

Not the Marrying Kind

Alice is determined that when she marries, it will be for love, which, given her circumstances, probably means she will never marry. When she's asked to do a story about a group of would-be brides heading to eager bachelors in the wilds of 1880s Colorado, she jumps at the chance to further her writing career. She, of course, is not looking for a husband. But that's before she meets Jeb Turner, a handsome rogue cowboy with eyes that devour her and kisses that melt her bones.

* * *

Jeb gestures at the dance hall. "Like those other gals in there, you probably just need a good kissing."

"You wouldn't dare!" Alice gasps.

Jeb didn't know what devil drove him. The next instant, he has Alice in his arms, tasting lips maddeningly soft and sweet.

The shock of Jeb's hard mouth on hers rockets through Alice. Finally she recovers enough to push him away.

"You... you untutored... brute!"

Yet, later, as other men flock around her, she's only aware of Jeb watching her from beyond the open door. Her body heats.

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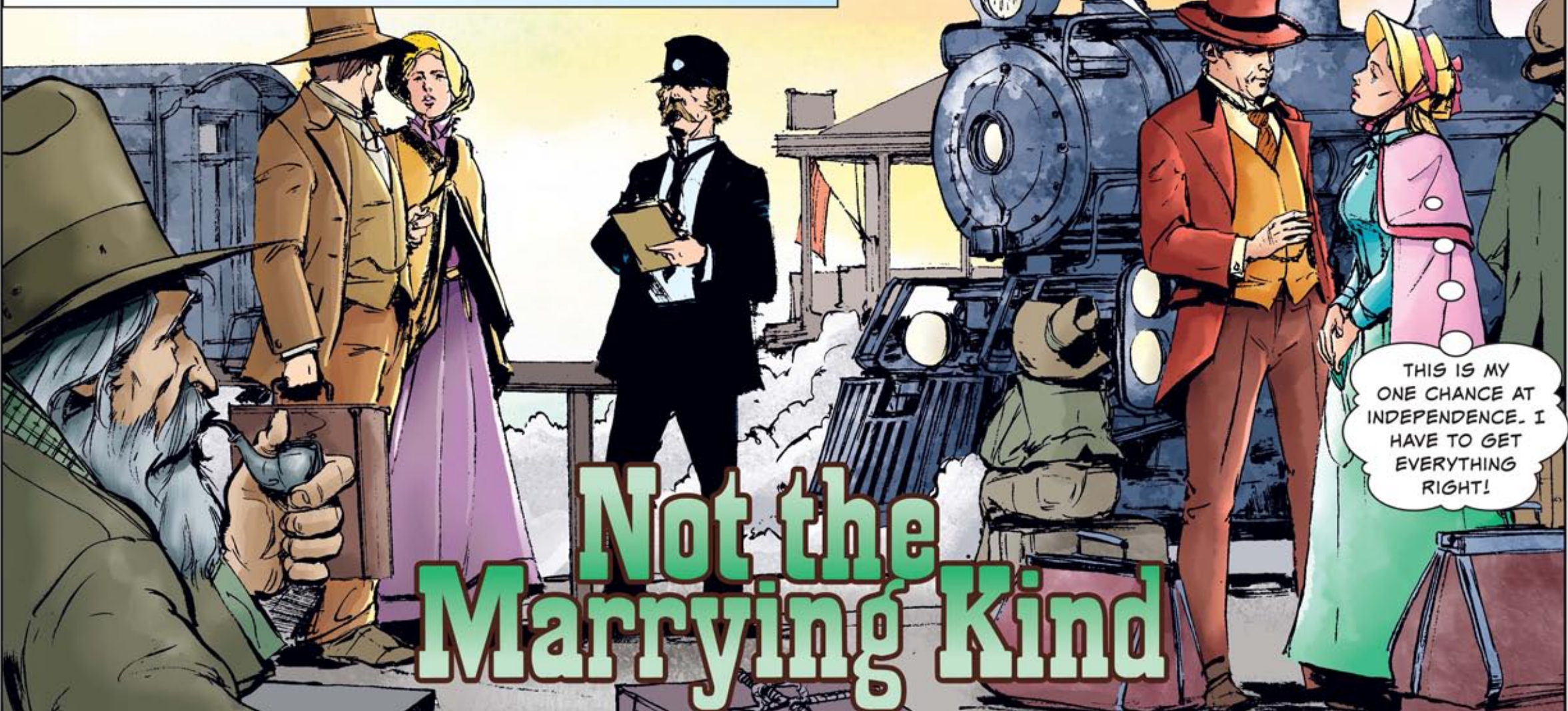
ALICE GREEN IS ABOUT TO EMBARK ON THE BIGGEST ADVENTURE OF HER LIFE. SHE IS JOINING A GROUP OF WOMEN GOING WEST TO FIND HUSBANDS IN WOMAN-STARVED COLORADO. ONLY SHE ISN'T SEEKING A HUSBAND HERSELF. SHE IS GOING UNDERCOVER TO WRITE A THRILLING ACCOUNT FOR GRIFF KANE'S NEWSPAPER. GRIFF HAS BEEN IMPRESSED BY ALICE'S LIVELY WRITING, WHICH STANDS OUT AMONGST THE DUSTY RELIGIOUS TRACTS HIS STEPBROTHER, HORACE SPROTT, PUBLISHES. HE'S GONE SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT ALICE MAKES SIN LOOK LIKE FUN.

REMEMBER, ALICE, NOT A WORD ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE REALLY DOING. IT'S FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY. AND TO KEEP THIS STORY EXCLUSIVE TO MY NEWSPAPER.

THEY'LL NEVER KNOW I'M NOT ONE OF THEM, GRIFF.

THIS IS MY ONE CHANCE AT INDEPENDENCE. I HAVE TO GET EVERYTHING RIGHT!

Not the Marrying Kind



IN THE 1880S, WOMEN HAVE FEW SUCH OPPORTUNITIES. BUT IF ALICE CAN PULL THIS OFF, GRIFF HAS PROMISED HER A JOB WHEN SHE GETS BACK.

YOU HAVEN'T SEEN MUCH OF THE WORLD, ALICE. YOUR UNCLE KEPT YOU ON A TIGHT REIN.

YES, AND THEN HE DIED AND GAVE MY INHERITANCE TO YOUR STEP-BROTHER HORACE--ON CONDITION THAT HORACE MARRY ME.

EVEN THE HOUSE WILL BELONG TO HIM. HE'S ALREADY MOVED HIS MOTHER IN WITH ME TO SET UP EVERYTHING JUST THE WAY HE LIKES IT.

ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN MARRYING HORACE SPROTT!

AFTER LOSING HER PARENTS AT FOURTEEN, ALICE LIVED WITH HER UNCLE EGAN, A CLERGYMAN, WHO WAS FOREVER LECTURING HER FOR MISSING SUNDAY SERVICES, READING SHOCKING ROMANTIC NOVELS AND BEING UNMARRIED AT TWENTY-ONE.

YOU'RE INCURABLY WAYWARD, ALICE. YOU NEED A FIRM HUSBAND TO KEEP YOU FROM CALAMITY!

