

CHAPTER 1

'YOUTH IS THE SEASON
OF IMPRESSION.'

Montana, 1867. The camp was a jumble, full of rough men and women, animals, dirt and noise. I stood aside, out of the thoroughfare, waiting for the others. The street, the only main street in Helena, was full of clapboard frontages with painted signs. At the edges, plots were still pegged out with string and stakes. Between the buildings, undergarments hung on washing lines in alleyways. Not far away, in a side street, someone had made a pigpen and the stench was in the air. Helena, it seemed, was to be like every other camp we had visited on our long and arduous journey. My heart sank.

Miss Adams stood with me as Mr Goldsmith climbed down, stiff-limbed, from the roof of the coach and began to fetch our overnight boxes. Mr Goldsmith had told me interesting stories about the history of America as we crossed the

varied landscapes of the Great Plains. Or at least he had until Miss Adams made him sit outside on the roof with the teamsters who were escorting us, deeming his many nuggets of information unnecessary for my ears.

‘Come, you cannot stand out here,’ Miss Adams said, pushing through the doors of the hotel.

Like all those on the trail, it was busy and accommodated a bar. I had never been exposed to working, drinking men in England, and found their bold stares and filth terrifying.

‘Don’t look, Miss Forsythe. It only encourages them.’

The hotel owner appeared: he wore, like so many American men, an unattractive droopy moustache, greasy from lip-licking. There was a pair of spectacles with green lenses resting on the top of his balding head.

‘Good afternoon, ladies,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Spencer party?’

We were travelling under the name of Spencer for more than one reason. The first was that Papa thought it prudent I, whilst travelling with so small a party, remain anonymous. The second was that with the displacement from the Sioux Wars, and so many people coming to the Montana gold fields, even the meanest places were full. Making multiple reservations in more than one name was somewhat dishonest, to my way of thinking, but had, on two occasions so far, secured us rooms when otherwise we would have been sleeping in the nearest pigpen. Still, we had perhaps only another three weeks of this before arriving at our destination, Portland.

There, I would meet the man I was engaged to marry – Anthony Howard Stanton from the family of the biggest railway constructors in America. Presently they were engaged in building a west-coast infrastructure, hence our rendezvous in Portland, where he was working on the branch line. We were to live in San Francisco, on Larkin Street, opposite Yerba Buena Park. The house was newly finished and already had a full staff, waiting for our arrival.

Miss Adams allowed the hotel keeper's wife to show us to our accommodation as I trailed behind them, lost in thought.

Married life. I was not quite sixteen. Very young for marriage; I knew it. It wasn't that I didn't know how to run a household, for I did, but the idea of being a wife kept me awake in the small hours. What if he could not love *me*, or found me lacking in some way? But Mama and Papa were convinced it was the best match I could make. Two of the finest families in the two greatest countries in the world, united.

When the photographs of Anthony Howard Stanton had arrived, Mama and Papa had expressed their approval whilst showing them to me: 'Darling, we think he looks most handsome and civilized.'

I had taken them, barely able to keep my hands from shaking. Quickly I had placed them on my sewing table, so that the tremor might not be detected. Aged twenty-two, Mr Stanton was a good height, slim and, yes, he was handsome, remarkably so.

The rooms were small, but they looked clean. I waited by

the door until Miss Adams confirmed her satisfaction and dismissed the proprietress. Miss Adams, I knew, was being paid handsomely to accompany me. A serious woman in her late twenties, she seemed to take no pleasure in anything. Her dress was plain to the point of severity and her hair so tight as to be unflattering. She also had a long nose, which, coupled with her all-seeing eyes, made her seem like a malevolent field mouse. I hoped I should be allowed to let her go once the wedding was over.

As our boxes were delivered, Miss Adams busied herself with unpacking the things we might need for the night. I washed my hands and face, drying off on the hard towel on the washstand, catching my pale reflection in the spotted glass hanging above it.

What had Mr Stanton thought of my portraits? I had loathed sitting for the photographer, my head in a carefully concealed brace to keep it still, but Mama and Papa seemed very pleased with the result. He had captured my pale skin and large eyes so well, everyone said.

