

## **The Spanish Lady (part 3 of 6)**

by

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(based on COTY)

Mr. Bernat, much to Louise's frustration, was too tied up in speculating with a trapper about the remaining winter weather to make a sale. With a sigh she turned away from his store, making a mental note to stop there first on her way back. The hotel was running awfully low on cleaning supplies, and she'd promised herself to do at least one thing for her father today.

She found a man beside her sled in the street, eyeing her father's dogs with interest. For one heart-stopping moment she thought - but no; the man was nearly as broad in the shoulder as the Sergeant, but not nearly so tall once he straightened up, and below the fur hat he'd pulled down to his brows his eyes were brown. What little she could see of his face was too pale... "Morning, miss," he said, his voice thin, barely carrying. "These your dogs?"

"My father's," she said warily, stopping a few paces away from Bear. "Why d'you ask?"

He smiled a bit, reaching up to rub at his face with one mittened hand. "Just a fine-looking bunch of animals, that's all," he said - and then coughed, a low, wet sound that she knew all too well. "Blast it!"

"Excuse me, sir?" She didn't quite like the look of him, but that cough-

"I'm sorry, miss. Honest, I am." He reached up and pulled his hat off, revealing a shock of untidy brown hair. "It's just that the doctors just told me I was fit to go home, and-" He coughed again. "I'm starting to think they just wanted my bed."

Bear was steadfastly ignoring the man in favour of sniffing the brownish-grey ice at the street's edge. She relaxed a little, but only a little. "Shouldn't you be on your way home, then? I imagine it'll be warmer where you're going than in the street, looking at strangers' dogs."

He laughed, a sound that went very odd indeed as it turned into a sneeze. "You're right, miss. It's just that they really are awfully nice dogs. Especially your wheel dog there." He indicated Moose, harnessed closest to the sled. "Just wanted a better look, that's all."

"Well... I suppose I can see that," she said, relenting a little bit further. Moose really was a splendid dog, even if he didn't have a lead dog's competitive spirit. "Were you sick long, then?"

The man nodded. "Two and a half weeks," he said. "Closer to three. They took me to the police hospital straight away-

"The police hospital? Why, that's where I'm going!" Louise exclaimed, heedless of the interruption.

"Visiting someone?"

"You could say that. I need to ask someone about-" She hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Directions once you get out of town on the trails. I'm looking for someone who might be sick, but isn't in Dawson City."

The young man - he looked a good deal less than Louise's 27 years- frowned. "I don't know, miss," he said doubtfully. "They might not want you going out on the trails. Some of the Mounties were saying there's an awfully big storm brewing down south. It'll probably be blowing up here by supertime."

Louise swallowed; at this time of year the weather was usually stable, off-and-on snow rather than outright blizzards. "Well, I... don't really have a choice. It's important. And I probably won't have to go far, anyway."

"I hope so, miss, for your sake." He looked down at the dogs again, holding out one hand. Champion lifted his head to sniff at the outstretched fingers. "My uncle says it looks like it's going to be a real rip-snorter of a storm."

She took a deep breath, then shook her head. "That's as may be, but I have to go. The sooner I get my directions, the sooner I can get out - and back."

The young man grinned. "Wise choice, miss."

Louise nodded, clucking softly to the dogs to get them up and ready to go. "Thank you for your warning, Mister....." She paused, waiting for him to fill in the blank.

"Patons, miss. Alfred Patons."

"Mister Patons, then." He stepped away from the dogs as she stepped up onto the back of the sled. "I'll be careful."

"Good luck, miss!"

She smiled just a bit as she turned her attention back to the dogs. "Gee up, Bear! Let's go!"