WHAT I LONG FOR IS A LIFE OF MY OWN. I'LL MARRY ONLY FOR LOVE--LIKE MY PARENTS. WHICH MEANS PROBABLY NEVER.

ALICE UNDERESTIMATED THE LENGTHS TO WHICH HER UNCLE WOULD GO. IN HIS LAST ILLNESS, UNCLE EGAN INFORMED A STUNNED ALICE THAT HER DISTANT COUSIN HORACE WOULD PROPOSE WHEN THE PERIOD OF MOURNING WAS OVER. HE DIED, SATISFIED HIS TROUBLESOME NIECE WAS COMPLETELY PROVIDED FOR.

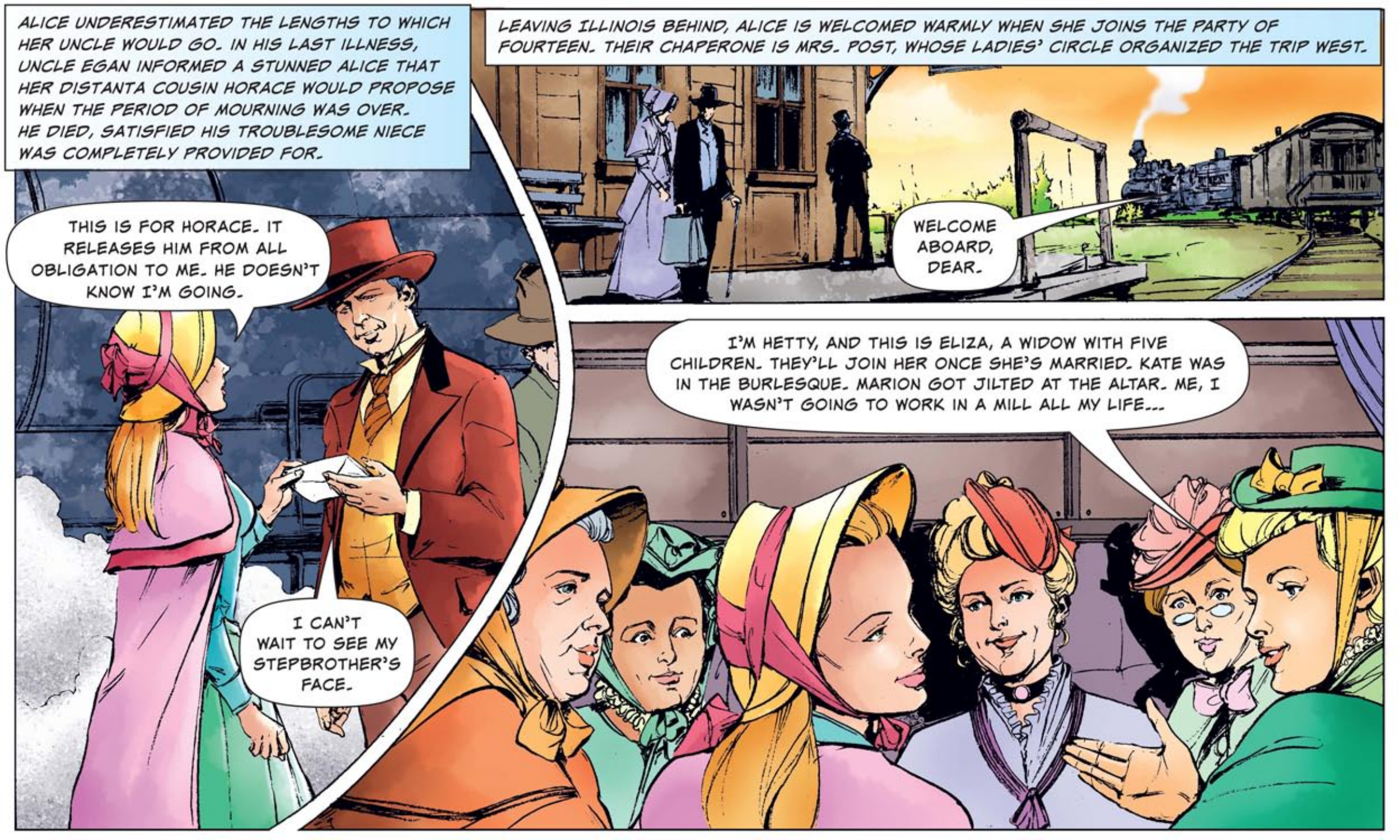
LEAVING ILLINOIS BEHIND, ALICE IS WELCOMED WARMLY WHEN SHE JOINS THE PARTY OF FOURTEEN. THEIR CHAPERONE IS MRS. POST, WHOSE LADIES' CIRCLE ORGANIZED THE TRIP WEST.

THIS IS FOR HORACE. IT RELEASES HIM FROM ALL OBLIGATION TO ME. HE DOESN'T KNOW I'M GOING.

WELCOME ABOARD, DEAR.

I'M HETTY, AND THIS IS ELIZA, A WIDOW WITH FIVE CHILDREN. THEY'LL JOIN HER ONCE SHE'S MARRIED. KATE WAS IN THE BURLESQUE. MARION GOT JILTED AT THE ALTAR. ME, I WASN'T GOING TO WORK IN A MILL ALL MY LIFE...

I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE MY STEPBROTHER'S FACE.



WHEN THE LONG TRAIN TRIP FINALLY ENDS, THE WOMEN BOARD TWO HIRED STAGECOACHES TO CONTINUE THROUGH THE VAST WILD LANDSCAPE TO WOLF RIDGE, COLORADO, WHERE THE EAGER BACHELORS ARE WAITING.

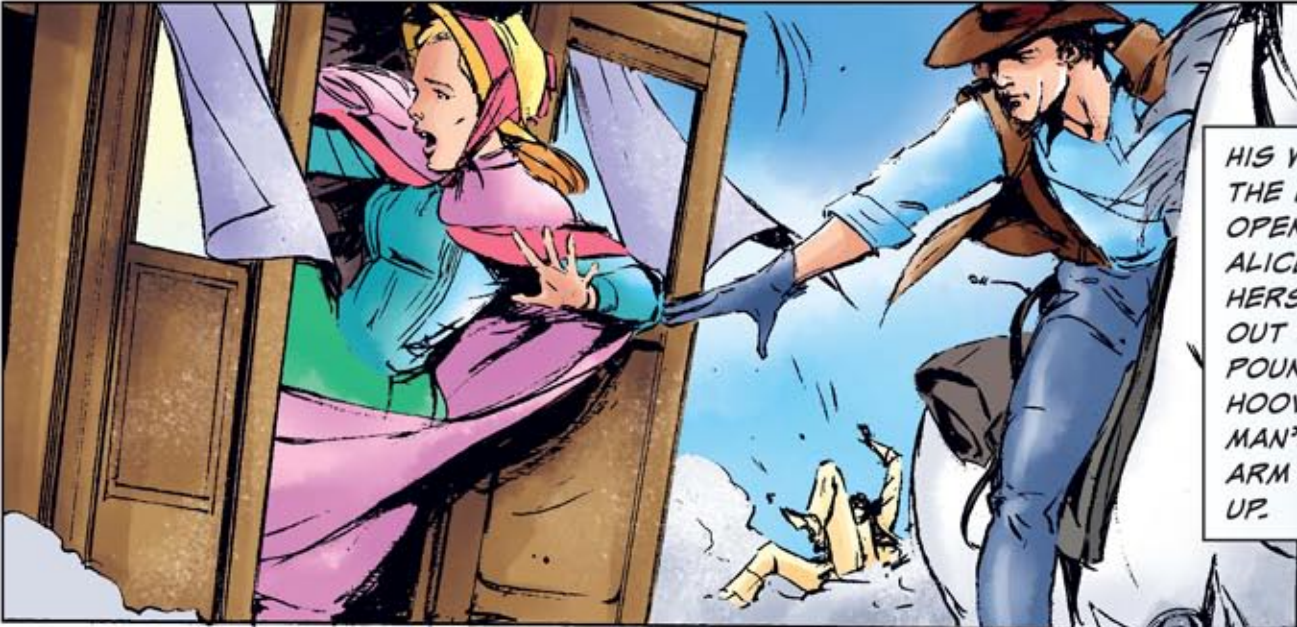
LISTEN!
GUNFIRE!

