

The Spanish Lady (part 4 of 6)

by

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(based on COTY)

Dawson's police hospital was the oldest of the city's three hospitals. Louise rather liked the look of the building - very classical, as if someone had been trying awfully hard to capture a little bit of sunny Greece and its old temples. The ice and snow drifted into every crevice rather spoilt the effect, of course, but they'd at least tried.

Louise stopped the dogs with a quiet "whoa" as they came around the side entrance. Sparing a few stern words for Bear, who was dancing nervously from side to side, she pushed back her parka's hood and slipped on a safety mask. They were everywhere these days, white gauze coverings over everything between eyes and chins. She hadn't worn one to speak to Mr. Bernat, because they'd both had the "flu, but here- well, this place was just full of flu patients, and all of them were breathing. No one was quite sure what caused the disease, but whatever it was passed through the air. She didn't want to chance taking a lungful of contaminated air out with her when she went looking for the Sergeant, after all.

This side door was mostly used for deliveries, in more normal times. These days only sick people came through the front. There was a harried-looking fellow in the garb of a police surgeon just inside; he looked up sharply as she opened the door. "Can I help you?" he asked warily. "You're not sick, are you?"

Behind the gauze, Louise laughed. "No, sir. I've been sick already, I promise," she said. The line of his shoulders relaxed; she continued. "I'm here to look for someone, that's all."

"Ah, right." He glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Patient of ours?"

"One of the Mounties, actually - he's-" She hesitated, not quite sure whether to ask this man directly. He looked as if he hadn't been anywhere but the sick-rooms for days.

As if reading her mind, the man said, "I have no idea where anyone is right now, miss. You'll have to ask at the front desk- I'm terribly sorry."

"It's all right. I probably have to sign in anyway, don't I?" He nodded. "All right. Say, you don't happen to know where Inspector Harper is, do you?"

"Wish I could tell you, miss. Sorry."

Well, the Inspector probably had better things to do, she reflected as she slipped into the hallway proper. The place absolutely reeked of antiseptic, and of other things she didn't care to identify. She didn't much like it, but she wasn't a doctor, so she could only assume they knew what they were doing. It'd be months before the air was warm enough to allow open windows, so the best anyone could do was try to overwhelm the rankness. Could be worse, she thought. Imagine what this'd smell like in summer! And the mosquitoes getting in-

She was so busy with her thoughts that she almost collided with a flash of red. At least, that was all she saw before reflex took over and she twisted out of the way. It took her a few seconds to realise she'd almost walked into a Mountie - and by then he was speaking to her.

"-so sorry. Are you all right, miss?"

That voice. She knew that voice, and it froze her blood to recognise it. It was Inspector Harper.

She gulped, feeling the heat of shame rising in her cheeks. Of course, he would be the first one I found, she mentally berated herself. This is what I get for concealing what I was doing from my father! "Yes, Inspector," she managed. "I'm-

Looking at the older man, something suddenly struck her. Every time she'd ever been in Inspector Harper's presence before, there had been an almost palpable air of disapproval about him. Where it came from or why, she didn't know, but it was very real. He didn't like her; as far as she knew, he never had liked her, and it had only gotten worse since the Sergeant had started courting her. Perhaps it was only that Inspector Harper's face was mostly hidden behind a mask as opaque as her own, but there was none of that feeling about him now. Puzzlement, yes, concern- but no dislike. He hadn't recognised her.

"-I'm fine," she said, almost dizzy with relief.

The Inspector nodded, frowning a little in what still looked like confusion to her. "Good, good. Can I help you find someone?"

Tell him no, something in the back of her mind urged her. Tell him you were just visiting someone and get out of here before he figures out who you are. The last thing you want is him sending you home.

"As a matter of fact, sir," she began very slowly.

That's it. Tell him no, and you can be on your way with no one the wiser. You have to beat that storm. No one would know, would they? Not the Inspector, nor her father, nor Mr. Bernat, nor even that Patons man would know. If anything at all went wrong, she would only ever have herself to blame. If it went well, she or

the Sergeant would inevitably have to tell Inspector Harper how a man who'd been on Arctic patrol for a full month knew about the epidemic in Dawson...

