

An explanation of the following conversation:

Many writing sources suggest “interviewing” your characters to find out what motivates them. I first started doing that with Robert Black (since the man was driving me nuts—his character kept slipping all over the place), and have since made a habit of doing it when I couldn’t figure out why my characters weren’t staying in character. I write in the present tense, as if the character is currently talking to me. Comments in brackets {like these} are mostly summaries of actions or thoughts, or else clarifying information.

One morning in June, I woke up much earlier than usual, and couldn’t go back to sleep, so I decided to go downstairs, get breakfast, and write for a while. On a whim, I invited Jonathan Steele to join me. What followed was 32 hand-written pages of a conversation with the voices in my head. This is the typed-up, slightly edited (for clarity and spoilers) version.

June 4, 2016

“Good morning, Jonathan.”

He approaches, looking more than a little wary. “Morning, ma’am.”

“It’s been a long time since we chatted like this.”

“Yeah.”

He’s uncharacteristically non-talkative. And this pen is going to drive me nuts.

“Why don’t you have a seat. I need to grab a different pen. I’ll be right back.”

{I’m back a few minutes later, having changed into warmer clothes as well}

“Looks like you grabbed more than just a pen.”

“Well, I was cold. Better now.” He’s sitting on the edge of his seat, tensed like he’s ready to flee at the slightest threat. “Relax, Jon. I’m not out to get you.”

“I know. Still, these talks with you usually aren’t pleasant.” He’s playing with the brim of his hat unconsciously.

“Sorry.” And I am sorry. I really don’t like hurting my people. “But...I need to know what makes you tick, so I can this blasted book done. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. And no. Not looking forward to being trapped in that story forever.”

I frown. “I thought you liked the way it ended.”

“Of course I do! It’s just that other part—well, it hurts. Even when I know what’s coming, it hurts like the dickens. Can’t you make it a little less painful?”

“Not really,” I apologize. “I’ve got to bring you face to face with death.”

“Damn family curse,” he mutters.

“I know. Kinda don’t like it myself. {Redacted spoilers here} But anyway, I think I need another cup of coffee. Would you like one as well?”

“Surely. Just not with all that strange stuff you put in yours.” He makes a face. I can remember Two Shields making the same face about Honehe’s tea drinking.

“I’ll be right back.”

Should have made myself a smaller cup. Oh well. And sometimes I wonder if I take this interview conceit too far—I’ve pulled up a chair for Jon and put out a mug for his coffee.

“That’s okay,” he reassures. “You’re a bit strange, but we don’t mind.”

“Gee, thanks. Even my imaginary creations think I’m peculiar.”

A teasing look comes into his blue eyes and he grins.

“You’re incorrigible,” I inform him.

“No, that’s me,” Travis tosses in from the living room.

“You two are like peas in a pod anyway,” Rob states from beside him. “And you’re interrupting a private conversation. Have you no manners?”

“Nope,” Travis declares cheerfully. “I’m uncivilized, remember?”

“Gah,” Rob growls, grabs his brother by the collar, and drags him off.

“I like Mr. Travis,” Jon volunteers, watching them leave. “Glad you think we’re a lot alike.”

“Well yes, you are. But I need to make sure I’m not just reusing the same character under different names. That gets boring rather quickly.”

“Which is why I have to sit here and do all these blasted interviews, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. So, enough of the small talk—shall we commence digging into your psyche?”

“My what?”

“Psyche. That which makes you who you are.”

He takes a swig of coffee as if fortifying himself. “Ask away, ma’am.”

I follow his action with a swig of my own.

“Right. So...I’m suspecting that the reason I haven’t been able to pin you down is because you’ve developed a chameleon personality as a defense mechanism. Is that correct?”

“Can you repeat that in English?”

A smile. “You’ve learned how to become different things to different people, because that’s what’s safest.”

“Oh. Well, no. That’s not quite right. Because I still won’t lie about who or what I am.”

No, he won’t. That core tenet is vital to who Jon is—changing that would be highly out of character.

“But I have learned how to be much more outgoing and entertaining than I’d be if I had my druthers. Learned that real young. Just a toddler—one of my mother’s friends (*even now he dislikes using the term lovers*, I think) remarked that I was too quiet and seemed sullen. ‘Why isn’t he a happy, cheerful child? Seems unnatural somehow.’”

“So you learned how to be happy and cheerful? I thought you were that way by nature.”

“I am, mostly. And that’s what kinda confused me. But he meant something more...loud? Boisterous? Not sure what the right word would be...”