OH LORDY,
WE'RE BEING
ATTACKED!

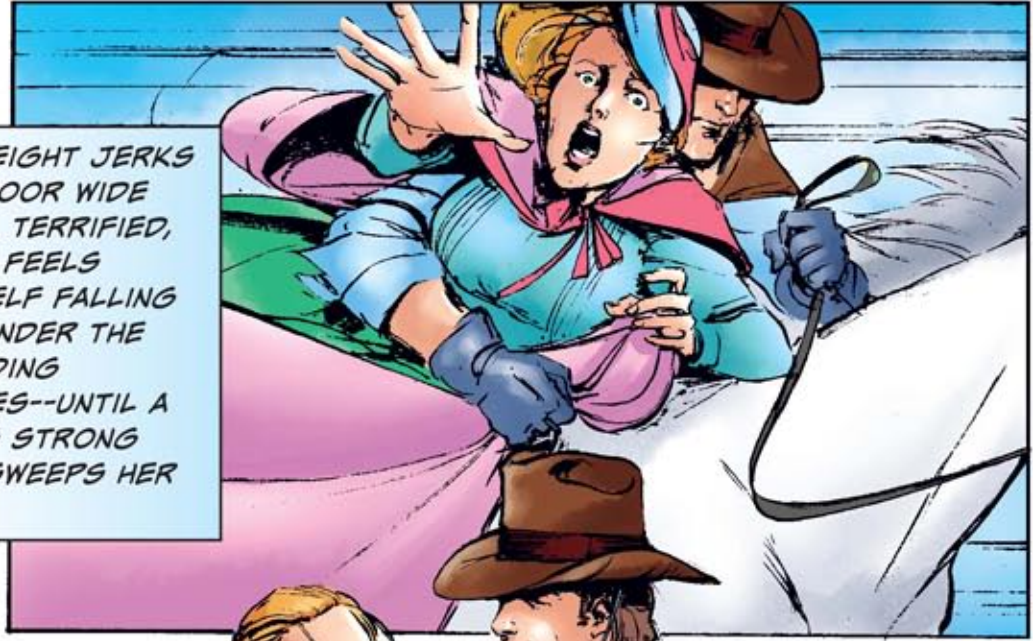
ABOUT TWENTY MEN ON HORSEBACK ARE TEARING UP TO THE COACHES AT FULL GALLOP, SHOUTING, WHOOPING AND FIRING THEIR GUNS INTO THE AIR LIKE MANIACS.

YIPPEE!
HALLOO,
LADIES!!!

SUDDENLY ONE HOthead LEAPS FROM HIS HORSE TO CLING TO THE SIDE OF THE COACH, THRUSTING HIS GRINNING FACE INSIDE TO GAPE AT THE SHRIEKING WOMEN.



HIS WEIGHT JERKS THE DOOR WIDE OPEN. TERRIFIED, ALICE FEELS HERSELF FALLING OUT UNDER THE POUNDING HOOVES--UNTIL A MAN'S STRONG ARM SWEEPS HER UP.



MUSCULAR ARMS PRESS ALICE AGAINST A HARD MALE BODY. THE BIG MAN IS LAUGHING AT HER.

GOOD THING I CAME TO SEE WHAT ALL THE WHOOPING WAS ABOUT. WOULDN'T WANT ANY OF THE BARGAIN BRIDES DAMAGED BEFORE THE FELLOWS CAN TAKE THEIR PICK.

THEY REACH TOWN JUST AS THE OTHER MEN CROWD IN TO MEET THE STAGECOACHES. ALICE IS SHAKING SO BADLY SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHETHER IT'S FROM EXCITEMENT OR FEAR.



SUDDENLY THE MAN LEADS HIS HORSE AWAY AS IF TOTALLY INDIFFERENT TO THE FERVOR OF THE OTHER MEN.

WHAT'S HE DOING?

ALTHOUGH WIND-BURNED AND ROUGH, ALICE'S RESCUER IS A HANDSOME ROGUE, WITH AN ANIMAL MAGNETISM SO FORCEFUL HIS EYES SEEM TO DEVOUR HER. SHE FEELS HER CHEEKS BURN AT HIS LOOK.



NO MAN HAS EVER LOOKED AT ME LIKE...LIKE THAT!

THAT ONE SURE FELT ALL WOMAN IN MY ARMS. BUT I'VE GOT URGENT BUSINESS IN THE MOUNTAINS. CAN'T GET MIXED UP WITH EASTERN GALS OUT TO GRAB HUSBANDS.

ALL THE MEN HAVE BEEN EJECTED FROM THE BENNETT BOARDINGHOUSE TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE ARRIVALS. THEY ARE TAKEN UNDER THE WING OF THE FORMIDABLE OWNER MADGE BENNETT.

THERE'S AT LEAST THREE BACHELORS READY TO MARRY EACH OF YOU. IF ANYBODY GIVES YOU TROUBLE, COME TO ME. NOW GET SOME REST. THE FUN STARTS AT THE BIG DANCE TOMORROW.

IT STARTED TODAY! A MAN SNATCHED ALICE RIGHT UP ONTO HIS SADDLE.

WHAT'D HE LOOK LIKE?

AT MARION'S DESCRIPTION MADGE STOPS SMILING. JEB TURNER! SHE RECALLED HOW HE'D SHOWN UP IN TOWN A FEW YEARS BEFORE, RUMORED TO HAVE BEEN KICKED OUT OF THE U.S. CAVALRY. HAD A CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER THE SIZE OF A DINNER PLATE.

