

INSTRUCTING ISABEL

GROVER TOWN DISCIPLINE, BOOK FIVE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



"*P*apa, Robert mentioned that he would be coming to see you tomorrow at your town office, or maybe we could invite him to dinner." Sophia sat at the table and twirled one wheat-colored lock, a perfect, thick coil, around her finger as the fingers of her other hand grasped her fork with the smallest piece of roasted brisket balanced at the tip of the tines.

Papa continued to slice through the thick portion of his own meat as he glanced over at Sophia, who sat to his right. "Why would *Deputy* Nelson feel the need to come and see me?"

Her father had placed an emphasis on the young man's title, Isabel was sure, to remind her sister of what was proper.

Isabel took a healthy bite out of her yeast roll as she stared at her sister's animation. Sophia's eyes brightened, and her thin lips pulled into a long smile that practically reached each ear at their father's question.

"Because I do believe..." Sophia paused for effect, ever the over-dramatic, then blurted out, "Robert...Deputy Nelson," she corrected, "will ask you for my hand!"

Isabel never paused in chewing. It wasn't a surprise to her that Sophia and Robert's two-month relationship had moved to such a

level. Ever since the barn dance a couple of months ago, when Robert, the twenty and six-year-old night deputy who worked for the sheriff, had asked her sister to dance, it was all that Sophia wanted to talk about. They'd followed up the dance with a buggy ride after Sunday service—on which Isabel had been forced to accompany them—and too many picnics and walks through town to count.

For her own sake, Isabel hoped they would marry so she could stop playing the chaperone to her sister's courting.

Her father, James Reynolds—his family had called him Jim when he was growing up—rested both his hands on the table on the sides of his plate filled with half eaten brisket, fresh boiled green beans with potatoes, and his second yeast roll, as he slowly chewed his last bite. His gaze wasn't rested on her sister, but her mother who sat at the end of the six-person dining room table.

Their mother, Lillian, who had the same wheat-colored hair and dark blue eyes as Sophia and who never liked confrontation, didn't glance up as she speared a green bean trying to avoid their father's gaze.

Her father finally glanced away from his wife to her younger sister. "Sophia Lynn, we have had this conversation before. I don't plan to repeat myself again. But until your older sister marries, I will not agree or pay for any wedding for you."

Sophia gasped and clutched at her throat as if she didn't know what their father's response would be.

Isabel kept herself from the rude act of rolling her eyes at her sister's theatrics. It was a ridiculous rule to her too, but she was doing her best to stay out of the conversation.

"But, Papa—"

"No." Their father rubbed at the upper part of his stomach with the side of the fist of his right hand that still held the knife as if the conversation gave him indigestion. "It is not right for a younger daughter to marry before her older sister. Do you want the town to think something is wrong with Isabel?"

Her sister's red face and furious dark gaze landed on her across the table. "Something is wrong with her. What girl prefers learning and teaching ignorant dusty workers to takin' walks in the meadows, dancing, and all-around fun and marrying a man who adores her? My sister Isabel. Even Serenity Morgan finally found a man to love her and is married and raising babies and churches in New Mexico. While I will be stuck as a spinster." In full dramatic form, Sophia rose from her seat and threw her linen napkin down beside her plate, prepared to storm from the table.

Isabel did feel bad for her sister and the rules that her father imposed upon the house. Soon her father would just have to give in because she refused to be married now, or possibly ever. There were bigger dreams at play for her.

"Sit!" their father barked. "I would like to eat my food without a tall glass of histrionics one night."

Sophia lowered herself back to her seat, bottom lip poked out so far, it practically covered up her round chin. "Mama, can't you talk to him?"

Lillian Reynolds finally looked to her husband with pleading eyes. She set down her utensils, hands trembling, then hid her hands in her lap. "James, isn't it our job to ensure our girls are happy?"

When their father shot an eyebrow up at their mother, she stammered, "N-not that they aren't. It's just that Sophia has always talked about marrying, while..." Her mother glanced at her and sighed. "Isabel has had other things on her mind. We shouldn't hurt one daughter because the other remains stubborn."

"First, wife, it is my job to feed, clothe, and provide a roof over their heads. Their future husbands can worry about their happiness. Second, I will not pay for Isabel to go away to some teaching academy, so she might as well settle into the life before her. Once that is done, Sophia can marry anyone of her choosing."

"Papa." It was her turn to be upset. Every time her sister brought up the subject of marriage, it was she who got denied her plans. "If

Sophia wants Mister Nelson, I don't see why she can't marry. Everyone in town always says how fine a teacher I am; it's my dream."

Her father stared at her now, his pale green eyes a mirror of her own, as he declared, "Dreams are for people who don't have the funds to live in the now, Isabel Carrie. With your inheritance, you could have a pick of any man. So pick!"