“Clown? Entertaining?”

“Yeah, all those ideas. The life of the party I think is the term I heard you use. And that’s not me. I like laughing, I like making people smile, I like making people happy.”

“Especially the smile—that’s why Kat’s inability to smile bothers you so much.”

He nods soberly. “She has such a beautiful smile. It’s a lot like Mrs. Dani’s.”

*Your father would agree*, I think.

He seems to hear my thoughts. “Yeah. Pa is definitely hooked on her smiles.” He pauses. “By the way, thanks for letting me know his secret. I think it’s helped both of us understand each other better.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

{ Back to the thread I’m chasing. }

“Did your mother ever parade you about? Make you perform for her ... visitors?”

He closes his eyes, as if trying to remember. “Yes. When she decided she couldn’t hide my existence any longer, she turned me into an accessory. She could pull off the Madonna and child look...as long as I was the perfectly behaved child. At least I was cute enough for her standards,” he adds bitterly. “I remember her stating once that my dark hair was the perfect foil for her blonde hair.”

“Is that why you’ve always been attracted by blonde girls? Varina, Clara, those few others?”

He stiffens. “Probably. Might be glad Kat didn’t have blonde hair though.”

“Okay, so we’ve determined that you discovered early on how to be the very picture of Victorian childhood—lighthearted, innocent, well-behaved, respectful.”

He nods. “Learning how to pull that off made life a lot easier on me.”

“But you were only two or three!”

He shrugs. “You’re the one who stated that kids that young understand a lot more than most folk give them credit for.”

*True, I think.*

“Did your personality change when your father came home from the war?”

“Not as much as you might think. I really wanted this stranger who looked just like me to like me, so I did my best to charm him, to do the things I thought he’d like.”

“Did you keep that up?”

A grin. “No, thank goodness. I learned pretty quickly that the things I liked to do of my own self were the things he liked as well. So I didn’t have to do that pretending business. For the first time since I could remember, I could be myself, and knew that Pa loved me that way.”

“But that didn’t last long.”

He sobers again. “No. We moved out to Fort Laramie in Fall of 1865 and mother left with me in tow before my birthday that following spring.”

“Hold on a second—I want to make sure you’re remembering those dates properly.”

“Sure.” He waves a hand at my phone. “You can double-check on your machine here. But just remember—Mrs. Kat was notorious for not getting dates correct.”

*In this case, unfortunately, I think it is your memory that’s off.*

{ Well, actually, it was mine. }

“Katja Ross says you were gone for almost a year. So that would have been Nov/Dec of 66 through Dec of 67.”

He shrugs again. “Okay. Whatever. You’re the stickler for dates.”

“Comes from being compulsive about details,” I inform him tartly.

“I also need to check when G Troop gets to and leaves Laramie. However, if you don’t get to Sanders until later, that actually works better for the conversation scene I just wrote, since you’d be older.”

“Hey Pa?”

Jim glanced over. His son was lying sprawled in the grass beside him, and had carefully copied his exact pose—arms folded beneath his head, knees bent, staring up into the cloud-spotted sky. A wave of love for this child of his washed over him. “Yes, son?”

“This is my bestest day ever,” Jon declared with certainty. “Can we do this again tomorrow?”

“I think that could be arranged,” Jim told him indulgently. “As long as your mother doesn’t mind us leaving her again.”

“Naw, she won’t mind. She was singin’ the doo dah song this morning, and she only does that when Mr. Hoyt’s in town, and he always comes over two or three days in a row,” Jon informed him innocently.

“Mr. Hoyt?”

Jon didn’t seem to hear the sudden winter in his father’s voice. “He’s one of her friends. They like to go watch the horses racing. He’s not as bad as some of her friends. He brings me sweets when he comes, and he said I can go watch the horses with them when I’m older. I think that’d be fun.”

“I see.”

Jon finally caught that he’d said something that had disturbed his pa. Sitting up, he added hurriedly, “But I’d much rather come fishing with you, Pa.” A pause, then he winced. “Uh oh. I wasn’t supposed to say nothing about Mr. Hoyt or the others, was I? Mother said I had to keep it a secrud. But you’re my pa—I didn’t think I had to keep secruds from you. Are you angry with me now?” he whispered.

