

The Spanish Lady (part 2 of 6)

by

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(based on COTY)

The week went by in an absolute whirlwind of activity. Louise didn't dare leave a single thing undone. Her father was getting steadily better, moving around more every day, but there was a world of difference between walking down the hallway and spending an entire day at work. The less he had to struggle with, the better, especially since she wasn't sure if she would be able to find him an assistant or not.

There were rooms to clean up. There were sheets to be boiled - there were sheets to be burned. Despite her best efforts and the assistance of Dr. Orr, some of the flu-stricken guests did die, and there was no way Louise was going to look a new customer in the face and tell him a dead man's sheets were on his bed. Families to contact, bills to collect on, bills to pay - people to feed - oh, there were a hundred thousand things to be done and she didn't think she'd ever see the end of them! At least they'd got enough new beds at the police hospital to take the worst of the load off...

She thought briefly of the police hospital as she pulled on her parka. Not knowing which trail the Sergeant had taken out of town, or which one he'd be likely to return on, she'd have to stop somewhere and ask for advice. Inspector Harper, at the barracks - well, he didn't like Louise at all; he'd give her a stern look, make a vulgar implication about her intentions (she flushed red at the mere thought), and send her away with a strict order not to interfere with a Mountie's duties. It wasn't interference, of course, just trying to warn him- but try telling Harper that. The police hospital, on the other hand... They knew her there, and no one would think anything of a few extra questions. They had too many other things to think about to waste time or manpower by sending someone else to give the warning in her place. If she was lucky, they wouldn't even bother mentioning it to the Inspector.

First things first, though. The kennel run behind the hotel burst into a chorus of joyful noise as her father's dogs heard her coming. She smiled, quickening her pace. All three of the dogs were scrabbling over each other to greet her first, yelping enthusiastically. "Hey, fellas," she said softly, crouching down to hold out one unmittened hand for inspection. "Getting mighty tired of being cooped up here, aren't you?" The biggest of the malemutes, a black-and-white beast named Bear, shoved his wet nose up against Louise's palm. There wasn't much room for him to do more than that; she laughed. "Easy, boy," she said gently. "I'm coming in there with you three, so you'd better behave."

Whether they understood or not, she didn't know. They usually seemed to. This wasn't really one of those times; the dogs were too excited to listen, and tried to jump up and lick her face all at once. "Stop that! Down, you- get down, will you? Come on, now, be good..."

Eventually the dogs stopped jumping up; either they'd decided to listen to her, or they'd just gotten tired. Bear's pink tongue lolled out to one side as he threw himself on the ground at her feet, rolling over with his paws waving in the air. "Oh, don't even try that, Bear," she said as she stepped over him. "You're the lead dog, not the lead puppy - so get up, because I'm not going to rub your belly." The dog whined pathetically; she ignored him. Campion and Moose, better behaved, trotted along behind her. Well, she could excuse Bear a lot. He was the lead dog, after all. And, if it came right down to it, he was the only reason she was willing to consider this plan. Using the team to carry supplies for the hotel from the shops was one thing, but going out onto the trails? That was something else again. She knew how valuable a good lead dog could be. You couldn't spend as long as she had in the Sergeant's company and not know.

Let's see, she thought as she got a good firm grip on Campion's collar. The smallest of her father's dogs, the white Siberian had to be pulled up onto his hind legs before she could hitch him up. With all four legs under him he'd bolt for sure before she could so much as get the chest strap fastened. I already checked the sled over, so that's safe. I put down the anchor, so the dogs won't run off with it until I pull that up. I've got the masks, so I won't have to come back for those. She glanced at the bundle tied firmly onto the sled before turning back to fetch Moose. And I've got my father's rifle - I know he won't like that one bit, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him...

She hadn't told her father about her plan. He still wasn't quite well. The last thing he needed was something else to worry about. He wouldn't mind her taking the dogs, she knew that. She'd be buying cleaning supplies anyway, whether on the way out or the trip back. He never minded when she went out during the winter for hotel business. It was only the thought of her going into the bush that would give him pause, really. Even for the best of reasons.

Well, at least I'm taking precautions! she thought as she finally grabbed Bear's collar. It's not like I'll be gone all that long, anyway. I'm just borrowing his gun in case I run into something on the trail. It'll be all right. He might not even notice I'm gone, if I'm lucky.

She didn't believe it for an instant, but it made her feel better to think so. She'd deal with the consequences later.