

The Spanish Lady (part 1 of 6)

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"Are you sure this is such a good idea, Father?" Louise asked. Knowing what the answer would be, she already had her arm out.

Fred Delaney's face contorted for a moment; his daughter sighed inwardly, but merely smiled as her father valiantly tried to suppress the harsh, rattling cough. "'Course it is," he said when he got his breath back at last. "I've been ... in this bed... three weeks now. Time I showed this-" Another suppressed cough. "-this sickness who's boss."

"I told you, Father," Louise said patiently, "you can't beat it like that. You need rest-"

"I've had rest! I want to walk now!" He grabbed her forearm roughly. She was pleased - surprised, but pleased - at how strong his grip was. Maybe he really was past the worst after all.

"All right, Father," Louise said, holding her arm steady as her father pulled himself up. No small feat, that. Even with three weeks without a clear breath or the will to eat, Fred Delaney was still a big man. Louise had only been up and about for a week herself, but what a week it'd been. Half of Dawson City was too ill to move these days.

Fred swayed a little on his feet, not yet letting go of his daughter's arm. He seemed to be concentrating all his efforts on standing still. It took him a while. Eventually, his grip relaxed, and he let out a slow, careful breath. "There," he said. "There, I think I've got it."

Louise smiled. "That's wonderful," she said. "Think you can walk?"

"Oh, I can walk enough," said her father with sudden, surprising vehemence. "Where's that Almon rat? I want a word with-" The sentence dissolved into a fit of racking coughs; Louise just shook her head, grabbing at her father's shirt before he could totter backwards. "-that... stinking-"

"No, Father," Louise snapped. "You are not going to hunt down Ed Almon for this. First of all, it's not his fault, and second of all, you'll have to get in line."

The coughing took on a different tone. It was a few moments before she realised her father was trying to laugh. "That... louse..."

"I told you, Father, it wasn't his fault. He didn't mean to bring the grippe home with him from the war."

"Grippe, my eye!" Fred collapsed back onto his bed, but managed to sit himself upright. "This isn't - some - sniffle -"

"No, I suppose it's not," Louise agreed with a sigh. "The papers are calling it the Spanish Flu. I heard today that most of the civilized world's got it by now."

Fred's head shook as he fought down another cough. "... wretched, stinking..."

She didn't know if he meant the disease, or the man who'd brought it to the Yukon. Somehow she doubted there was much difference between the two in her father's mind. "Getting angry like this isn't going to help, Father. You're just sapping your strength. If you want to get up and walk around, you're going to have to calm down."

Fred shot her an angry look, but closed his eyes and remained seated. Eventually, he asked, "How's the hotel?"

"Pretty close to full up, actually," she answered.

"Still?"

"Afraid so. No one's in any shape to go home..."

Fred sighed. Louise hastily added, "It isn't any better anywhere else, you know."

He shook his head wearily. "I came to Dawson to run a hotel," he muttered. "Not a hospital."

She gave what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "It can't last forever, Father, you know it can't. Why, people are getting better every day. Hardly anyone who's stayed at the hotel's died of this."

He said nothing. Louise knew what her father was thinking: that the two of them were among the lucky ones. He'd seen the funeral processions in the beginning of the epidemic, before he'd fallen too ill to get up and look out his window. They were burning the corpses outside of town. Winter in the Yukon made it impossible to give the disease's victims a decent Christian burial. Still, people took what comfort they could.

"Almon," muttered Fred, sagging back against the wall. "If I could... if I could just... "

"It wouldn't do you any good, Father." Louise quietly guided his shoulders away from the wall, giving him room to lie down again. "Doctor Orr says it's a miracle he's lived this long. I don't think he's going to last much longer."

"No more... than he... deserves..."

"Father, he's sick. He didn't know he was sick when he came home! It's not like he's a murderer!"

"Your Sergeant-"

"Would say exactly the same thing," snapped Louise. She snatched up the blankets and pushed her father back with one hand. "Intention makes all the difference in the world. Sergeant Preston wouldn't blame Ed Almon one bit, and you shouldn't either. Now, lie down and rest!"

It wasn't until she was halfway to the hotel kitchens that she allowed herself to relax, shoulders trembling as she leaned into the paneled wall. Right now, she'd have given anything for the big Mountie's presence; she was tired, bone-tired, of managing everything alone. Oh, she'd been taught everything her father knew about the business since she was old enough to see over the counter. Handling the hotel's everyday affairs? That, she could do. But with the flu raging through the city like a wildfire, and her father still sick, and hardly anyone able to help - well - it was hard. Harder than it had to be, she was sure. It was one thing for a woman to do the work of a man, but she was doing the work of five, and so was everyone else in Dawson with enough strength left to stand. What she wouldn't give to hear the sound of his footsteps, the bark of his dogs! No matter how dark things got, it was always easier to bear with him around...

And yet, and yet, she knew in her gut that it was for the best. He'd gone off on an Arctic patrol two days before Ed Almon came coughing back to town. He'd been spared. He was the best man in the entire Northwest Mounted, Louise had no doubt of that, but when it came to a foe like the Spanish Lady... well. You couldn't fight a plague the way you fought crime. And, if Louise were to be absolutely honest with herself, she had to admit that when it came to sickness he was... well, kind of stupid. He'd told her once about how he'd caught diphtheria, how he hadn't even realised working in a stricken Indian village put him in danger until he started shivering with fever. God help him if he'd been in Dawson when the Spanish Lady hit! Why, he'd probably be in among all the flu victims, trying to make up for the doctors and nurses that Dawson City didn't have. He'd be breathing the flu-ridden air without so much as a thought-

Without so much as a mask, either, Louise realised with a dawning horror. Oh, heavens, he's out in the howling wilderness among the Indians, he hasn't got any way of knowing - there's no one north of here who'd be able to tell him - he's going to ride right into town and catch it from the very first person he talks to!

She pushed herself away from the wall, striding down to the kitchens with a renewed sense of purpose. She had a week before he was due back. That would be just enough time to get her father to the point where he could handle things on his own again, at least for a day or two. There were only so many trails into

Dawson from the north; she'd just have to figure out the right one, and hope that he didn't come back early.

At least, she thought with a wry twist of her lips, my father's dogs will be grateful for the exercise.