He slid his little hand into Jim’s, looked up at him with fearful blue eyes. It was like looking at a mirror. Jim thought, *At least there’s no doubt but that he is my son.* Pain spiked through him then, and anger. *Not only is she hell-bent on destroying me, she’s got him cringing already. If I leave again, she’ll have him a whimpering coward before he’s five. Damn it, no. No son of mine is going to grow up afraid like that.*

His expression softened. “No, son. I’m not angry with you at all. And you’re right—you and I shouldn’t ever have to keep secrets from each other.”

The little face relaxed; a sunny smile reappeared.

*What do I do now?* Jim asked himself. His marriage was unsalvageable, of that he was quite certain. *But I have to keep Jonathan with me. We need each other.*

His new orders rustled in his shirt pocket. *I wonder . . .*

“Tell me, Jon: how would you like to come live out in a fort with me and the rest of my army friends?”

“With Injuns and horses and wild animals and stuff? Oh could we? That’d be the bestest thing too!” Jon was practically wiggling with excitement.

His enthusiasm was contagious. In spite of the hollowness he felt inside, Jim had to smile. “Well then, instead of going fishing tomorrow, why don’t we go down to the headquarters and talk to my colonel about it?” *Elizabeth will fight it tooth and nail, but I am still her husband, and what I say will stand.* “But why don’t we keep this a surprise for your mother until after I find out if it’ll all work out. We wouldn’t want her to be disappointed, now would we?”

Jon’s expression was too old, almost crafty. “Mother won’t like living in a fort. She’ll yell real loud about it,” he stated. Then he grinned and snuggled up to Jim. “But I want to go with you, so I’ll make sure to keep it a real good secrud.”

He interrupts. “I knew as a three year old what was going on.”

“I know. But you probably couldn’t have told Jim that quite so clearly when that young.”

“True,” he allows.

My brows come together. “If you knew what was going on, why didn’t you warn Jim before your mother left Fort Laramie {or wherever she took you from}”

His handsome face clouds over. “Because I was having too much fun running amok at the fort. I had playmates my own age for the first time and the men kinda adopted me as the troop mascot. They even got me my own kepi to wear about. Mother was more than happy to let me run loose—it meant I wasn’t underfoot at home and she could do as she pleased. Besides, you know how the bachelor officers were supposed to flirt with the ladies, to make them all feel special and protected. Was hard to figure out who was being gallant, and who was actually...” he hesitates, then plunges ahead “who was actually having an affair with her.”

“I see. Was it this time that you got to be friends with Mrs. Kat?”

“Uh huh. Though Pa insisted I call her Mrs. Ross back then. We spent a lot of the winter together—Mother took to her bed that winter. She claimed illness and too cold.” A bitter twist of his lips. “I doubt her bed was cold. So I stayed with Mrs. Kat. That’s when she started teaching me German.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad way to pass the winter.”

“No, it wasn’t. Except I’d get really antsy, stuck inside for days on end. Still, I tried to be on my best behavior for Mrs. Kat.”

“Because you liked her and wanted her to be happy?”

“Exactly.”

“So far, so good. I need a quick break. Would you like some more coffee?”

“We’re not done yet?”

“No.”

“Dang.” He stares into his empty mug. “Then yeah, I need more coffee.” He scoots away from the table. “I can get it myself though.” {which was odd, since I was using the Keurig. I guess he figured it out pretty quickly}

{We moved out into Jill’s cabin. He seems more at ease out here.}

“A lot more familiar, eh? “I ask.

He looks around appreciatively. “Oh yes. Looks a lot like the cabin Pa and I built.”

“Smaller though.”

“Not much,” he says. “When I said it was a little house, I meant it. Only about a 12’ by 16’.”

“That’s not quite four of this one.”

“Sounds about right,” he says, glancing around again. “But we had a loft too.”

“Well, I’m glad you like it out here, but we should get back to our conversation. We’re covering a lot of ground and don’t want to lose the momentum.”

“Momentum? That sounds like a Kat word. Something science-y.”

I snort. “It is. How about ‘I don’t want to lose our oomph.’”

A grin. “Yeah, that sounds more like me.

“So where were we up to?” I ask, looking back over my notes.

“Fort Laramie {or Sanders} and learning German with Mrs. Kat,” he supplies helpfully.

“Right. So, before another winter can hit, your mother—”

“Look,” he interrupts. “I get that we have to talk about the woman, but can you call her Elizabeth and not ‘mother’? She wasn’t a mother in any way.”

“Except for giving birth to you,” I point out.

“Except for that, though if she could have gotten away with not having me, I think she would have.”

“No,” I correct slowly. “I think she did want you, if only for the novelty of the matter.”

“Whatever. We’re almost free of her. Let’s get this over with.”