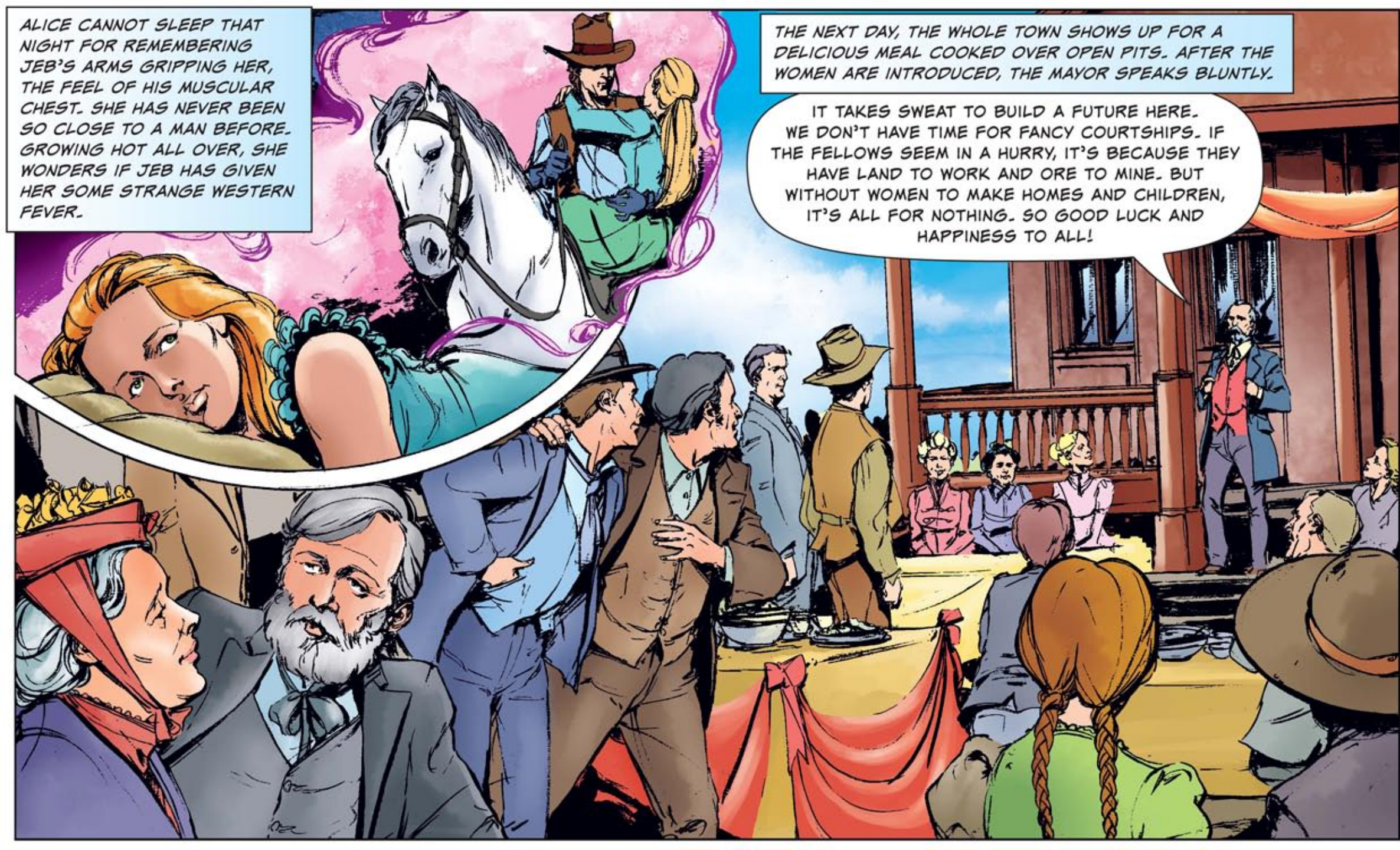
THAT COULDN'T BE ANYONE ELSE BUT JEB TURNER. GET A FEW DRINKS IN HIM, HE'LL START A FIGHT. TOOK OFF SOMEWHERE TWO YEARS AGO AFTER A BIG BRAWL.


ODD HE'D TURN UP TODAY. YOU LADIES STEER CLEAR OF THAT BAD APPLE.

ALICE CANNOT SLEEP THAT NIGHT FOR REMEMBERING JEB'S ARMS GRIPPING HER, THE FEEL OF HIS MUSCULAR CHEST. SHE HAS NEVER BEEN SO CLOSE TO A MAN BEFORE. GROWING HOT ALL OVER, SHE WONDERS IF JEB HAS GIVEN HER SOME STRANGE WESTERN FEVER.

THE NEXT DAY, THE WHOLE TOWN SHOWS UP FOR A DELICIOUS MEAL COOKED OVER OPEN PITS. AFTER THE WOMEN ARE INTRODUCED, THE MAYOR SPEAKS BLUNTLY.

IT TAKES SWEAT TO BUILD A FUTURE HERE. WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR FANCY COURTSHIPS. IF THE FELLOWS SEEM IN A HURRY, IT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE LAND TO WORK AND ORE TO MINE. BUT WITHOUT WOMEN TO MAKE HOMES AND CHILDREN, IT'S ALL FOR NOTHING. SO GOOD LUCK AND HAPPINESS TO ALL!

