me like a lightning bolt: she stood with her head bowed, just as she had in the fields. My eyes followed that sinuous curve of her back, down, down, over her bare rump and on down her long legs. Her toes curled into the pebbles of the stream bank. She groaned, her voice as deep as usual and then growing deeper and rougher. Her strong wrist flexed as she worked her length. Her head fell back, accentuating her bony chin and long throat. Then her hips pumped twice, her groan became a loud grunt, and she ejaculated.

I closed my eyes and held my breath. I counted to five. And when I opened my eyes again, the person standing on the stream bank holding a spent cock was a young man.

That was the second-greatest shock of my life.

The first was that I had known, deep inside, despite the dress and the name and the modesty, and that I had been drawn to him, to the hard, stubborn, vulnerable maleness of him. And that even though he was as much a scoundrel, as much a no-good sneaky deceiver as I was, I was still attracted to him, to the extent that my own cock ached above a sac as tight and ridged as a walnut shell.

I lay silent behind the grass as the young man walked back to the house. When he had disappeared down the trail, I relieved my cock of the confines of my trousers, and then of the milky fluid inside it, and lay gasping on the bank like a dismayed fish.

When I caught my breath and most of my wits, I walked straight to the sleeping porch and slipped under my sheet, and when the soft, now-familiar *good night* came from the doorway, I pretended I was asleep.

I woke cranky and self-righteous but too cowardly to confront the imposter, which made me crankier. I stomped through the house on my way to milking the cows, further bothered that Isabel was already awake and cooking breakfast. How dare he continue to be the perfect fiancée? I stewed during chores, earning myself a near-kick from one of the cows. Then I stewed during breakfast. I stewed all day, trying not to watch Isabel at his work, noticing for the first time the way the hired hands studiously avoided looking at either of us but traded meaningful glances amongst themselves. By quitting time, I had decided on a plan.

We would attend church.

Isabel had so far begged off of attending services, and for three weeks, I had capitulated, glad to have the excuse to sit out a few of the good reverend's droning sermons. But the next day was Sunday, and Isabel's pleas would be for naught. I wanted to see him in town, among other people. I wanted, I believed, to discover that his disguise was difficult for him, that he was not a willing liar. I had no idea why he would claim to be a woman in the first place, as I'd yet been too craven to ask, but I evidently didn't lack for cruel intent. Despite almost every excuse he could come up with, including a whispered mention of menses, Isabel found himself perched beside me the next morning, suffering the long ride to town.

Church was as dull as ever it was, but I had never attended for the sermons. After three weeks on the farm, it was good to see friends again. To Isabel's dismay, they flocked around him eager to make my future bride's acquaintance. He kept his head down and his gloved hands clasped, and he spoke softly, and except that he wouldn't meet their eyes, folks didn't seem to find anything about Isabel amiss. When the reverend's wife called for an impromptu welcome celebration picnic, I ignored Isabel's iron grip on my arm and accepted.

Folks gathered by the river, those who resided in town providing a generous spread. I made a point of introducing Isabel to everyone he hadn't met at the church. At some point, a group of ladies insisted Isabel join them for cider and cakes, and gossip most likely, and I fairly pushed him at them.

I spent the afternoon throwing horseshoes and discussing the harvest with the men of the town. I kept Isabel in the corner of my sight for a long time, while he sat among the ladies. Occasionally, his bonnet would nod and his chin dip on a response, but mostly he seemed to clutch his cider. After a couple of hours, I believed I had my answer, or one of them, that his disguise was not a comfortable one. Isabel did not revel in fooling people. From my privileged position of utter ease among my fellow men, I decided that I would give Isabel, or whatever his name was, a chance to explain himself as soon as we returned home.

Having decided both our immediate futures, I turned toward a discussion of draft horses and forgot to watch Isabel. I didn't see him rise from the circle of women and excuse himself. I didn't see him slip away toward town. Nor did I see the small group of men who broke away from the picnic to follow him.

What I did see, about an hour later, was Isabel walking toward me, looking as though he'd just arrived from Armageddon. His arms held together a dress that was all but tatters. He had lost a shoe and limped on the one remaining. His hair had fallen from its pins and drifted loose below his bonnet. The knuckles of his formerly white gloves were bloodied.

The anger with which I had awoken died.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Daniel Cooper," he said, his voice like broken china, "please take me home."

I looked up, took in the shocked faces around me, and then noticed a few that wore no shock, though they did bear a few bruises.

And my anger was reborn.

The drive back to the farm was as quiet as the ride into town had been, between my simmering rage and the effort with which the young man beside me was holding himself upright.

I wanted to beat every one of them. Pummel them until they broke, and then drive my oxen over their pitiful remains. My hands fisted the reins such that the

team shook their heads and chuffed at me to drive like a sane man. I managed to get us back to the house without tipping the wagon. That didn't keep my companion from falling off the seat once we'd stopped.