He getting agitated, so I plow on. “So she leaves the fort and heads back to St. Louis?”

“Yeah. She’d planned to drop me with Aunt Bertha from the get go.”

“At least she didn’t just leave you at the fort,” I say.

“Would have been kinder of her if she had,” Jon spits out. “At least the fort people cared about me. Aunt Bertha hated me.”

“So why did Elizabeth not leave you?” I wonder.

“Because if she had, Pa would have known immediately what she was planning. By hauling me along, she was able to keep up the charade of visiting family for a lot longer. Which meant by the time Pa heard what was going on, it was far too late.”

“Oh. Out of curiosity, did you ever meet Jonathan Seward, your grandfather?” *And eponym*, I decide, since that name just came out of nowhere.

“Lots before the war ended. We practically lived with him then, since he had a big ol’ house on the rich side of town. She kept the house Pa owned for meeting her ‘friends’ in.”

“Ah. Is that how you found out about her ancestry? From your grandfather?”

A nod. “Yeah. He was a quiet man. Haunted, I’d say now.”

“That’s unfortunately a common after-effect of falling in love with one of the Fae,” I explain.

He nods again. “That’s what he said. Last time I saw him was in 1866, right before she left St. Louis for good.”

“And what did he tell you?”

“He said”—his brow wrinkles as he tries to remember—“he said ‘You look nothing like your mother, and I pray you’ve gotten none of her nature. Still, your blood will draw you to the water, so just remember that water is a fickle mistress. Don’t let it drain your soul, as it is draining your father, as it has drained me.’ Or something like that. I didn’t totally understand what he was talking about.”

“You were just four, so that’s understandable.”

“Guess so.”

“And after that she left you with your aunt?”

A shudder. “Yeah. Pa said she died not long after that?”

“Well, not quite—she didn’t officially divorce him until the summer of ’67, right about the time Rob and Danica showed up at Sanders.”

“Poor Pa. He was ripe for falling in love, wasn’t he.”

“Indeed. And stop changing the subject on me.”

He gets a stubborn set to his jaw and leans back on the bench. “I want to know when the woman dies. And how.”

“Fine. She doesn’t get to enjoy her freedom for long. The officer she left your father for killed her New Year’s Eve 1868, after he’d discovered that she’d taken another lover already. Satisfied?”

“Yes.” His expression is grim.

“You really do hate the woman, don’t you? Can’t you forgive her—she was just following her nature. Water has to run free and wild you know.”

“She was only half-nymph—she could have controlled her instincts. Same way I do.”

I lift an eyebrow at that; Jon’s not known for his lack of experience.

He blushes, but continues. “That was before I committed to one girl. After that, you know I never even thought of anyone else.”

“True,” I acknowledge.

His blush deepens. “And honestly, half the time I went to the ladies of the town, all I wanted was to be held. Guess that’s one of those childhood trauma things.”

I grimace. “You’ve been reading my research books, haven’t you.”

“Yup.” He grins suddenly, a flash of that charm that makes him so irresistible. “Hey, I’ve been awfully confused about myself all this time. I figured I’d try to do some digging on my own while you were busy with all the other stuff you’ve had going on these past couple years.”

“Fine, fine,” I mutter. “So, she left you with Aunt Bertie, who you think hated you.”

“She didn’t hate me,” he allows reluctantly. “She just was a spinster who’d finally started to be courted by a newly-arrived bachelor fella, and the last thing she wanted was to be saddled with a child of four.”

“So you slipped back into your charming child act?”

He nods. “Well, first I tried acting up some, hoping she’d send me back to Pa. But after she informed me in no uncertain terms that my choices were to behave or be sent to farm family as a servant—translation, slave—then I became as sweet and obedient as I could manage.” A scowl. “Still wasn’t good enough that fellow she was seeing. He disliked children period. Not sure what he saw in her anyhow—seems like all I could remember was him getting after her to spend more money.”

Bertha Steele’s story is nearly as tragic as her brother’s. Jon is sounding entirely too judgmental here—I think I’ll tell him a few things.

“Your aunt was barren—she’d eloped when younger, became pregnant, then the father was killed. She miscarried, and in ‘saving’ her life, the doctor managed to damage her so badly that she could never have another child. Most men want a child to prove they’re men, so that immediately destroyed her chances of finding another husband. When Mr. Burns came along and stated that having no children was a good thing, she was willing to do anything to keep him.”

Jon is silent, digesting this. “So he wasn’t just after money?” he asks.