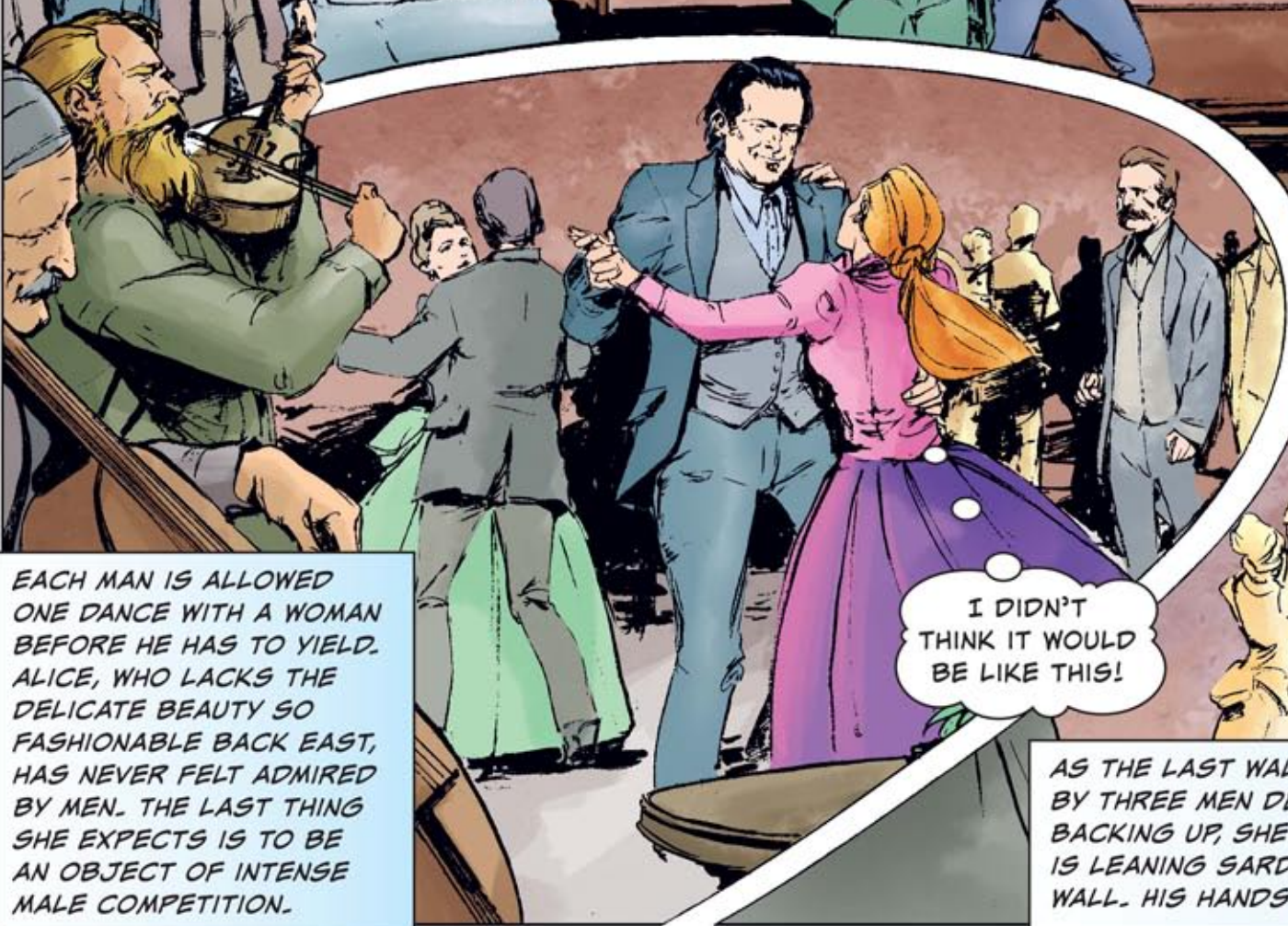




BEFORE THE DANCE, ALL THE ELIGIBLE MEN ARE INTRODUCED. A MOTLEY PARADE PASSES BY, BOBBING AND GRINNING. ALICE TRIES TO STIFLE HER ANNOYANCE--OR SHARP DISAPPOINTMENT THAT JEB TURNER IS NOT AMONG THEM.



JEB'S NOT LOOKING FOR A WIFE. TOO BAD! I'D LOVE TO SEE WHO'D HAVE HIM--FOR MY STORY, OF COURSE!



EACH MAN IS ALLOWED ONE DANCE WITH A WOMAN BEFORE HE HAS TO YIELD. ALICE, WHO LACKS THE DELICATE BEAUTY SO FASHIONABLE BACK EAST, HAS NEVER FELT ADMIRIED BY MEN. THE LAST THING SHE EXPECTS IS TO BE AN OBJECT OF INTENSE MALE COMPETITION.

I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD BE LIKE THIS!



AS THE LAST WALTZ BEGINS, ALICE IS PURSUED BY THREE MEN DETERMINED TO DANCE WITH HER. BACKING UP, SHE BUMPS HEAVILY INTO JEB, WHO IS LEANING SARDONICALLY AGAINST THE BACK WALL. HIS HANDS KEEP HER FROM STUMBLING.

SUDDENLY, ALL THREE PURSUERS BRISTLE AT JEB.

GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER, TURNER. YOU NEVER PUT YOURSELF INTO THE RUNNING, SO DON'T TRY TO HORN IN!

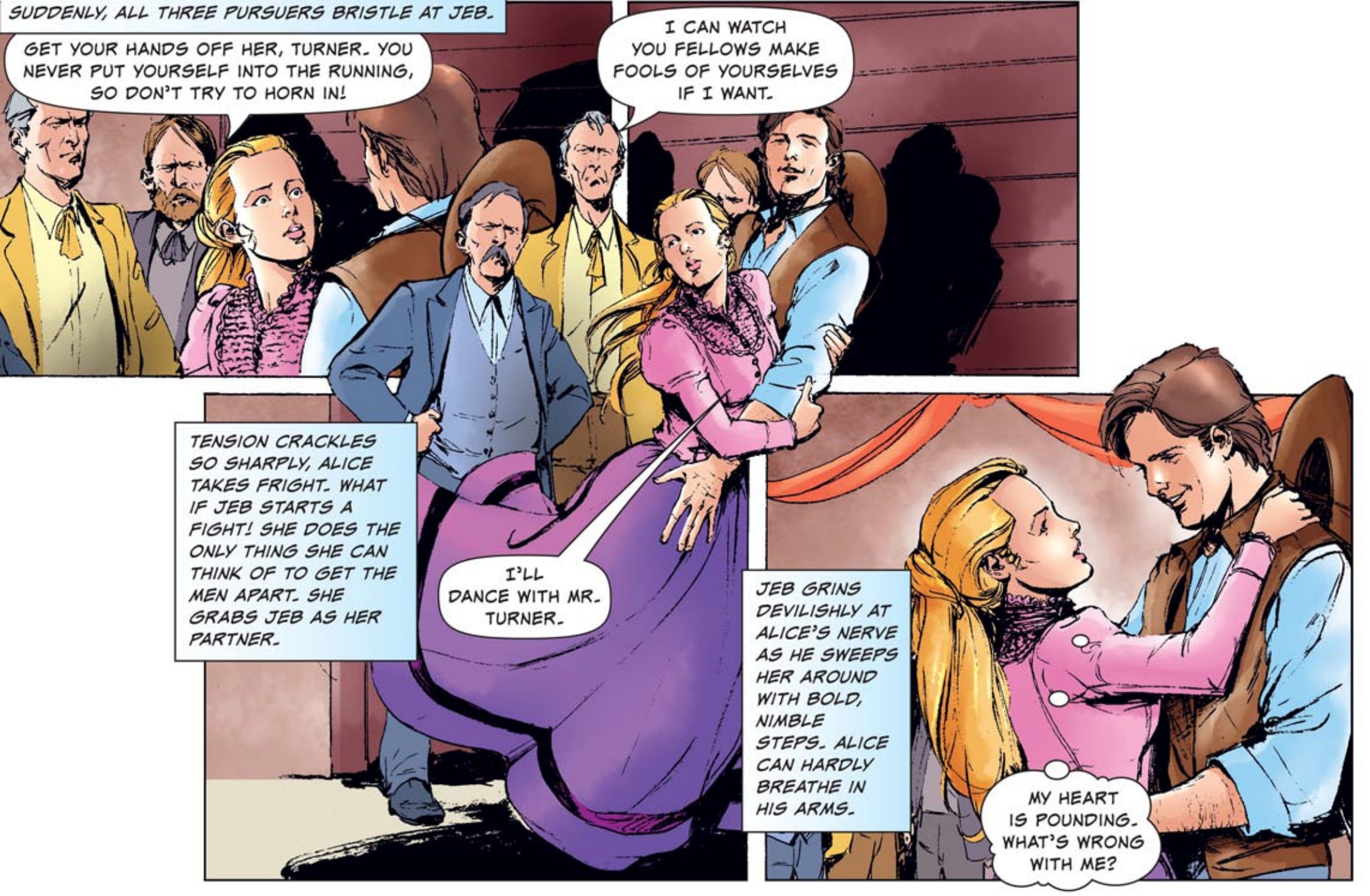
I CAN WATCH YOU FELLOWS MAKE FOOLS OF YOURSELVES IF I WANT.

