

CHAPTER 8

When George received Seth's confirmation that he would escort Ollie and her sister to Beaumont, he asked Seth to meet his daughters at the El Dorado train station on April 1. The three boarded a Santa Fe Railway train and took it to Kansas City, where they transferred to a Southern Pacific train that would transport them across the barren southwest to Texas.

Ollie hated bidding farewell to her family and the life she loved. "Effie, I'm glad you're coming with me. It makes saying goodbye easier. It just wouldn't seem right marrying if you weren't my matron of honor, and I'm glad you'll be with me when I see Will again. It has been so long. I'm not sure I remember what he looks like, how he smells, the tone of his voice. I'm scared."

"I know it's been some time since you've seen him, but once you're there, once you're with him, it will be like you've never been apart," Effie reassured. "And, what an adventure for me. I never imagined I would have the opportunity to witness a discovery like Spindletop with my very own eyes."

Nervous as a farmer in the middle of a drought, Ollie couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Seth, however, slept the entire journey.

Effie whispered to Ollie, "Do you think Seth is okay? All he does is sleep."

"He has asthma. I think it makes him tired. I have no idea why Papa picked him to be our escort. A lot of help he'd be, sleeping like he is, if robbers held up the train."

"Does he make you uncomfortable?"

"Yes. We were childhood friends—good friends. But I will never get over him asking Papa for my hand."

Ollie's face flushed with fondness. "Do you remember our first long-distance trip? We traveled by covered wagon across the plains all the way from Missouri to Kansas."

"How could I forget? All Papa talked about was homesteading."

"I loved that wagon trip. Life was easy. Sun warmed our skin. Rain washed our faces. Days were full and slow. We got up at dawn's first light and went to bed with the blackness of night. What an amazing adventure. Each day passing across land we'd never seen before, inhaling new sights, sounds, smells." A smile turned Ollie's lips as she remembered the voyage by covered wagon.

"I thought it was boring. I much prefer the train. It's much faster."

Ollie stared at her sister. *I don't really know you, Effie. And, now, with me moving so far from home, we won't share our secrets, our dreams, our fears. I will miss you so much. I hope I am making the right decision.* A lonely sadness washed Ollie's eyes.

She looked out the window. This trip was a journey through time. The hours raced along, measured by the clicking of train wheels as they glided along steel rails. Scenery flashed by, glimpses of nameless town, faceless people. A world seen, but never know, places soon forgotten. The sights, sounds, and smells compressed into a kaleidoscope of revolving time. For her, this trip was only about the man that waited for her in Beaumont.

Ollie dozed intermittently but was awakened frequently by what sounded like gunshots and the overpowering odor of cigar smoke. *Trains. Not nearly as pleasant as wagons.*

Finally, after several days and what seemed like endless stops and starts, the train screeched to a halt in the Beaumont station. Eager for a taste of Spindletop, most passengers bullied their way off the train to the depot platform. Seth finally woke up.

"Nice to see you've rejoined the world, Mr. Steele," Effie said.

“Are we there?”

“Yes.” Ollie gawked through the window seeing her new home for the first time. “I’ve never seen so many people all in one place.”

They gathered up their luggage and ventured out into the throng. “It’s just like the story in the Kansas City Star. Beaumont *is* a seething mass of humanity,” said Seth.

The disembarking passengers included tourists, who came just to get a look at the Lucas No. 1 well, and speculators, thirsty for black gold. Ollie McNary may have been the only passenger that came to Beaumont to marry.

The crowd swarmed in anticipation, as if assembled for a feverish revival, oblivious to the gentle rainfall that kept the platform wet and slippery.

“I don’t know how we’ll ever get through this mob.” Claustrophobia twisted inside Ollie as she nudged her way through the pack.

From the corner of her eye, Ollie watched a stranger latch on to Seth. “Come to make a fortune? I have a small plot for sale.”

The veins in Seth’s neck pulsated. “A plot? How big? How much?”

“A quarter of an acre. You can have it for a song.” Seth’s breathing turned to slight gasps. He felt an attack coming on. He couldn’t get enough air into his lungs.

Before he could squeak out a yes, a distinguished looking gentleman jumped in. “Where’s your plot? How much?” Another bystander joined the haggling.

“I’ll give you \$100,000.”

“\$125,000.”

Seth’s nostrils grew wide with frustration. Opportunity had knocked on his door, and he couldn’t answer.

Ollie tapped at Seth with her satchel. “Too rich for your blood. Come on. Let’s get out of this mob.”

Effie agreed. “Yes, it’s stifling.”

They edged their way through a crowd pulsing with manic exhilaration. Like a contagious disease, oil fever crept up the backs of the unsuspecting newcomers, suffocating and infecting even the sensible.

Ollie sized up the sights, sounds, smells of her new world.

Effie giggled. “Look at the men. Clean-shaven except for their handlebar mustaches. They’re wearing derby hats and silk ties, just like in Harper’s Bizarre.”

Ollie answered, her sense of smell her strongest attribute. “Yes, and they reek of cigar smoke.”

Seth noticed the women. “Look at the big city women. Diamonds. Broad-brimmed hats. Stylish clothes.”

“Yes, and they smell of expensive perfume,” said Ollie, focusing on the unshaven men. Their work clothes splattered with crude, the smell of labor fresh on their skin, their shoulders sagging from exhaustion. She gazed into their tired eyes, and worn-out souls peered back. *My poor Will. What have you been through?*

The working-class women of Beaumont, their skin wrinkled and hands calloused, sold water and sandwiches to the crowd.