“Well...that too. How did you know about that?”

“I know Grandpa Steele died shortly before I was born—I never met him, and I know Pa let Aunt Bertie have all the money from him. Not that it was a lot, but it was enough to let her live comfortably without worrying about where the money would come from. Pa figured his army salary was enough for a family of three.”

“That, and the Swards weren’t exactly poor,” I put in.

“That too,” he allows. “Don’t think we ever got any of that money though.”

“Unfortunately, no. Elizabeth managed to spend it all or at least kept your father from getting it.”

Another sour expression. “Yeah. I know. But Aunt Bertie’s money?”

Now he’s the one keeping me on track. “Burns did marry her and proceeded to spend most everything she had. Fortunately for her, she died before she discovered his perfidy.”

“So she at least died happy?” At my wry expression he amends it, “Or at least as happy as Aunt Bertie could get?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good,” he says, then takes a deep breath. “What’s next?”

What’s next is that I really need to use the restroom, but the house was stirring and if I go back inside, I’m afraid I won’t get back out here to my writing.

“Next is your father comes for you and takes you back to Fort Sanders.”

His face lights up—I can tell he’s eager to discuss this section of his life.

“But ma’am, you’re getting awfully distracted. Go on—I’ll be here when you get back.” He leans back and sticks his feet up on Jill’s table. I frown.

“Get your dirty imaginary boots off of there,” I tell him sternly. He just grins, stretches his hands out to catch the wall behind him.

{run in, run out. Don’t get caught ☺ }

“Feel better?” he sasses me.

“Hush you. Let’s get going again—it’s going to be heating up real soon.” Little twerp is probably trying to waste time, so I can’t get to the harder portions. “You do realize if I can’t get all the info I need today, I’ll just have to sit you down and go through this again later.”

Four feet hit the floor and he grimaces. “Fine then.”

“So, why was life at Fort Sanders so good?”

“Because I didn’t have to pretend to be anyone other than who I was,” he informs me eagerly. “In fact, Mrs. Dani wouldn’t let me do that.”

“Because she was a Truth-seer.”

“Uh-huh. When I first got there, I was desperate to make sure everyone liked me, so I wouldn’t be taken away from Pa again.”

“He would have resigned before he let you go again. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do now. I didn’t then. So there was that. And then there was the fact that Mrs. Dani was the nicest, prettiest, openest lady I’d ever met. I mean, Mrs. Kat was nice and all, but it was kinda hard to understand her a lot of the time, and honestly, she just didn’t know much about kids.”

“Neither did Danica,” I point out.

He waves away my input. “But she seemed to instinctively know exactly how to treat me. I really, really wanted to please her, so I put on my best behavior and said what I thought would make her happy.”

“And...?”

He grins blissfully. “And she said, ‘None of that, Jonathan Steele. In this house, I insist on total honesty. Be who you are, say what you think and feel. Be respectful, but stay true to yourself.’ I was dumbfounded. I mean, I was pretty sure I could be like that with Pa, but no one else had ever told me that before.”

“Did you understand why she knew?”

“Oh, she told me that flat out. ‘And don’t you think you can lie to me and get away with it,’ she said. ‘I can see truth and lies—I’ll know immediately if you’re not completely honest with me.’”

“Which isn’t quite true—there are ways to tell the truth but tell it slant, or something like that.”

“Emily Dickinson,” he says suddenly.

I blink.

“Told you I get bored sometimes and read your books.”

“You’re full of all sorts of surprises today, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Can’t have you know everything about me. Then you might get bored.”

*Get back on track...*

“But yeah, I didn’t know that. Not as a five, almost six year old. And truth be told, it was a huge relief to not have to perform any more, so I really never tried to find ways to get around her ability.”

“Is this when telling the truth becomes so important to you?”

He ponders that a moment. “Probably. I mean, it had always kinda bothered me that I had to pretend to be something I wasn’t, but after living with the Blacks for those six, almost seven years, after that it really became part of who I was. I didn’t lie, and I didn’t want anyone else to lie either.”

“Lying became an unforgiveable offense.”

He winces a little, remembering how badly he lashes out at his father. Now that I think on it, I warned him a long time ago that he’d feel really bad if/when he ever found out the truth.

“Yeah, yeah,” he tells me, waving a hand in the air. “I remember you saying that. But other than that, yes, lies were the worst sin in my mind.”

Unfortunately, it’s heating up outside and I can feel myself slowly running out of steam. Plus, my hand is cramping.