TENSION CRACKLES SO SHARPLY, ALICE TAKES FRIGHT. WHAT IF JEB STARTS A FIGHT! SHE DOES THE ONLY THING SHE CAN THINK OF TO GET THE MEN APART. SHE GRABS JEB AS HER PARTNER.

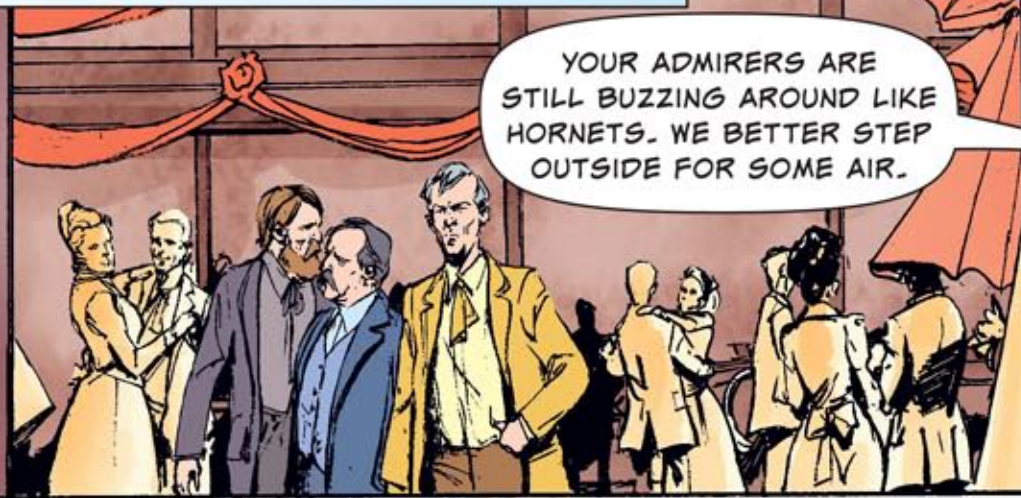
I'LL DANCE WITH MR. TURNER.

JEB GRINS DEVILISHLY AT ALICE'S NERVE AS HE SWEEPS HER AROUND WITH BOLD, NIMBLE STEPS. ALICE CAN HARDLY BREATHE IN HIS ARMS.

MY HEART IS POUNDING. WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?



AS THE DANCE ENDS, JEB WHISKS ALICE OUT THE BACK DOOR.



YOUR ADMIRERS ARE STILL BUZZING AROUND LIKE HORNETS. WE BETTER STEP OUTSIDE FOR SOME AIR.



WARM FROM DANCING, THEY LEAN AGAINST THE RAIL IN THE COOL DIMNESS. JEB REMARKS THAT ALICE MUST LIKE TO START TROUBLE.



DON'T YOU DARE BLAME ME! YOU STIRRED UP THOSE MEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT EVEN LOOKING TO BE MARRIED.

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN WOMEN WHO CAN'T GET HUSBANDS BACK HOME. NOW THEY'RE CHASING MEN WHO HAVEN'T SEEN A FEMALE FOR SO LONG THEY'LL MARRY ANYTHING IN A SKIRT. 'SIDES-- I'M NOT THE MARRYING KIND.

ALICE CAN'T BELIEVE HER EARS. FURY FLOODS HER.



MEN HERE WILL BE DARNED LUCKY TO GET ANY ONE OF THEM. THEY'RE FINE WOMEN AND VERY BRAVE TO RISK COMING TO A WILD PLACE LIKE THIS!

BETTER GET YOU SOME PUNCH TO COOL YOU DOWN BEFORE YOU GIVE US BOTH SCORCH MARKS!

JEB RETURNS WITH PUNCH,
WHICH ALICE DRINKS
THIRSTILY. SHE INFORMS
JEB IT WON'T COOL HER
OPINIONS, HOWEVER.

NO, GUESS IT WON'T. LIKE
THOSE OTHER GALS IN
THERE, YOU PROBABLY NEED
A GOOD KISSING.

YOU
WOULDN'T
DARE!!



JEB DIDN'T KNOW WHAT
DEVIL DROVE HIM. THE
NEXT INSTANT, HE HAS
ALICE IN HIS ARMS AND
TASTES LIPS
MADDENINGLY SOFT
AND SWEET.

THE SHOCK OF JEB'S HARD MOUTH
ON HERS ROCKETS THROUGH ALICE.
FINALLY SHE RECOVERS ENOUGH TO
PUSH HIM AWAY.

YOU...YOU
UNTUTORED...
BRUTE!



I MUST
HAVE BEEN CRAZY.
BUT THOSE
LIPS...

ALICE HAS NEVER BEEN KISSED BEFORE. HER MOUTH BURNS FROM THE FIERCENESS OF IT. MEN FLOCK BACK AROUND HER, BUT SHE'S AWARE ONLY OF JEB WATCHING HER FROM BEYOND THE OPEN DOOR.

THE SOONER I GET BACK TO CIVILIZED MEN, THE BETTER!

WELL, SHE'S GOT SOME BACKBONE. WHOEVER SHE MARRIES MIGHT GET HIMSELF A FIRST-CLASS HANDFUL OF TROUBLE.

MADGE HAS HEARD ABOUT ALICE'S DANCE WITH JEB. SO THE NEXT DAY AT THE BOARDINGHOUSE, SHE WARNS ALICE AGAIN.

DON'T WORRY, MRS. BENNETT. I'M PUTTING THAT MAN RIGHT OUT OF MY MIND!

I WISH I COULD JUST TELL EVERYONE I'M NOT ON THE MARRIAGE MARKET. BUT GRIFF SWORE ME TO SECRECY AND I HAVE TO KEEP MY PROMISE. HOW DID I KNOW THE MEN WOULD BE SO INTERESTED IN ME!

AND FAR FROM FORGETTING JEB TURNER, ALICE SPENDS THAT NIGHT DREAMING EROTIC, STEAMY DREAMS THAT LEAVE HER DEWED WITH PERSPIRATION AND TINGLING WITH MOST UNLADYLIKE SENSATIONS.

THE NEXT DAY BRINGS A PICNIC. AS JEB TALKS TO THE FREIGHT AGENT, HIS EYES MEET ALICE'S. SHE BLUSHES VIOLENTLY. JEB FIGHTS A POWERFUL TUG INSIDE.

THINGS YOU ORDERED WON'T BE IN FOR DAYS. WHY DON'T YOU JOIN THE PICNIC?

GOT TO DEAL FOR ANOTHER HORSE AT PARKER'S RANCH.

ALICE'LL HAVE SOME FARMER PANTING AND HOG-TIED BY AFTERNOON. GOT TO STOP THINKING ABOUT KISSING HER.

ALICE AGAIN TRIES TO DEAL WITH THE UNEXPECTED MALE ATTENTION. SHE DOES HER BEST TO DIRECT THE MEN TO OTHER WOMEN AND TRIES NOT TO THINK ABOUT JEB TURNER. ALREADY, HAPPY PAIRINGS HAVE BEGUN AROUND HER.

THINK OF THE FREEDOM I'LL HAVE BACK EAST WORKING ON A NEWSPAPER. I HAVE TO REMEMBER EVERY SINGLE DETAIL TO WRITE IN MY JOURNAL FOR GRIFF TONIGHT.

