

It was wash day, and a weary Jewel Crowley was glad she was almost done. Doing laundry for her five brothers was work enough, but when sheets, pillow slips, shirts and the rest were tossed in, it was a wonder she got it all done before the sun went down. At twenty-four years of age, she was by society's measure a spinster. She had no husband and no prospects for one, but, she had plenty of wash, she thought wryly, adding six more pairs of denims to the nearly full clothes lines strung between the trees in the field next to the house. She blamed her lack of suitors on the Grove's remote location – no one of any interest ever came to the Grove, and, on the fact that Adam Crowley was her father, and Noah, Abraham, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul were her brothers. No potential suitor in his right mind would come calling knowing he'd have to face down six burly lumber beasts guarding her like archangels girded for war, so her life was rooted with them instead. Not that she minded. She had a good life, good family and friends, but when she went Home to the Lord, she wanted to have something on her headstone besides, *She Took Care of Her Brothers*.

Jewel was intelligent enough to know she could have a full life without a husband. She had only to look at Viveca who'd been a doctor before marrying Nathaniel Grayson, or Abigail, who instead of spending her widowed years pining for a mate had focused her energies on ways to uplift the race and women as well. Even Jewel's good friend Maddie, whose unconventional past had made her a pariah to many in the Grove had settled into a good life with her books and her hunting dogs. Jewel herself was noted for her committee work and her way with roses; a talent which gave her income and some

measure of independence, but she didn't want to be still doing wash when she was old and grey while the world passed her by.

She'd just started hanging up the last tub of wet clothes when she saw Eli Grayson's buggy pull to a stop in front of the house. She'd heard about the fancy New York publisher who was coming to town to talk about the Gazette. She hoped the meeting between the two would go well. Everyone else in town missed reading Eli's newspaper, even if he was a Democrat.

"Afternoon, Jewel," he said walking up, giving her that smile. Jewel had known Eli her entire life. He was wearing his lady killer smile. She was immediately suspicious.

"Eli," she replied as she hung up socks. "What brings you by?"

"Just thought I'd stop over and see how you were."

"Oh really? Can't remember you ever doing that before."

"Is there a law against me inquiring after your health?"

"Eli, I'm busy here and I have supper to get ready. What are you fishing for?"

"You doubt my motive?"

"Is my Pa a Republican?"

He covered his heart with a hand. "You wound me, fair maiden."

She shook her head at his silliness. "What do you want?"

"Have this problem and I need a favor."

"What type of problem and what type of favor?"

"G.W. Hicks is in town to talk about maybe adding the Gazette to his stable."

"I heard. How's it faring?"

"Well, he has this small stipulation."

“And it is?”

“I need a wife.”

She snorted a laugh before she could stop herself.

“You find that funny?”

“You need a wife like a goat needs an embroidery hoop.” She hung up another pair of socks. There were so many she wondered if they were somehow breeding when nobody was looking.

“I’m serious, Jewel.”

“And I’m not?”

Eli knew this would be difficult; Jewel Crowley could be as irascible as her Pa. “This may be my last chance to make something out of the Gazette. His papers are read all over the country. I can’t let this opportunity pass.”

“You’re not making sense. What does Hicks buying the Gazette have to do with you needing a wife?”

“Hicks believes bachelors are undependable and unreliable.”

She stopped. “Should I speak to that or remain silent?”

“The latter, please.” His smoke black eyes twinkled with amusement. She also had one of the wittiest tongues in the Grove. “Hicks won’t consider the Gazette unless I have a wife.”

She fished more socks out of the tub and added them to the line. “So, who are you marrying? Do you need me to make a cake? Is that what this is about?”

“No, Jewel. I figure, if I can get someone to pretend to be my wife for the short time Hicks is here, no one will be the wiser.”

She shrugged and after hanging up the last two socks picked up the empty tub and rested it on her hip. “Sounds half – baked to me, but if you believe you can pull it off, I’ll keep your secret if I run into Hicks while he’s here.” She walked away.