“Afraid I’m going to have to just do a summary of the next few years,” I tell him apologetically.

“Oh darn,” he says, snapping his fingers.

I want to stick my tongue out at him, but considering this is all an imaginary conversation with a fictional character, that feels a bit peculiar even to me.

“Let’s skip ahead now.”

He grabs the edge of the bench, leans forward in mock eagerness. “Quit channeling Travis,” I mutter.

“First few years in Texas—what changes?”

He drops the clowning. “Not a whole heck of a lot. We stay awfully busy, but nights were really hard. Actually, I think the hardest time of the day was breakfast, because that’s when me and Mrs. Dani and Kat, and our pas when they were home, would all gather around the table to talk. Especially me and Mrs. Dani. We had a lot of our best conversations then.”

“And now she wasn’t there.”

“Yeah. And breakfast at the Katie was this hurried affair. Most of the hands would stumble in only half-awake, since the days started as early as Reville used to be. And none of them really were interested in talking to the new kid—they were all years older than me.”

“Except Rafe.”

“Right. Except Rafe. Once we got to be friends, that was better. At least I had someone to talk to.” *Boy, he should understand Kat really well, I think.*

“What about your father?”

A sad frown. “Despite Pa thinking we’d be able to spend a bunch more time together, he was nearly as busy down there as he was up here. Plus, for the first six months or so, he spent every waking moment with old Henderson, Mr. Geordie’s original foreman, and with Nickel.”

“Out of curiosity, why didn’t Nickel take over as foreman?”

“He didn’t want the position. Said he preferred being the *segundo* and didn’t want the responsibility that came with the foreman’s role.”

“Understandable, I suppose.”

He shrugs. “Yeah. Problem is, Pa also prefers being second-in-command. So why he took the foreman’s position, I’m not sure.”

“Mainly he did it for you.”

“Oh.” That shuts up that line of questions real quick. “Though I suppose he wasn’t actually in command, since Mr. Geordie was still the owner and that made him the boss of the outfit.”

“And that is exactly how your father rationalized his position down there.”

“Gotchya.”

“When did you first really start getting homesick for the Blacks?”

My question catches him somewhat off-guard and he looks away, as if distracted by the lawnmower next door. Though I’m pretty certain he’s just remembering.

“When did I first get homesick?” he repeats softly. He stares down at the table. “First night out, at Fort Parker. Two Moons was there, and she asked about Red Hair, and Bird that Gets Mad, and even about Knows Things, though Kat wasn’t around much of the time she was there. Somehow she knew we were leaving permanently, because she looked right at Pa and said something like ‘This is one fire you cannot outrun, Gun Chief.’ And Pa just got this blank expression, then said, ‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’ But after she left, it really hit me hard that we wouldn’t see everybody the next morning. I hid it though, because Pa looked like he was about to cry as well.”

“And you, being you, wanted him to be happy.”

“Yup.”

“So you pretended to be excited about the trip?”

“Well, just a little. Not so much that I was lying or putting on a mask. Not yet anyway. I mean, I was more than a little curious about life in Texas. I didn’t mind the move—I just wanted to bring the Blacks along with us.”

“Makes sense. So when did your father tell you to quit whining about home?”

“The day after Henderson died,” he answers promptly. “I think that’s when it truly hit him that he was now stuck as Mr. Geordie’s foreman.”

“Stuck?”

“Well, he’d given his word.”

“Got it.” With Jim, as with his son (“And me,” pipes up Travis. “Shuddup, Trav!” I tell him.) his word is binding. He’ll not break a promise unless there’s absolutely no help for it, and if he must break it, then he’ll do his best to make restitution in some way. “So did you stop whining about home?”

“I didn’t think I was whining all that much to being with, but yes, I didn’t bring up the topic again.”

“When did Henderson die, by the way?”

“Um…” he does some quick figuring on his fingers, as do I. “We got down there in the fall of ’73, when I was 11. Henderson managed to hang on almost a full year, so he died in the early fall of ’74.”

“And you were 12.”

“Yeah. The next year I’d promised myself that I’d make it back up to Montana for Christmas, but I was gosh awful sick that December. I don’t even remember Christmas that year.”

My John just popped his head in—“Don’t you go sneaking off,” I warn Jonathan. “Just a temporary interruption.”

“I thought your hand was cramping,” he says innocently.

“It is, but I’m still getting answers out of you, so I’m going to keep writing as long as I can. If you’d not hidden this so long, I wouldn’t have to do these marathon interviews with you guys. Yes, I’m looking at you, Robert Black,” I snarl.