ZEKE STONE, WHO STUCK TO ALICE LIKE A BURR THROUGHOUT THE PICNIC, MANAGES TO GET HER INTO HIS WAGON FOR THE TRIP HOME. DARK STORM CLOUDS RISE UP BEHIND THEM.

HURRY, ZEKE, OR WE'RE GOING TO GET SOAKED.

SOMETHING I GOTTA DO FIRST.

ZEKE PULLS TO A STOP TO LIST HIS ASSETS, INCLUDING HIS GROWING TANNERY, SUPERIOR SOURCE OF WATER AND TEN FAT HOGS. HE THEN PROPOSES MARRIAGE.

YOU GOT A STRONG BACK AND LOTS OF WORK IN YOU. YOU WON'T UP AND DIE ON ME AFTER BIRTHING A PASSEL OF KIDS. WHAT DO YOU SAY?

A TANNERY!
THAT'S WHY HE
SMELLS SO
BAD.

AH...I'M
VERY
FLATTERED
BUT I
CAN'T...

ZEKE WON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER. TO ESCAPE HIM, ALICE HOPS DOWN FROM THE WAGON. ZEKE SCRAMBLES AFTER HER.

LOOK, IT'S A REAL
HANDSOME OFFER.
I DON'T SEE WHY
YOU'RE BEING SO
CONTRARY...

PANICKING, ALICE GIVES ONE OF THE HORSES IN ZEKE'S TEAM A WHACK ON THE RUMP. BOTH HORSES TAKE OFF WITH ZEKE IN HOT PURSUIT. AS BIG DROPS OF RAIN START TO FALL, ALICE DASHES FOR THE ONLY SHELTER AROUND.

INSIDE, ALICE RUNS SMACK INTO JEB TURNER, ENCOUNTERING THE BROAD CHEST THAT SO IGNITED HER DREAMS THE NIGHT BEFORE.

WH...WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

GETTING OUT OF THE RAIN. YOU AND ZEKE WERE MOST ENTERTAINING.

WHY'D YOU TURN DOWN SUCH A GOOD PROSPECT? UNLESS YOU'RE TOO SOFT FOR LIFE OUT HERE.

HE'S LAUGHING AT ME!

NO HARDSHIP WOULD BE TOO MUCH WITH A MAN I LOVED. BUT THAT WON'T BE ZEKE STONE!

RAIN CROWDS THE TWO INTO THE CORNER OF THE SHACK THAT DOESN'T LEAK, FORCING A TRUCE. TO DISTRACT HIMSELF FROM ALICE'S WOMANLY CURVES, JEB ASKS HER WHERE SHE'S FROM. ALICE TELLS HIM ABOUT HER DEAD PARENTS AND HER FRACTIOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH HER UNCLE.

UNCLE GOT SO UPSET WHEN I SKIPPED SUNDAY SERVICES. BUT I COULDN'T STAND HOW HE DRONED ON...

I'M ONLY LEAVING OUT HORACE... AND THIS ASSIGNMENT.

INTENSELY AWARE OF JEB'S LONG THIGHS BRUSHING AGAINST HERS, ALICE LOSES ALL SENSE OF TIME. THEN A MIGHTY CRASH OF THUNDER SENDS JEB LEAPING TOWARD HIS FRIGHTENED HORSES BEFORE THEY PANIC AND BREAK LOOSE.

THE MOMENT JEB TOUCHES THEM, MURMURING SOFTLY, THE HORSES GROW CALM. THEIR PERFECT TRUST IN HIM STIRS SOMETHING DEEP INSIDE ALICE.



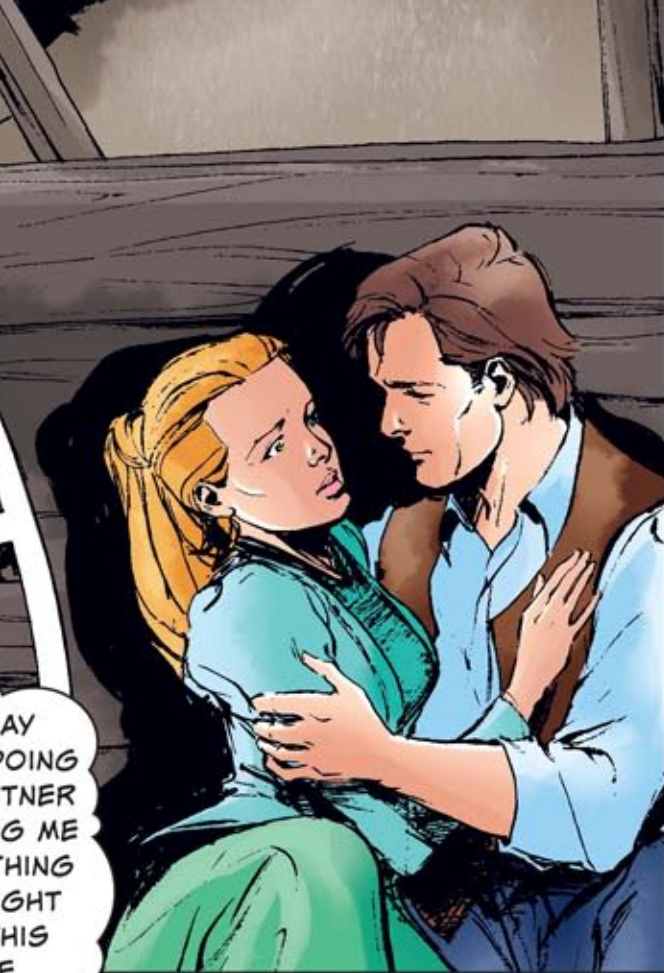
MOTHER TOLD ME DOGS AND HORSES ALWAYS KNOW WHEN SOMEONE IS GOOD AND DECENT. BUT THERE'RE SO MANY AWFUL RUMORS ABOUT JEB...

JEB'S HANDS ARE CALLED FROM HARD WORK. BUT WHEN ASKED HOW HE SPENDS HIS DAYS HE WILL ONLY SAY HE IS "BUSY IN THE HILLS."

HE'S MAKING ME CRAZY WITH CURIOSITY. WHAT A CHANGE FROM ZEKE.



CAN'T SAY WHAT I'M DOING OR MY PARTNER WILL STRING ME UP. LAST THING I NEED RIGHT NOW IS THIS FEMALE TEMPTATION...



SUDDENLY, LIGHTNING AND A CRASH OF THUNDER SEEM TO REND THE CABIN APART. ALICE, YELPING WITH FEAR, FLINGS HERSELF AT JEB. HE CLAMPS HER IN A FIERCELY PROTECTIVE EMBRACE.

THE NEXT INSTANT THEY ARE KISSING WITH A RAW ELEMENTAL HUNGER THAT MAKES THEM WANT TO DEVOUR EACH OTHER. THE PASSION RACING THROUGH THEM IS AS VIOLENT AS THE STORM. THEN JEB THRUSTS ALICE ROUGHLY AWAY.

CAN'T... STOP...

I WANT TO TEAR OFF HER CLOTHES AND TAKE HER... NOW...