Fighting the urge to pull down her mask and show her full face, she contented herself with a deep breath and a step forward. "It's me," she said instead, speaking a little more clearly. "Louise Delaney."

Above the mask the Inspector's brown eyes widened a moment, then narrowed sharply. "I see," he said in a low tone. "What are you doing here, miss?" His tone was clipped, impatient.

"I... wanted to help, sir," she said uncertainly, watching the familiar irritation sink into what little of his face was visible. "And I needed to ask someone-"

"I'm sure you did," the Inspector said, cutting her off with a jerk of one hand. "Your help's not needed here, Miss Delaney. Go home."

"Not that kind of help, sir!" The words came rushing out before she could stop herself. "This is important!"

"Important enough to come sneaking around my hospital?" he asked coldly.

"YES!" she all but shouted - and then fell silent, shocked at the sound of her voice.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one. Louise was dimly aware that there were other people in the hallway, several of whom had turned in her direction. Only dimly, though; she was too shaken, and too busy staring up at the Inspector, to really care. There was no change in his expression that she could detect as he turned, glancing down the hallway. "Follow me," he said curtly, and led her down the hall.

There was a room, a small one, not far from the door she'd come in by. Inspector Harper propped the door open and gestured for Louise to go ahead of him. Inside there wasn't much: a desk with a chair on one side and a smaller chair on the other, a gas lamp, a few instruments Louise couldn't identify. No more than that. Aware of a faint, faraway trembling sensation in her shoulders, Louise took the smaller of the chairs. The Inspector nodded once, dropping into the other with a distinct lack of grace. He leaned forward; the lamp cast bizarre shadows across his masked face as he steepled his fingers.

"Miss Delaney," he said, voice muffled by the gauze, "I'd like to know, please - exactly what do you think you are doing here?"

There was a grimness in his eyes that didn't bode well. Louise could feel the palms of her hands beginning to sweat.

"I'm waiting, Miss Delaney."

She couldn't avoid the urge to tremble. "Sorry, sir," she murmured. He grunted, but said nothing. "It's... I wanted to volunteer for something."

"Volunteer." He didn't sound as if he believed it in the slightest.

"Well - yes, Inspector. Sort of. You see-

"He's not here, Miss Delaney." Even through the mask she could tell he was scowling. "And even if he were, you still wouldn't be allowed anywhere near him."

"E- excuse me, sir?"

Patiently, as if explaining something to an exceptionally slow child, the Inspector continued. "There are two other hospitals in this city, Miss Delaney. Either one of them is closer to your father's hotel. If you had solely wanted to volunteer to help the victims of this epidemic, one of them would have been a more sensible choice. Since you have no male relatives in the Mounties, I can only assume that you, like many, many women before you, are trying to catch Sergeant Preston by any angle that comes to hand. Allow me to congratulate you on choosing one that's at least somewhat socially redeeming."

Louise sat back in her chair, thunderstruck.

The Inspector went on. "You're not the first woman to set her sights on Bill Preston, Miss Delaney. I very much doubt you'll be the last. You're more persistent than most of the others, and I think it's just possible that you may be smarter than most of them, as well. What he sees in you I don't know, but let me tell you this right now: the last thing, the absolute last thing, that he or the Mounted Police need is some lovestruck girl sniffing around side doors, trying to catch him off his guard- or lay in wait for him when he's been in the field these past four weeks. If you think you can snare him that way-

"You're wrong, Inspector," Louise suddenly said. Oh, she was trembling all right, but with rage now.

"Oh, really?" The dark-haired man leaned back, one eyebrow arching in the sudden shadows.

"Yes. Really." She clutched the arms of her chair firmly; she'd be wiping her palms on her parka otherwise. "I am not 'sniffing around your side doors', thank you very much. I came here looking for someone who could tell me where I might find the Sergeant-

"So you're admitting it?"

