

A chapter from *Victims in Love, Banished to Steamboat Springs in 1914*

by Ken Proper. To be published and launched during the fall of 2020.

## Linen in September

September 1, 1915

"The phone call is for you," Maggie shouted from the kitchen. "Hurry up, we are on a party line."

Who would be calling me? I have only used this new invention occasionally and only because no one was around to answer the ringing machine.

"Ah... hello, yes?"

"Julius, it's Corina."

"Oh, hello. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine and so is your god child. It's so lovely in the evening. Can you join us at the bath house for a light picnic at low teatime?"

"Umm ... sure if you wish."

Maggie smiled broadly. She pointed at the telephone with a, '*Get with it,*' motion as Corina said, "I do wish it, very much so."

"I may not be done here until after supper."

“You’ll be done at 5:15,” Maggie interjected.

“Alright, I’ll be there at about 5:30. I have to get my bathing costume.”

“No need to do that, I bought you a new one. We’ll change there.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really, I love you. See you soon. Bye.”

I stood with the receiver in my hand staring at the wooden box on the wall.

“Now you hang it up Julius,” Maggie instructed. “In the future, you should sign off with a closing salutation, like ‘goodbye’ or ‘I love you too’ would be a nice touch.”

It was once again a set up. I will not call it matchmaking, because Corina was married, but nonetheless, a covert attempt to get us together.

“My... oh my god, Maggie, where is this going?”

“Name dropper,” she chuckled, “I guess you’re going to find out.”

Feigning rectitude, I arrived on time and waited. Assuming an altruistic attitude was difficult, but necessary. It is awkward for a man to jilt a woman. But it was the right thing to do because she was a married woman and I was not keen on being six feet underground for her. It was just not going to work out. The women were not considering JJ’s certain anger. The memory of the gleaming knife returned.

Corina appeared with her conquering beauty, pushing a wicker pram and little Julius tucked inside. She wore a white linen suit, a red scarf, the ends crossed in a single knot which rested

atop her breasts which bobbed up and down with each step. Her smart, modern hat tilted slightly to one side and the suit tailored to her hourglass figure. She looked stunning and my reserve began to melt. I felt thrilled to be alone with her.

“Will you excuse my wearing linen in September?” She said with a coy smile.

“But of course,” I replied matching her demure smile and thinking, *Great opening line.*

“It was on sale for fifty percent off at Steamboat Mercantile; I just couldn’t pass it up, even this late in the season. I didn’t wear a corset. Can you tell? I don’t look fat, do I?”

“Yes, I can tell and no, not at all.”

“Hugus has the new front lace corsets with a tongue. It’s much easier for a woman that dresses by herself. It laces up to just below the bust.” She demonstrated with her hands. I stared there and remembered what they looked like bare. “I decided not to wear one because we will undress soon.”

“Good choice. You look lovely,” was all I could think of to say.

She picked up little Julius and sat at a table. The backlit trees filtered sunlight gently through her hat, hair, neck and shoulders. The green grass, freshly cut, smelled rich, earthy and fertile.

“He’s six weeks old, growing like a weed and a hungry one. I nursed him before we left. You won’t mind if I have to do it again, will you?”

“Corina.”

She smiled and replied, “Yes?”

“Are you sure you want to do this? What does JJ think? You’re being quite unabashed.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes!”

“I gave him another advance on payment ‘A loan for his business,’ as he said. We’ll probably see him as he heads for the saloons.”

“This is just too simplistic. He has a quick temper.”

“So do I.”

“You’re missing the point. How will our situation ever work?”

“He said you two would be ‘friends for life’”.

“You did too.”

“True, I meant it. He didn’t. He thinks only of himself, has zero empathy and guaranteed to be a terrible father. A mother protecting her young is older than the human experience. I think there is going to be a significant inheritance and I’m the only beneficiary. Also, I have the bear bonds maturing in June, predicable and just in case. JJ and I will certainly part ways with him receiving a lump sum, hopefully at the end of my contract with Madame, which you recall expires January 1, 1916. I have an heir and I want you to help with the spare.”

Astonished, I stammered, “Is this a business arrangement?”

“Quit Julius, I’ve always loved you. You know that. This isn’t something we are going to rush in to. I want your frequent company. You loved me before. Do you still love me? Do you want to spend your life with me?”

I just stared at her.

“Well?”

All my good intentions, my armor, my moral decency crumbled to dust, fell to the grass and disappeared. The flowery seed of sin bloomed in its place.

“I do.”

She took my hand and said softly, “You won’t regret it. I promise. Now just relax, I’m going to pour glasses of lemonade for us.”

She had crushed ice. The citrus aroma filled my head and the cold liquid calmed my anxiety. We sat in silence until as predicted, JJ walked near the table. I stiffened.

“Mr. Brandon,” he said with a smirk and twirled a gold coin in his fingers.

“Mr. Hysser,” I returned. He changed course and walked to the Brooklyn Bridge.

A moment later I said, “It irritates me that scoundrel forcefully assaulted you, and I regret taking your virginity.”

Corina laughed, “That would have been better said as, ‘It chaps my hide.’”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are. It’s true he forced me, and I’m lucky I didn’t pick up a disease from him. One time and it hasn’t happened again. Marrying him was the proper thing to do and I will not break my contract with the sisterhood. The fight for women’s freedom is too important and...” She paused, “You were not the first.”

I was astonished again. I look at her in disbelief. It was not that I did not believe her; rather that she revealed an intimate secret of her life.

“It was in Davos, Switzerland, at the Valbella Sanitarium. I told you about the amorous German couple in the adjacent room. She was a talker and would go on and on. He would patiently listen but eventually say, ‘Tell me more.’ Soon she would be screeching and moaning like a wounded animal. This happened many times. I guess women just appreciate the attention when men listen. One evening, when I knew I was leaving the sanitarium soon, we were standing on our respective balconies. Perhaps I had too much wine at dinner. Hans said, ‘I’m sorry you are leaving, I’ve enjoyed our conversations.’ His wife was gone at therapy or something and I said, ‘Tell me more.’ He adroitly picked up on that clue and climbed over to my balcony. It was very quick, and he was very nervous. We hardly spoke again. I think his wife wondered about that evening. He had difficulty hiding his infidelity. It was a momentary lapse of reason on my part. A pregnant schoolteacher would have turned heads in this town.” Her voice trailed off with, “It didn’t work out anyway.”

“Your tuberculosis seems much better. You look splendid, healthy.”

“Thanks Julius, I appreciate it. I feel fine and the Jewish National Hospital doctors gave me great strategies. That’s enough about me. Now it’s your turn. Who was your first?”

I never thought I would tell this story, but I answered with, "She was married too. Well, all three were married." Corina eyes widened. "No, I coupled with them one at a time. They were not ashamed and came back for more. Soon they all knew or assumed, the jealousy became noisy and it got me banished."

"So, it was the different colored candle wax on the floor at the secret rendezvous that did you in?"

"Yes, I should have chosen different places."

"I'm glad you didn't." She gave me a peck on the cheek and handed me the new swim trunks saying, "See if they fit. Then you watch little Julius while I change."

When she returned, I slipped into the warm and soothing water. I swam laps to the point of exhaustion. Corina gracefully entered the pool while watching the sleeping child. She pushed me under the surface and kissed me there. Submerged we hugged. I held her and my breath as long as I could. As one, we rose to breathe and see the peach colored clouds drifting in the azure sky. I realized both of my hands were on her breasts with thumbs resting on the thin cloth covering her nipples. She whispered, "Sit with our child while I swim."