“Me?” Rob asks, all innocence.

I just growl.

John leaves, and I continue. “Christmas of ’75, you were 13 and sick as a dog.”

He makes a face. “Ever wonder why I won’t eat strawberries? Because I’d had an extra large helping of strawberry jam with my breakfast, right before I started puking my guts out.”

I just look at him. “So you picking those berries for Kat, that was even more difficult for you, because the smell of those strawberries makes you want to puke?”

A shy, crooked smile. “Yeah. But it made her smile, so it was worth it.”

“I thought she burst into tears when you brought her them.”

“She did, but after I calmed her down some, she gave me this sweet little smile. It was even more adorable because there was this bright red strawberry juice stain across her lower lip. If we hadn’t been where we were, I’d have kissed those lips clean. Even then, I nearly started to.”

“But you got light-headed because you started bleeding again.”

He sobers. “Yeah. Totally ruined the moment.”

“If you’d kissed her despite the taste of strawberries, wouldn’t that have made your brain connect kissing her with nausea?”

“Nope. I think it would have given me a taste for strawberries once again.” He grins unrepentantly.

Sometimes I forget that for all his restraint and gentlemanly ways, Jonathan Steele is still a quarter nymph, with all the earthiness that entails. Travis may have been uncivilized, but Jon is truly wild when it comes to some things.

“And you’ve now succeeded in getting me totally off topic.”

There’s a wicked sparkle in those bright blue eyes. “But ma’am, this a much better subject to end on. Besides, I did give you more useful information there about myself, didn’t I?”

“That is true,” I admit. “And this is one area where you are not like your father.”

Jim just shakes his head in the background. Jon shrugs. “You’re the one who stuck a water-maid in my bloodline.”

“Yes, yes I am.” I sigh. Deeply. “Though it does explain a great deal about you.”

“And it also proves how much I love Kat,” he points out. “ ’cause from the time she comes back to me until, well, forever, she’s the only girl I ever look at. Those two in Seven Rivers don’t count,” he adds hurriedly.

“Okay fine. I guess we’ll end here.”

He scoots the bench away from the table loudly, stands up, and promptly knocks his head on the lantern hanging from the ceiling. *I’d better be careful if I ever meet Morgan McKinley in here*, I tell myself. “Watch your head on the way out—the doorway’s small,” I warn him.

He grins, nods, and heads out the door, setting his hat firmly on his head as he goes.

“And thank you,” I tell him.

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” Another charming, crooked grin. “*Bis später.*”

{*Später* turns out to be much later that evening.}

“Sorry I’m late! Didn’t expect a bass guitar to show up.”

“Ma’am, begging your pardon, but you’re always late.”

“I know. But let’s just get started, okay?”

“Do we have to?” He’s definitely in a crankier mood than he was earlier today.

“Yes, we do.”

“It’s too loud,” he complains. “I can’t hear you.”

“Whatever. I’m thinking you just don’t want to discuss the next eight years with me.”

“Well, there is that too,” he admits.

*At least the boy is honest.*

“Of course, I’m honest.” He’s highly insulted that I would hint otherwise.

“Enough small talk, Jonathan. Let’s discuss Christmas 1876.”

“Fine.” He flops down on the floor, folding his arms beneath his head, and stares up at the ceiling fan. He refuses to look at me. “What do you want to know?”

“When did you decide you were heading up to Montana?”

“That was the first year I’d gone on a drive with the rest of the outfit. At the end of the trail, with my share of the money in my hand, we’re at the train station to head back south, and I happened to see Cheyenne on the schedule for heading north. That’s when it hit me that I probably held enough money to buy a ticket back home, even from Texas.”

“After all my hints and outright suggestions were ignored or turned down flat out, I decided to go myself. Like I said earlier,” he scowls at the crossed out paragraph above {I had written a paragraph, then realized it wasn’t accurate and scribbled it out} “I knew I could take a stage from Fort Stockton to the nearest train station. So I did it. I waited until Pa was gone for the day, then took a horse and headed towards the fort. Didn’t tell anybody where I was going or anything. I’m still not sure how Nickel found out what my plans were.”

“Your pa suspected you might try something,” I answer casually. “So he asked Nickel to keep an eye on you.”

“He suspected?” Jon is flabbergasted. “How did he get suspicious?”

“You gave up asking and got very quiet for a few weeks while you did your investigating/planning, and he knew that if he wanted to go back so badly, you must want it just as bad.”