I stared at the mirror, turning my head slowly left and right. My abundant hair was black like night and shone as if it had been varnished. Piled up as it was, it gave the overall impression that my head was too heavy for my neck. Mama thought this appearance artful, along with some very tight corset lacing. All of it conspired to make me appear the merest slip of a thing, particularly at parties, where she often had my stays tightened by an extra two inches. And perhaps it had been worth it, for Mr Stanton's proposal had come so

soon after his receipt of the photographs. He had telegraphed my father the following day, and over the next hours my future had been tapped out in Morse Code across thousands of miles at the cost of one dollar a letter. At the memory, my chest tightened and the walls suddenly seemed to be closing in on me.

‘Miss Adams, would you be kind enough to loosen these stays, please? The room is not hot, I know, but it is so very airless.’

Her mousey face sharpened but she unfastened the back of my dress and let out the stays, just a little. I took a deep, inelegant breath, dragging at the collar to free my throat and shoulders.

‘And might we open the window a little?’

The manner in which she threw up the sash indicated she did not approve of this either. And perhaps she was right, as the air that came into the room was scarcely that of the purest kind. Still, it was cool and there was a tang of the fresh wind we had experienced on our long journey over the Great Plains, first by rail, then by stagecoach.

Papa and Mama were travelling separately, and had departed earlier in order to get to San Francisco early and finalize the wedding plans. The journey through Montana was our final leg, but the coming weeks were probably to be the most arduous – or so Mr Goldsmith had warned me. The Indians were attacking all along the Bozeman Trail and no one was safe, but on this route he told me they were mostly unthreatening. And on the Oregon Trail people were dying of

a terrible disease and that must be avoided at all costs. It was so bad they were being buried under the trail itself, so that the wagons passing over them might break down their bodies very quickly and stop the wolves eating their bones.

I looked over at the window, wanting to feel the breeze on my skin. After all day in the coach I felt horribly trapped in the small room, but it would be indecorous to stand any closer to the window, where I might be seen, my pale shoulders exposed.

It was then that I saw you.

You were riding a white horse spattered with large tan splotches, your feet kicked out of the stirrups as you approached the hotel. Behind you trailed another horse on a rope. I had never seen anyone so at ease on horseback, and moved closer to the window. I hadn't yet seen your limp, nor your pale eyes, but I could see your longish brown hair and your unshaven jaw. Around your neck was a leather lace, from which dangled assorted objects. There seemed to be a knife, some feathers, with a few spent cartridges amongst them. You were squinting with fatigue, for the early evening spring sunshine was not bright. I hadn't noticed I'd taken another step further towards the open window, fingers touching the frame. A rifle sat behind your right leg, stock sticking out of its sling, though I had become used to guns in my short time in America. I had seen more guns in the month since we arrived in New York than I had thought to exist in the entire world. You were dressed in long, soft Indian boots that laced around your legs, trousers, and a shirt with a battered suede

waistcoat over it.

I forgot about the strictures of my stays, captivated. You pulled the horses to a halt in the rutted dust by the hotel's hitching post, and swung yourself down in the most graceful manner possible. As you slung the reins over the horses' heads and caressing them, I could see you were speaking to them but in the noise leaking from the hotel and the clamour on the street there was no way for me to hear what you were saying. As you moved to tie them to the rail I saw the difficulty you had when out of the saddle: you were lame in the right leg.

I watched as you handed the waiting hotel urchin a coin to keep an eye on the animals, and I was still standing there, staring, when you looked up, your expression unreadable. My breath caught and my heart began to thump as if it would jump out of my chest. From the window frame, my fingers lifted, then hesitated, uncertain. How long we stood there I, to this day, have no idea.

Miss Adams's cry of dismay pierced me. She ran forward, pulling me away and flinging the window down. Turning on me, her tirade was impressive. 'Miss Forsythe! How could you expose yourself to such a man? To the whole street, undressed!'

