

Sandhill Dreams

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(EXCERPT)

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As a child, the rocking of the train, the clunk of the wheels on the tracks, had promised adventure, excitement, but not this time. Sitting on a train headed to the furthest corner of Nebraska was the last thing Lainie Gardner had imagined for her life. Her dreams shimmered in the distance like a hallucination. She should be crossing the Atlantic Ocean with her friends, and fellow nurses, from the 95th Evacuation Company, bound for the European front. Instead, she waited for the train to stop long enough for her to disembark in Crawford.

She tugged a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her jacket pocket and wiped a small circle in the train window. Dust blew in waves across the desert landscape of the Sandhills. The few trees squatted against the horizon. The emptiness mocked her, mirroring the barrenness inside.

The conductor swayed between the seats of the car to the rhythm of the clacking wheels. "Next stop. Crawford." Even his words were as lifeless as the tumbleweed that paced the train.

The train jerked from side to side as it slowed. People jumped from their seats and collected their items. A dark-haired toddler jostled against his mother. He jumped on the seat and his sandaled foot slipped. Lainie sucked in a breath. With a thud, his head collided with the hard bench seat, and he wailed. He lifted his head, and Lainie noticed a gash on his forehead and a trickle of blood.

Lainie attempted to jump from her seat to help him, but stopped short. Her joints refused to unlock. Not too long ago she'd been active and healthy, but not any more. Rheumatic fever had struck quickly and left her weakened and vulnerable.

The commanding officer's words raced through her mind. "Young lady, being a nurse requires strength and stamina, of which you have neither."

Oh, she'd fought that pronouncement, but in the end she lost.

The boy's mother pressed a handkerchief against the wound. Lainie sighed, and collapsed back on her seat. There was little more she could do to help this young boy. But she could have done much for the soldiers.

"Next stop. Crawford." The conductor continued his travels through the car.

Lainie shuddered and then swiped the cloth across her forehead. Her stomach knotted and doubts raced. She'd skipped the planning that would make this trip a success. "I must be crazy."

The matron across the row quirked an eyebrow as she glanced at Lainie, and then returned to her book.

Lainie blushed. The words weren't supposed to trip from her mouth like the tumbleweeds blowing across the hills. She fingered the veil of her hat and turned back toward the window, ignoring the questions reflected in the woman's eyes. She'd answered too many questions already. No need to entertain a stranger's.

The click of the train's wheels against the track slowed its tempo. She tucked her paperback book and handkerchief inside her handbag. The knots tightened their hold as she wondered what she'd find at Fort Robinson, a few miles down US Highway 20 from Crawford.

Crawford would seem like a hamlet compared to North Platte. She shuddered. North Platte had never seemed like much of a town to her. Not that it mattered now. She couldn't go back to what her life had consisted of before she left for nurse's training. A cycle of endless parties and flirtation held no appeal after she tasted the opportunity to make a difference.

Lainie pitched forward when the train jerked to a stop. She leaned down to look out the window, and her heart sank as she fell back into her seat. "There isn't much to Crawford."

"No. It's a small extension of the fort and a few ranches. But those of us who call it home love it." The matron's steady voice soothed the fear that gripped Lainie. She searched Lainie's eyes a moment before she continued. "This your first time here?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm hoping to get a job. You know, free a man to fight and all that."

The woman pursed her thin lips, a pinched expression settling on her sharp features, almost like she'd heard that story many times and watched others' hopes crumble. "Yes. Well, good luck." The woman's ample form side-stepped into the aisle, freeing Lainie to stand.

Lainie almost ducked to look under her seat for her courage. It had been in full force when she convinced her family moving to Ft. Robinson was the right step. With the girls from the 95th Evacuation Unit shipped out, she'd thrown caution to the wind, packed her bag,

and bought a train ticket in the opposite direction and a few thousand miles closer to home.

She sidled down the aisle toward the door, a tightness and deep ache pulsing from her muscles. She swallowed against the pain. The effects of rheumatic fever lingered, and the train ride had been harder than she'd anticipated.

Loud, almost frantic barks ricocheted off the train as she stepped onto the platform. She shielded her eyes and scanned the platform. She stepped toward the wooden crates stacked two high and at least six wide. Snouts and paws pushed against the chicken wire fronts. The barking escalated as two men placed an additional crate on the pile.

The dungarees and cowboy boots they wore with their khaki standard issue shirts made her wonder if they were soldiers. Yet his uniform was a far-cry from those the servicemen wore as they rushed through the canteen back in North Platte. One slipped back into the car while the other wiped his forehead.

"What is all this?" She raised her voice over the din.

The soldier reached into the mawing gap in the train's side to accept one end of another crate.

Lainie pulled herself to her full height, all five feet and a couple inches of it and leaned toward the soldier. "Excuse me."

The soldier dropped the crate he'd picked up, and then spun on his heel rubbing his ear. His gaze took her in, then swept over her again. "You didn't need to shout."