I ran around the rig and tried to lift him, but he wouldn't have it. So I helped him gain his feet and supported him as we walked to the house. I realized in those few steps that that was the closest I had been to him since he'd arrived. He felt warm and solid, despite his injuries, and he weighed more than I expected him to. His body shook, and I wanted it to be a sign of anger but worried it was defeat. Or worse, fear. Fear of me.

"You're going to be all right," I said.

"I have to tell you something," he said.

"Wait," I said. "Right here. Don't move."

I installed him in Ma's rocking chair and threw a blanket over him. Then I started pumping water and heating it, and pumping and heating, and again. He stood up and watched, despite my exhortations for him to sit down. He had never been much of one for resting, I realized. When the washtub had a good amount of water steaming in it, I fetched the softest cloth I could find, and a towel, and set them on the table.

He peeled off the ruined gloves and removed his shoe. "Thank you. I won't be long."

"I'm not going anywhere," I told him and took the blanket from him.

"I don't need help."

"You do."

"I have to tell you something. Listen."

I laid my hand over his mouth. "Hush," I said. "I already know."

His eyes grew wide at that, but he stood still then, and let me help him undress. The bonnet came off first. Underneath, his hair was matted with dust and blood. I untied his skirt and it collapsed to the floor. His simple petticoat followed, and when he had stepped out of them, I kicked the fabric aside. Kneeling, I lifted the hem of his chemise to find the tops of his stockings. He set a hand on my shoulder as I rolled them down and slipped them off his feet. His hand fell away as I stood again.

The chemise was some lightweight fabric, probably once white or even the color of old bone, but the top half had long since been yellowed by sweat. The

fabric was torn and bore several small bloodstains. The short sleeves had tiny bits of lace at the hems. The detail looked ridiculous against the havoc of the rest. I reached for the drawstring at his neck.

He caught my wrist and looked at me with those coffee eyes. “Daniel,” he said.

But there was no sense in delaying. I tugged on the string ends, and the fabric loosened. I spread it as wide as it would go. When it wouldn’t clear his shoulders, I grew impatient and pulled the entire garment up and over his head. And then he stood before me, naked, and I wanted to weep.

They had bruised him in so many places I could scarcely believe he could keep his feet. Something had sliced the skin at his ribs and collarbone. I circled him, tallying the marks. When I faced him again, he had covered his crotch with one hand. I lifted it aside and saw that the skin over one testicle was purple.

When I looked up, he had turned his head to one side, his eyes shut tight. A knot swelled on his jaw, another on the high arch of his cheekbone. I laid my hands on his shoulders.

“Look at me,” I said.

His chest rose on a deep breath, and he turned.

“What’s your name?”

He swallowed, looking like a man come to his final judgment. “Isaiah Payne, sir.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Come,” I said, pulling him to the washtub, but what I was thinking was, *Isaiah. His name is Isaiah. Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah.* It had the same soothing effect as the *chirr* of crickets on an evening.

He tried to reach for the washing cloth, but I kept hold of it. Soaking it with hot water, I thought, *You need to apologize. You need to own up to your part in this.* But I needed to help this way first. I was afraid that if he knew I had taken him to town on purpose, he would up and leave, battered and uncared for. And that wouldn’t stand. *He* wouldn’t stand much longer if I didn’t get to it.

I started at his face, dabbing as gently as I could. He watched me, his eyebrows cinched together, and I hoped that it was because he didn’t

understand me and not because he didn't trust me. He had no reason to trust, I reflected bitterly, but then I caught myself. We both had deeds to fess up to, and we would get our chances to do so in due time.

I worked down his body, clearing away dirt and dried blood. He felt reassuringly sturdy under the cloth, and under my free hand, which I used to brace him with, though in truth I was probably steadying myself. I didn't feel I had the right to touch his more private skin, so I did eventually hand him the cloth. He held it for a long moment, looking at me.

"When did you guess?" he asked.

"Yesterday," I said, and then, because that wasn't wholly accurate, "last night."

His head tipped to one side, and I watched the realization strike him. "At the stream?"

"Yes."

"Did you..." He bit his lip. "How long did you watch?"

"I was still hiding when you left."

He looked down at his cock. He swallowed hard. "I'm so sorry, Daniel." When he looked at me again, his eyes shone wet. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

"I imagine you had your reasons."

He frowned. "That's no excuse for deceiving you."

"No, but you're not the only one with a heavy conscience."

"What do you mean?"

"I put you in that melee today."

He took a sudden step backward, striking the side of the washtub. "You set them on me?"