I put out my hands, pleading, yet I couldn't help but glance back at the window again. 'I wished only for a moment or two of air. I had thought there was no harm in it. Please, do not tell Mama. I shall not behave in such a fashion again.' I stood, dress hanging from my shoulders. If Miss Adams did tell of what I had done, then I would be in considerable trouble, and

Mama's disapproval was so hard to endure. I thought quickly. 'But if you were to write to Mama, of course, she would wonder why I had been left to my own devices.'

Miss Adams's mouth closed like a man-trap. I said nothing more, but went over to the bed, fetching the travelling photograph frame containing my two photographs of the handsome, immaculately suited Mr Stanton. Going to my nightstand, I opened the frame with a snap, like a book, and placed it where I should see it when I went to sleep and when I awoke, as had become my custom.

'I should like to change before we eat. These clothes feel travel-stained,' I said, presenting my back to her. She unfastened my dress, hands crueller than necessary. I made a mental note that, as a married woman, I should very much like a lady's maid who did not pull me about, and was considerate with the hairbrush. Worthy Miss Adams may have been; gentle she was not.

'Might we eat downstairs, do you think?' I asked, as she finished buttoning my evening gown.

'Amongst his kind of rabble? I think not,' she sniffed.

I bit my lips together. Was I so transparent? Had I even admitted to myself I should like to catch a glimpse of you again? What was it about you that made me brave enough to request eating in a room full of men who terrified me? You were older than me, that much I guessed. It was hard to say how much older. Your tan, though undesirable in a civilized man, suited you. But you did look wild, and dusty. The horses were still hitched to the post. You were down

there, somewhere.

We ate in the room. The food was dreadful. Some sort of leathery pork steak with the obligatory beans. Owing to father's entertaining duties for the embassy, our meals at home in London had frequently featured caviar, champagne jellies and spun sugar confections, but I loved best Cook's little treats of an apple and cheese or a biscuit slipped on to my tray when Mama wasn't in the room. I placed my knife and fork together in silence. Miss Adams said nothing. Eating very little was ladylike, and she approved of ladylike behaviour. My travelling companion wasn't one for conversation, but as all she would have done would be to remind me of my lapse I was grateful for the silence.

So, the interminable wait for the moment of retirement began. I had read all my books, and there were no more to be had at the hotel. Some had a small stock laid by, but Miss Adams had yet to find something suitable. The coach was to depart at dawn the following morning, so we were going to be up early. I stifled a feigned yawn. I doubted I would sleep: the wilder the territory became, the more fear crowded my thoughts and it was worse at night.

'I shall prepare to retire, I think.'

I managed to snatch a glance out of the window as I passed. The white and brown horse was still there, waiting patiently. But alone.

The next morning, we were up and dressed before the sunrise. The stagecoach team were keen to cover the miles.

We would be travelling long distances over the coming days and stopping only at staging posts. It was the remotest part of our journey, and not without its perils. Our guards were armed and taking no chances, as there were deserters and road agents to be found in the foothills of the mountains.

When hearing of our plan to avoid the Oregon Trail, Mr Stanton had written to tell me that his family's railway company were planning to scout our route for a new branch of the Pacific Railroad. He asked me if I would be so kind and such a help to him as to make notes on the terrain, and any large bodies of water or mountains. Perhaps I might even sketch them? I ordered new pencils, water colours and sketchbooks so that I might be of use to my future husband.

Outside at dawn, waiting to climb into the coach, I looked at the hitching post. The horse was gone. The street empty.

Mr Goldsmith, huge and forbidding in his great overcoat, appeared and opened the coach door, handing me in. 'Morning, miss,' he said in his gruff manner, smelling somewhat of whiskey.

'Good day.' I settled into my seat, stays already digging into my hip bones.

We left Helena, and set out on a trail towards a place called Fort Shaw, hurrying because soon the glacier high up in the mountains would experience the spring melt, which would make crossing all the rivers far more dangerous. Fort Shaw, according to the men I had heard talking when we stopped to water the horses, was little more than a military camp to keep the trail open, but there we would take on

provisions and fresh horses. After that, we would branch west into the mountains.

Indian territory.