Eli raised his eyes to the heavens for strength, then hurried to catch up with her. “Hicks wants to meet her at dinner this evening.”

“Okay. So who’re you going to ask?”

“You.”

She stopped, stared and began to laugh. “Me? Did you fall out of bed on your head this morning? I’m going to fix dinner.”

He touched her gently on the arm. “Do I look as if I’m laughing?”

Jewel searched his face again; the handsomest male face in the county. “You have women in Kalamazoo, Chicago and all points in between. Use one of them.”

“None of them can be here by five this evening.”

“Then find someone else. What about Lenore?” Lenore’s father James ran the Grove mill. She was silly and vain, but she was unmarried.

“Lenore Wilson couldn’t keep a secret if she was dead.”

“What about Celeste Keppler over in Niles?”

“She’s a lumber beast, Jewel. The rest of the time she doesn’t even wear shoes.”

“So shallow, Eli.”

His lips thinned. “This is not funny.”

“No, it’s not, but I’m out of suggestions.” She was once again in motion and striding through the cropped grass towards the house.

“Jewel – “

“Go away, Eli. I don’t have time for your foolishness.”

“Jewel, if you’d just listen.”

“I’ve heard all I need to hear. No.”

“Please, Jewel – ,”

“Pestering me to death is not going to change my mind.”

He gently grabbed her hand to keep her near. “You’re the only choice I have.”

Jewel ignored the warmth from his touch sliding up her arm, or at least tried to.

“Then you are in a serious fix,” she pointed out disengaging her hand.

“That’s why I’m here. I truly truly need your help.”

“And so will my reputation when word gets out that I pretended to be your wife.”

“Your reputation will be fine. We’re just going to have dinner with him. It isn’t like we’re going to stand up and make a grand announcement that we’re married.

Afterwards, we’ll tell him you went to visit a sick aunt in Muskegon, or some other place.

He’ll only be here a couple days. He’ll never have to see you again, or you him. Please, Jewel. Think about what the Gazette means to the Grove.”

“Think about what size skinning knife my Pa’s going to use on your hide if he finds out.”

“He won’t.”

“Why not ask Maddie?”

“Hicks has already met her. Please Jewel, I’m begging. I’ll do anything you ask in exchange. I’ll grovel, crawl on my belly like a snake. I’ll eat worms, dirt. You name it, I’ll do it.”

The fervent plea sounded so boyish, she couldn’t keep her smile from showing.

“That smile gives me hope.”

“Save the charm for your mistresses.”

Eyes filled with humor, he went silent for a moment then asked again, softly,
“Please, Jewel.”

She sighed. “If I say, yes, I know I’m going to regret it. I can feel it as sure as I can feel the sun on my face.”

“You won’t, I promise. One hour. That’s all. Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll be dining in the Quilt Ladies’s private room. No one will even know what we’re discussing.”

“Can’t you just tell him the truth?”

“If I do, he’ll bankroll a newspaper somewhere else because he’ll think I’m a liar.”

“Which in this case you are.”

“Jewel, please. Please.”

She sighed again and ran her hands over her face. “Okay. One dinner. One hour. One. That’s all.”

“Thank you!” Grabbing her around the waist, he swung her around and the pleasure in his dark face made him even more handsome. “Thank you!”

Laughing, she protested, “Put me down, you loon!”

“I could kiss you.”

“Don’t.”

He set her down.

The power of him was so overwhelming, she had to turn away or become a puddle at his feet. Grabbing hold of herself, she kept her tone cool. “We’ll be eating at the boarding house?”

“Yes. I’ll come back and pick you up around 4 so we can arrive together.”

She looked down at the denims she was wearing. “I suppose I should put on a dress.”

“Would you, please.”

She shot him a look. “I’ll see you later.”

“I owe you, Jewel.”

“Yes, you do,” and she went into the house.

{TXB}