"No!" I said, hating how frightened he looked just then. "I wanted to see you in a crowd. I wanted to see if your disguise held." I had a difficult time looking him in the eye, kept having to pull my gaze back. "I wanted to know if you enjoyed deceiving people."

Isaiah looked sad but nodded. "I understand. I didn't enjoy it, but I don't expect you'd excuse it in any case." He knelt and dunked his head, working the mess out of it. I couldn't help but think how he'd done the same thing the night before, not knowing he'd have to do so again today because of me.

He stood and twisted the water from his hair. How different he looked now that I knew he was a man. Still strong, still vulnerable, but it was as if I could see the depth of him.

“Tell me why,” I said.

Isaiah straightened. “Do you hear much news of the Indian folks back east?”

“No,” I admitted. “Only those hereabouts.”

“Well,” Isaiah said, “the government is removing them west. It started as they could go voluntarily. That they have a couple years to agree, only the chiefs don’t agree and they’re not moving. And in Georgia, there’s gold in the ground, on Indian land, and white men want it.”

I didn’t understand what that had to do with Isaiah wearing a dress.

“I’m Cherokee,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, as it was about all I was capable of. Suddenly the lines of his face began to make more sense. But then, because sometimes a man doesn’t know when to shut his mouth, I asked, “Do Cherokee men go about in dresses?”

Well, he looked at me as though I was the sweetest idiot he had ever encountered. “No, Daniel Cooper, we do not.” Then he conceded my point with a nod. “Normally. But I could see what was going to happen, that I was going to get removed, and it wasn’t going to matter that I worked hard for a respectable white woman, or that she had taken the trouble to teach me to read and write. So I decided to remove myself before someone else did it for me. Mrs. Bennett liked for me to read to her in the evenings, and she especially liked hearing the missives from men out west, particularly when they called for a bride.”

“Are there so many as that?”

A small smile curled one side of Isaiah’s mouth. “Quite a few. But when she heard yours, she didn’t have any of the scorn for it she often had. She said, ‘He sounds a kind man.’”

I thought back to my letter—I could still recite it, I’d labored over it for so long—but I couldn’t find outright kindness in the words.

“It was there,” Isaiah said. “That’s why I sat up and took note. Because I had heard it too, and Mrs. Bennett and I rarely agreed on the makeup of a man.

Anyhow, I thought myself sleepless that night, and the next morning I wrote to you. I thought if I traveled as a lady, one whose fare had been paid by her future husband, no one would suspect I was actually a Cherokee man evading removal.” He looked at me sheepishly. “I planned to reveal myself as soon as I arrived and hoped you would let me work off the cost of my fare. But then...”

“Then what?” I asked.

But Isaiah shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Mr. Cooper, if you’ll let me, I’ll work for as long as you deem necessary for me to repay my debt. Then I’ll leave you in peace.”

“Leave me?” I blurted.

“Well, of course,” he said, “you want yourself a wife, not just another mouth to feed. Not one with one of these.” He waved a hand at his cock.

“Yes, I do!”

Isaiah looked appropriately astonished.

“Listen,” I said, “I hardly understand myself right now, but I know this. I thought I wanted a wife. Well, that’s not quite true. I was lonely, and I talked myself into the scheme of easing that loneliness with a wife. I thought if she did her work and kept me company and didn’t preach at me, it would even the accounts for not being by my damn self forever. But then you showed up. You not only did your work, you did half of the men’s, and you didn’t complain, and you didn’t preach, and you sang songs.” I stopped because I was starting to feel foolish.

It didn’t help that Isaiah’s mouth had begun to curl on another smile. “Daniel Cooper?”

“Lord. What?”

Isaiah set his hands on his waist. “Look at me.”

I did, but he directed my gaze to his member. It bobbed at me, as if to say hello.

“I come with a cock.”

“I know that,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment, then asked, “May I tell you something?”

When I nodded, he stepped from the washtub to stand before me.

“I had planned to confess to you right away. But then I saw you, and my good intentions clammed up.” He shook his head. “You’re a handsome man, Daniel Cooper, and then you took my bag and helped me into the wagon and put up with my nattering and gave me your bed. I’m not proud of it—I noticed your looks first. But your kindness was the nail in my moral coffin.” He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. “You treated me so sweetly, I kept putting off the confession. I wanted more time with the man who believed I was his future bride.”

I had believed that, but looking at Isaiah just then, I couldn’t imagine how I’d not recognized the man. The sinews of his neck and shoulders flexed under his skin. Strong collarbones sheltered his chest, which was nearly as broad as my own. With wet hair, the bones of his face stood out fiercely. His eyes... blinked. “Daniel?”

My fingertips were tracing his cheekbones. I couldn’t remember raising my hands, and now I was prodding his injured face.