"Yes," Louise answered, "I'm admitting it, if that's how you like to think of such things. I'm admitting that I came here looking for a man you don't think I should

be chasing, a man I've known almost my entire life, who I'd gladly help at absolutely anything that I could in any way that I could. I'm admitting that I do intend to chase him down and catch him off his guard today - because if I don't, he's going to come riding into Dawson City tonight or tomorrow without any idea of what's going on here. There's quarantine signs at every house that has the flu, but there's no signs on the trails, are there? He'll see how busy the police hospital is and come right up to find out why. You know how easy it is to catch this "flu, Inspector Harper - all he has to do is talk to someone who's got it, or someone who's been around someone who's got it, and he'll be flat-on-his-back sick."

The Inspector stared at her silently; Louise felt just confident enough to add, "And you know the Spanish Lady doesn't care how strong you are, or how tough, or or any of that. She'll kill you just the same..."

More silence, as Harper's gaze shifted into the shadows. Eventually, he said, "I'll send someone."

"Do you have anyone you can spare, Inspector?" Louise asked softly. She knew she was pushing it; she also knew it was her only chance. "Half of Dawson is too sick to move. The other half knows it. Have you got anyone you can spare for something like this?"

His eyes shifted back to her - still narrow, still angry, but somehow more at her words than at Louise herself. "That's what I wanted to volunteer for," she said softly. "To go out and warn him myself. That's all - I swear."

"I don't think you understand how dangerous it is out there right now," said the Inspector slowly, reluctantly.

"If you mean the wildlife, Inspector, I have my father's gun and I can use it."

"That's not what I mean."

"Oh, the storm?" He nodded. "Alfred Patons told me about that."

The older man blinked. "You met my nephew?"

Louise almost bit her tongue in surprise, but nodded. "Yes, Inspector. On the way here. He- he said you were worried about how bad the storm was going to be." Harper grunted noncommittally. "Look- I'm sorry. I should have come to you right away and asked, but I really didn't think you'd even listen."

"You were right," said Harper tersely, rubbing at the edge of the mask with the first trace of weariness she'd seen in him. "I'm still inclined to send you back to your father. With the weather as bad as it looks like it'll get, you'll be in more danger than he will."

She wanted to wipe her palms dry so badly... "Inspector," she began, "if it even starts to look like the storm's arrived and I haven't found him yet... if that happens, I'll turn my dogs around and head back to Dawson just as fast as I possibly can. I promise."

He closed his eyes, rubbing at his face again. At last he said, "Let me see your dogs."

Outside, it was a hair colder than Louise remembered. Inspector Harper didn't seem to notice. He stooped beside her sled, examining the dogs and their harness with a critical eye. "They look like good animals," he conceded reluctantly. "Got much experience driving them?"

"Around town, mostly, but I've been out of the city a few times. Bear's smart enough to keep me on the trail and out of trouble." She didn't like reminding him of the possibility of danger, but as Sergeant Preston's superior officer, he stood a good chance of valuing the dog's experience over her own. Moose, who had lain down in front of the sled almost as soon as she'd stopped, looked up and wagged his tail at the man.

"Show me the gun."

Obediently, Louise withdrew her father's rifle from its coverings. "Lee-Enfield .303, Inspector," she recited, silently blessing her father for extolling the thing's virtues to any hunter who would listen. "Military issue- my father bought it off a cashiered serviceman, years ago. It's a little tricky to load, but it's got a ten round magazine, so I shouldn't have to worry about running out of ammunition....."

He glanced sidelong at her. "Expecting to run into a wolf pack, Miss Delaney?" With a shake of the head he straightened up. "I shouldn't do this, but I don't seem to have a choice. Head out of town along the road that leads past the Green Parrot Café..."

Louise beamed, grateful for the mask that concealed most of her excitement, and repeated Inspector Harper's directions to herself. The hardest part was over. Now all that remained was to actually do it.