The three trudged on through the horde passed shady-looking characters, their breath tainted with the odor of whiskey, their eyes hard from pursuing the easy buck; passed seductively clothed women, flaunting their tools of the trade, smelling of promiscuity, beer, and cheap perfume; passed Mexicans, Coloreds, Chinese; passed boomers, wildcatters and roughnecks

dressed in high boots and slickers, covered with soot and splattered with oil, the stench of steam, sweat and petroleum embedded in their pores.

Ollie shook her head and thought, *the smells of Beaumont.*

They wormed their way through the crowd to a narrow, muddy street. Congested with buggies, buckboards, hacks, and work wagons, traffic was at a standstill. Horses and mules struggled to advance through the slippery combination of mud and oil.

Pulling a wagon jam-packed with a heavy load of pipe, a team of mules sank up to their bellies in a muddy pothole, deadlocking traffic on one side of the street. The mules lunged forward, trying to free themselves from the quagmire, only to sink back into the mud again and again. A fowl-mouthed muleskinner cursed the fallen animals. "Get up, you worthless bastards." He cracked his whip on their backs, tearing scars into their muddy hides. The mules tried one more time, again sinking deeper into the hole.

Ollie became impatient. "Why doesn't that stupid muleskinner get out of the wagon, grab hold of the reins, and lead those poor mules out of that sink hole? He'll never get anywhere like that."

Crying, Effie couldn't bear the cruelty. "Let's go to the hotel, Ollie. This place is wretched."

Ollie grimaced. "The street is nothing but mud. I don't want to walk in it. It looks like tar. And it's raining. We'll be soaked to the bone." She tried to wave down a hack as Will had instructed but wasn't pushy enough to overcome competition from the eager crowd.

They reached the end of the boardwalk. Ollie watched other foot travelers slosh through the muck. The men wore high boots and the women lifted their skirts so only their shoes came in contact with the mud. "If I'm going to live here, I better learn to walk in mud." She lifted her

skirt and stepped off into the street where a “gusher” of black, greasy water, mud, and Spindletop oil poured into her shoes.

“This is disgusting. My shoes will be ruined. I want to curse like that muleskinner.”

Effie followed her sister’s lead, but Seth paid no attention to the mud. Instead, he trudged along inhaling the excitement of a boom town.

They crossed the street and found their way to the Crosby House, bags in hand, and a good dose of Beaumont on their shoes. “Will told me to meet him here. Why, I don’t know.”

The infamous hotel sat like an abandoned old scow pushed up against the banks of a river. Promoters had set up shop in the garden and on the front porch of the ramshackle building. Sounds of haggling echoed out to the street.

They entered the gallery. No wider than the width of a single room, it ran out like an extended invitation. Unfinished planks hastily nailed to the building partitioned off narrow stalls. Blueprints of the Spindletop Oil Field covered the boards.

Seth eyed the stalls. “Look at the stacks of money. Powerbrokers in Beaumont’s game of chance.”

They crossed the gallery to the lobby, where the high-pitched voices of women intertwined with the coarser voices of men. Cursing drifted through a haze of cigar smoke. Off in a corner the telegraph office kept the room buzzing and lease prices rising. A crazed man with slicked-back hair and a handlebar mustache stood on a chair. He waved a hand full of greenbacks and shouted, “I’ll give \$100,000 for a single acre.”

The assembly roared with laughter. “That’s the price of a 20-foot plot.”

Ollie found the hotel desk—a primitive, thrown-together hodgepodge of wooden planks, painted dull brown. A sallow-eyed clerk glared at her with lethargic eyes. “I’m looking for

William Russell.” The clerk handed her an envelope and a room key. Ollie turned to Effie.

“Another communication from Will. Envelopes. Telegrams. Letters. I’m beginning to wish I hadn’t come.”

“Open it,” encouraged Effie.

My Darling,

I will not be able to meet you until this evening. We received an unexpected order from an important customer. It must be delivered to Gladys City today. Because the customer has made some unusual requests I think it best that I personally supervise the delivery.

Maggie has made arrangements for us to marry at 7 pm this evening at the Crosby House. Without consulting me? she fumed. I called in a dozen favors to get us a room. The clerk should have given you a room key. I know you would prefer a proper ceremony in a church, but the weather and mud here are hard on clothes. We thought it best to have all the festivities at one place. You and Maggie have made decisions about our wedding? We will have dinner in the hotel’s dining room following the ceremony.

Please settle into our room. I am assuming you will want to bathe and rest after your long trip. Baths are an additional cost, but I thought all three of you would want one. I have already paid the bath charges. There is a changing room for bathers that are not guests of the hotel. Perhaps Seth should use it, and then you and Effie can change in our room.

Please let Effie know that Maggie has saved a place for her to sleep at the

boarding house. It is overflowing with guests now, so Seth has the choice of sleeping in the hayloft or the gymnasium.

Can't wait to hold you in my arms,

All my love, Will

Ollie tucked the letter into her purse. Doubts swam in her head like guppies in a lake—too numerous to count. They grew into catfish—too ugly to touch. *Married the same day I arrive. In a smoke-infested, curse-filled hotel. To a man I haven't seen in nearly a year. I need time to get to know him again. He has hardly communicated with me for a year and now he's rushing me into marriage.* She rolled her lips into her mouth and moaned. *Rest? Who can rest in this insanity?*

“Let's take our luggage to the room and go find some lunch.”

Effie blurted out, “What does the letter say?”

Ollie glared at her sister with the same face she would make when she had eaten something disgusting. “I don't want to talk about it.”