She didn't care about the land or money, and she refused to be held in Grover Town for the rest of her life. At least not as some man's wife. Besides, she wasn't like her sister; men in town young and old stumbled over themselves to get her to offer them a smile. Sophia was like their mother, willowy and sylphlike in manners and dress, with perfect thin, bow-shaped lips. They both had lovely hair that was a shiny golden brown and made their curls look like someone had turned wheat into silk. For her, she was buxom, breasts too full and hips too wide and her lips round and red like she'd spent the day sucking on too many cherry sweet sticks. Her thick dark hair just added to her bulk, so she never wore it down and always kept it pulled back and bundled tightly with a fistful of pins to keep the heavy locks secure. No, men were not galloping down the road asking for her hand. However, she knew better than to attempt to argue with her father when he was in such a mood. When he used her first and middle name, he couldn't be budged. "I've lost my appetite. May I be excused, Papa?"

He grunted at not hearing her agreement to his terms but nodded.

Sophia let out small snuffles as if her world had come to an end because she couldn't marry Robert.

Their mother started eating again, more of a distraction Isabel was sure than actual need for sustenance.

Quietly, Isabel placed her napkin beside her plate then rose and left the table. She was fuming mad, but it would do her no good to show those emotions to their father; it would only incite his own anger. Their father's views were simple and archaic, to

Isabel's thoughts. A young lady should want to marry and have children, maybe have an appropriate small business, knitting, dress making, or painting pretty pictures. Her father didn't see the need for a woman, who didn't need money to help her family, to even work.

In her room in the big L-shaped house, she flopped on her bed. Her stomach was already growling from the lack of food. Unlike her sister, who ate like a bird to maintain a delicate size, Isabel found pleasure in eating just as she did teaching. She hoped Mrs. Turner, their cook, would wrap up her plate for later. After the household had retired, she could sneak into the kitchen and finish her food. It was cold out now; three inches of snow was on the ground. Her room was warm like the rest of the house. There was a small potbelly that sat in the corner, with a long flue that continued up and out the roof.

As she lay there staring at the wide, black stack, she tried to figure out what she could do to get out of the town. Her father had refused since she was seventeen to send her east to her mother's sister. Her aunt, Josie, had married a young politician whose stage-coach had broken down outside of Grover Town over twenty years ago. She'd journeyed to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with her new husband after he'd completed schooling in Manhattan. Once, when she was nine and Sophia seven, her father had taken them to Pennsylvania for a visit. Her father had garnered a few business opportunities that carried him from a simple farmer in Grover Town to one of the biggest landowners.

After a few months, her mother had thought the city too hectic and she preferred the small-town life, and since her father had no more need of it after he hired a solicitor to take care of his interests, they had moved back. Sophia had been too young to remember it as anything but a long trip. However, Isabel remembered the wonder of living in a growing city. She'd hungered to return, and when she learned in the schoolhouse that Miss Beadle, the schoolmarm, had lived on the east coast while she went

through her training, it had set in Isabel's mind. It had been her way out of the small town.

Over the years, she'd realized she loved instruction, and it became her career goal. Unfortunately, her papa didn't see it that way. He'd forbade her at every turn. The only thing he allowed her to do was use the schoolhouse once a week after supper to instruct some of the ignorant workers who'd come to Grover Town. Only, with one of the sheriff's deputies present and the house maid accompanying her.

Understanding that her father was not going to fund her training, she would have to think of other options. Soon. Now that her sister had someone wanting to speak to their father about her hand, the pressure would be relentless for him to see her settled first. His views at the table moments ago were not a surprise to her; she had just believed that she could wear him down and eventually, he'd relent and let her go. It was clear to her now that was never going to happen.

With an idea in her mind, she rolled to a seated position then went to her desk. It was covered with books and education articles that she'd borrowed from Miss Beadle. Pulling open the slim drawer under the desk, she removed paper, pen, and ink. Ensuring her flute pen was filled, she began to write.

MY DEAREST AUNT JOSIE,

I hope that this letter finds you and Uncle Albert well...



YOU MUST COME HOME. Both your brother and his wife have passed due to sickness that is running through the reservation. Many have died and the graves are plentiful. We can only hope this letter finds you. The children are safe. You must come home.

Salali

. . .

HOME.

His cousin had used the word twice. A word that had no translation in Tsalagi. For him, the reservation was never a true home, and it was a place that, to him, he had never felt a part of. When he and his twin had come of age, they'd left their parents' house. Cary had left two years earlier, at ten and six. His brother, Garmin, had gone to live with their mother's people and only went by *Sequoyah*, the nickname his mother called him. Sparrow. His brother, the social one of the two who thrived living among the large group of their mother's people, had married within months and had been happy.

He and his brother may have been identical in looks, but they were as different as the sparrow and the eagle. *Uwohali*.

"I must leave."

"You sho this is sometin' you wanna do, CB?" Rufus asked him as they sat outside of the workers' tent.

"Yes." Cary hadn't really been speaking to his friend, a man a few years his junior. The two of them had worked for years doing back-breaking work on the rail line.

"Things have been better since both us got on this company with the union," Rufus argued.