Isaiah must have sensed I was about to pull away because he pressed his hands over mine. They were large and knobby-knuckled, his wrists ropy as he curled his fingers around mine.

“I don’t want a wife,” I said. “I want a partner. Somebody to share the work, yes, but someone to share the farm with too, the planning, the decisions.” Isaiah began to nod. “I want someone who knows it’ll be hard, who understands that most years come with storms, and harvests are usually a scramble. And winters are *long*.” He was smiling beneath my hands now. “All you can see in January is snow and sky and you have to go outside and make tracks in it just so you don’t lose your mind. But if I had a partner, we’d make twice as many tracks and we’d tell each other stories while the wind was howling and the ice was creeping in around the doors—”

“And sing songs?”

“And sing songs.”

“And dance some?”

“Why not?”

“And arm wrestle?”

“If you want to lose.”

Isaiah scoffed. “That’s what you think.” His eyes narrowed. “Who cooks?”

“We do.”

That answer seemed to please him. “And who milks the cows?”

“We do.”

“And how many apple pies per week?”

“As many as you want.”

Isaiah grinned. “And where will I sleep?”

“In my bed.”

His nose twitched. “And where will you sleep?”

Damned if I didn’t feel as though I were blushing. “Not on the porch.”

His lips fell open. One of us swayed toward the other, or maybe I just pulled him to me, and then we were kissing, Isaiah and I. He still tasted of cider, and I held him there, unable to get my fill of it, of him. Isaiah seemed of the same mind, as his hands slid down my arms and around my back to pull me closer. His long, firm body against mine was exhilarating.

And confounding.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I said.

Isaiah leaned his head into my hand. “Me neither, Daniel Cooper. But I reckon we’ll get twice as much done while we’re figuring it out.”

And we have.

Isaiah survived that first long winter at the farm, during which he gave to it the name Stormy Ridge (and to me several names of a less polite nature). In the spring, we plowed the fields and sowed them. We spent the summer doing more repairs on the house and outbuildings than even Pa and I had ever accomplished together. Autumn brought rain, hail, and an unseasonably early freeze, but also the largest, most expedient harvest the farm had ever seen. When the first snowflakes fell, Isaiah still resided in my house and my heart, refusing to vacate either, and we found to our mutual surprise that we had begun to build a life together.

So we kept going. The farm grew in size and scope. A few years into our work, a young man arrived who changed the direction of Stormy Ridge. In

short, he so reminded us of a younger Isaiah that we hit upon an idea, that Stormy Ridge might become a sanctuary for young men of a homosexual nature. That term didn't exist then as it does now, but the idea that men such as us had been so made by our Creator was one that Isaiah and I held firmly. These young men were as much a product of nature as grass or streams or raging blizzards, and if Stormy Ridge could support those things, it could welcome men like us.

It has been neither simple nor easy. Our neighbors in town have been decidedly mixed in their opinions of our partnership. As you might imagine, I did practically nothing to help our cause. Anyone who has treated us favorably either began our time together with a live-and-let-live philosophy, or else Isaiah worked his considerable charms upon them.

I share this with you, young man, because it is unlikely that Isaiah Payne will be able to work those same charms on your behalf. Nor must he. If you choose to remain at Stormy Ridge, to give her your sweat and blood and waking hours, you also must accept responsibility for your success, your happiness, and, if you prove worthy (or extraordinarily lucky, as I did), your love.

The love of my own life has, by the way, just poked his head into my study. He said, "Come to bed, Daniel Cooper, before you blunt your nib."

Well. And so I'll leave you with this: you may remember that I mentioned at the beginning of this letter a reward. If you waited out this tale to receive your prize in hand, you may be disappointed. The reward of which I spoke is possible only through your labor here. But since you've humored me with your patience, I'll give you a glimpse...

Imagine a home where you are welcome.

Imagine an employer who values you for your skills, talents, and plain hard work.

Imagine a life during which your friends outweigh your foes, if not in pure numbers then by the sheer mass of their sustenance of your being.

Imagine love? I didn't, and yet it landed on my doorstep and has demanded my attention ever since. It has been, hands down, the most important work I've done during my years at Stormy Ridge, and my greatest reward.

May you earn all of these and more. Good luck, young man.

Welcome home.

Daniel T. Cooper

Isaiah Payne

November 1896

The End

Author Bio

Mia West writes historical and paranormal male/male romance. Her series include Into the Fire, featuring a long-term m/m couple in post-Roman Europe; Club Grimm, where sex therapy meets dark fairy tale simulations; Grizzly Rim, home of horny shapeshifters in Alaska; and Stormy Ridge, whose first book will be based on this DRitC treatment. Nothing makes Mia happier than settling in with a good thunderstorm, a tasty drink, and a damaged hero (or two), except maybe planning her next book.

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