“Figures. The man just knows me too well,” he grumbles.

“Isn’t that a good thing for a father?”

“I suppose. Except I really wanted to go north.”

“So, Nickel trailed you into Fort Stockton and when you went to buy your stage ticket, he collared you?”

“Yeah. Boy, you should have heard me hollering. He told me to knock it off, that I was making an ass of myself in front of the entire town.”

“Did you stop?”

“No. Not until he managed to snag my money. Without that, there was no reason to fight—I couldn’t buy a ticket any more.”

“And when you got back to the Katie?”

He grimaces. “Pa was waiting for me. We didn’t bunk down with the other hands—he’d demanded a small place of our own as part of his hiring deal with Mr. Geordie. So he was waiting in our little cabin. Just sitting there at the table, staring at the back wall. Nickel marched me in, deposited me in a chair at the other end. ‘Well, Mr. Steele, you were right,’ was all he said. Then he dropped my wallet in front of Pa and left.”

“First thing I did was stand up, knocking my chair over. No, I didn’t bother picking it up. And I marched down to the other end of the table and tried to grab my money back.”

He falls silent as Jill comes in.

“I’ll be back,” I tell him.

He just closes his eyes.

“I’m back.”

“Great. Wonderful. Terrific.”

I feel sorry for the poor boy. And yes, I do mean boy, because right now his memories are of a 14 year old desperate enough to defy his father, just to go back home. “It’s okay, Jonathan,” I tell him quietly. “You don’t have to recite everything that happened that night. Can you just tell me what it was you said that made Jim break down?”

“It wasn’t anything special,” he whispers. I can see tears leaking from his closed eyes. Never really noticed it before, but he has ridiculously long and full eyelashes, like my John. *Not fair*, I think in passing. But he’s still talking. “All I asked was Why. ‘Why, Pa?’ And he just dropped his head down on his arms and began to sob. ‘There’s no going back,’ I heard him say. ‘It’ll be better for everyone if we just forget about each other.’”

“What did you think, watching him fall apart like that?”

“I...I didn’t know what to think. Never in my life had I ever seen a grown man cry like that, and let me tell you, Mr. Geordie cried a lot when he was drunk. He was drunk pretty doggone often. In fact, every time I’d ever seen a man cry, they’d been drunk—I started looking around to see if Pa had been drinking as well.”

“Had he?” I asked, curious. Jim doesn’t drink much. In fact, that one drink he has with Rob in the saloon is the only one I’ve ever seen him have.

“No. I guess he was just too rattled by my running away that he couldn’t take any more and broke down.”

“Even though he’d been expecting it.?”

“Yup.”

*Poor Jim, I think. At least I know things will end well for him someday.*

“What else did his crying do to you?”

“Well, I figured it must be something pretty bad that had happened between him and the Blacks if it made him cry like that, and if it was that bad of a thing, then they might not want to see me either. Remember there’d been no letters all this time either. At least, I thought there were no letters,” he clarified.

“But I thought you said you’d never given up the idea of going up to Montana? I’m confused here.”

“I didn’t. Every year I’d determine to do it, and every year I’d chicken out, certain I’d be turned away.”

“One more question, then I’ll call it quits for the night,” I tell him.

He doesn’t seem terribly relieved by my words. In fact, he stiffens warily. “And what do you want to know now?” he demands.

“How did not talking about the Blacks change you over then next few years?”

His face twitches. “Well, it didn’t really. I mean, I didn’t talk about them a whole heck of a lot to being with.”

“I told you that,” Rafe says from across the room.

“Yes, you did,” I acknowledge. “Rafe also said that you closed up, became very private.”

“Most cowboys are,” Jon points out.

“Yes, but you tended to be more talkative than most.”

“Talkative doesn’t mean open,” he states, and he’s right. He’s quiet for a few minutes as if thinking. “I was pretty quiet those years,” he finally says. “I figured I was stuck in Texas for a good long time, so I ought learn this cowboy business, and learn it good.”

*Makes sense, I think. I also think that my hand really hurts and my head is nodding already, so I’m going to save the whole Clara incident for another time.*

Jon’s still sprawled out on the floor, one arm shielding his eyes from the glare of the overhead lights.

“That’s all for today, Jon,” I tell him gently. “And thank you. I’ve got a ton of data to digest now.”

“Data to digest?” he echoes. “Sounds like something Kat would say.”

“Most likely,” I agree. “Goodnight, Jon.”

“ ’Night, ma’am,” he says, and then is gone.