"True. This is not my end, Rufus. I've stayed too long." He held the letter tighter in his hand. It was a testament that he'd focused more on earning funds than planning ways to start his life. A piece of himself was now gone, now that his brother had passed. A brother who had lived, loved, produced a family, and died.

Yes, he had been away from his own dreams for a lifetime.

Night had descended around them and it was cooler than in the day while they worked under the heat. The snow would come soon in Utah Territory. "If I am to make it, I must go now, before the snow."

"I understand. Let me know where ya end up, CB." Rufus was an

ex-slave, and once he was freed in Alabama, he'd hightailed it away. He'd told Cary that he'd been sold or traded so many times, he had no family to keep him in place. Rufus confessed that to his knowledge, he'd never been given a last name, so once the chains that bound him were gone, he took on Abraham Lincoln, the full name of the president who had set him free.

"I will, my friend." Cary glanced over at the man, who was just as big as he was. It was a reason they never had a problem with getting hired on with different rail companies and were paid better wages than most. Wages Cary had taught his friend how to save and plan instead of squandering it on charwomen who cooked and cleaned for the company, those women who followed camps, or on drinks in the towns they passed through. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Lincoln."

Cary stood and embraced the man he'd been happy to call friend. There were others he'd worked alongside, immigrants, and foreigners, with whom he'd built a bond. Each of them had been there for different reasons but had been good, honest workers. Even as a loner, he'd miss the camaraderie. Going into the open space tent, he found his bag and began to pack away the few belongings stowed under his cot.

Other men, who were roused by his actions, sat up or came over to him to say their good-byes or offer him well wishes. Cary headed to the temporary office the crew had constructed and torn down at every location. The company's chief of operations used it to work, sleep, and issue out the pay at the end of each month. Knocking at the door, Cary waited for a moment before the door pulled open.

"What brings you round 'bout, Cary?" Mr. Sheffield's Irish roots showed rich in his speech as he inquired while standing in the doorway, the lamp from the room setting his face in shadows.

The man standing before Cary had always shown decency to all those under him. He judged each man by his work, not by race. Others in the rail industry hadn't, and they had been blatant about

their dislike for people of color, be they ex-slaves, Asians, or Indians. Even a half-breed.

"I've come to tell you I'm leaving the company."

"What ya' say now?" Mr. Sheffield stepped back into the room, pulling the door wide as the light showed the confusion on his features. "Come in."

Cary crossed the threshold into the warmth of the room. There was a big fire outside of their tent, but it never quite made it back to his cot. It wasn't freezing out yet, but the heat from the roaring fire seeped into his skin and eased the aches in his muscles some.

"So, what were ya' goin' on bout? You're leavin'. Has someone done ya' wrong? If so, point'em out and I'll fix'em." Mr. Sheffield stood next to a table that was both his desk and the place he took his meals in the one room lodge.

Taking off his hat, Cary met the fair man's gaze. "Nothin' like that. I've had a family emergency. I can't take care of it on route."

Mr. Sheffield dragged a hand through red-brown hair he kept cut short. "Is there no way ya' could finish out the season?" He held his hands open in plea.

Cary shook his head. "If there was a way I could, I would. But once the snow sets in, travel will become slow and impossible in some places."

Sighing, Mr. Sheffield moved behind his desk and pulled a ring from his pants pocket that was connected by twine to a short leather strap that was buttoned at his waist. Those keys opened the black powder sticks container, the main office, the chest that held the money box, and the money box. Once his boss had the box pulled out from the chest under the table, he said, "You're one of my most consistent workers, big as an oak and strong as one too. I'm goin' hate to see ya' go."

Cary knew he was bigger than most of his mother's people, however, it was his father, a Scotsman, who was responsible for the size and build of him and his brother.

"I wasn't ready to part, either." It was true. He'd figured that he

had one more year working the Transcontinental Rails before he had all he'd wanted saved to put his dream into action. Now, he'd have to make do on what he'd already earned.

"But family is family." Mr. Sheffield's family, a wife and four kids, had followed him from New York and usually settled in the closest town to their camp. He spent the winter months with them, wherever the work stopped. In early spring, he'd assemble everyone back together again and pick up where they'd left off.

"Yes, sir, it is." Cary took the folded bills for his months' pay. He flipped through the money and noted it was his normal pay and a little extra.

"I went ahead and paid you out the month and your Christmas bonus everyone else is goin' ta get in a few weeks." Mr. Sheffield snapped the metal lid of the strong box closed then locked it. "I don't want ta hear no argument. You'd have earned it."

"Thank you, Mr. Sheffield, it's been an honor." Cary held his hand out to the man.

Without hesitation, the boss man grasped it and gave a firm shake. "If ya' every need a job on the rails, you look me up. I'll even train ya to be an engineer."

Cary knew the honor in the man's words. Most of those positions went to Irishman and was passed down from fathers and uncles. It was true respect of a man's abilities in the older man's words.

"I 'preciate the offer." With a firm nod, Cary was out the door. Pulling his duster tighter around himself, he headed into the night toward town, to see a man about a horse.