LOOK, I'M NOT ONE OF THEM COW-EYED BACHELORS. DON'T GO SETTING YOUR TRAP FOR ME.

WHAT THE HELL AM I THINKING? I'M LIVING ROUGH AS A BEAR UP IN THE HILLS. GOT NO BUSINESS THINKING ABOUT WOMEN. ESPECIALLY ONE WHO MAKES MY BLOOD SIZZLE.

ALICE STRUGGLES WITH THE FLOOD OF NEW FEELINGS POURING THROUGH HER, SO CONFUSED AND EMBARRASSED SHE CANNOT SPEAK. SUDDENLY JEB MOTIONS TOWARD THE DOOR.

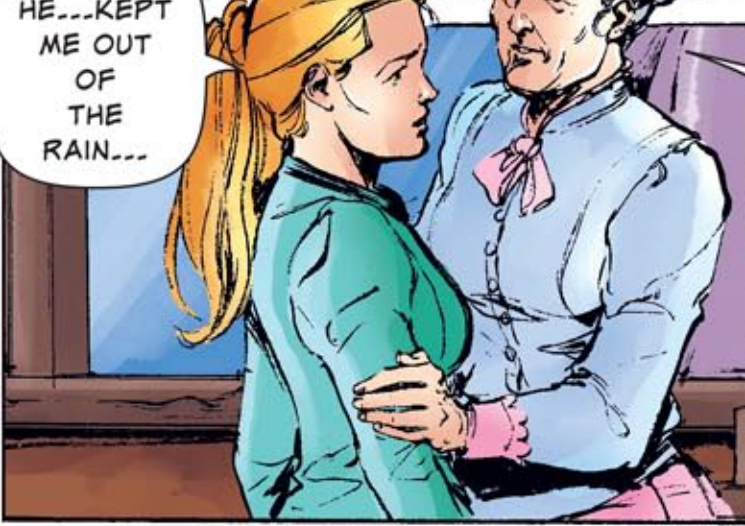
STORM'S LETTING UP. YOU CAN RIDE MY OTHER HORSE BACK TO TOWN.

I'M SO ASHAMED. HOW COULD I HAVE KISSED HIM BACK LIKE THAT? BUT I'VE NEVER FELT THIS ACHING LONGING BEFORE...

BACK AT THE BOARDINGHOUSE MADGE, ALARMED BY ALICE'S HIGH COLOR, WANTS TO KNOW IF "THAT MAN" TRIED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HER.



I... HE...KEPT ME OUT OF THE RAIN...



CAREFUL, HONEY. JEB TURNER COULD ALREADY HAVE TWO WIVES BACK IN THE HILLS FOR ALL WE KNOW.

ALICE WRITES FURIOUSLY IN HER JOURNAL, TRYING TO RELIEVE THE THROBBING IN HER BOSOM. JEB TURNER HAS MADE IT CLEAR HE IS NOT FOR MARRYING. WELL, NEITHER IS SHE. SHE MUST FORGET THAT HE LAID HANDS ON HER AND...TAUGHT HER THE DESIRES OF A MARRIED WOMAN.

MUST BE THE TRIALS OF COURTSHIP. I'LL HAVE ENOUGH FOR A DOZEN ARTICLES TO GIVE GRIFF WHEN I GET BACK.



PAIRINGS ARE HAPPENING WITH WHIRLWIND SPEED. BY THE END OF THE WEEK, HETTY IS JOYFULLY MARRYING A YOUNG RANCHER WHO HAS TO GET BACK TO HIS CATTLE. AND OTHER WEDDINGS ARE LINED UP.

PEOPLE HERE SURE DON'T WASTE TIME MAKING UP THEIR MINDS. YET I JUST KNOW HETTY IS GOING TO BE HAPPY.

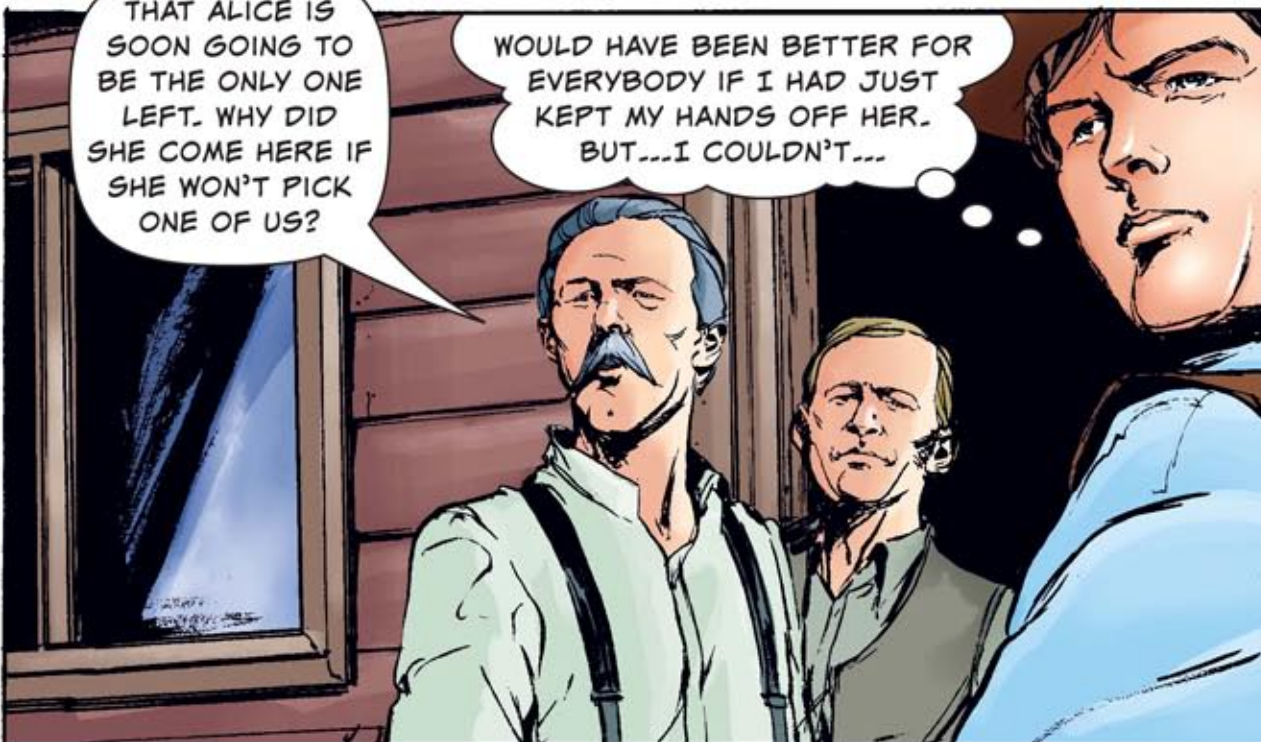


AS THE HAPPY COUPLE LEAVE, ONE OF THE BACHELORS GROUSES THAT EVER SINCE THE PICNIC, ALICE HAS GIVEN ALL THE MEN A COLD SHOULDER. JEB FEELS A SPURT OF SECRET EXCITEMENT.

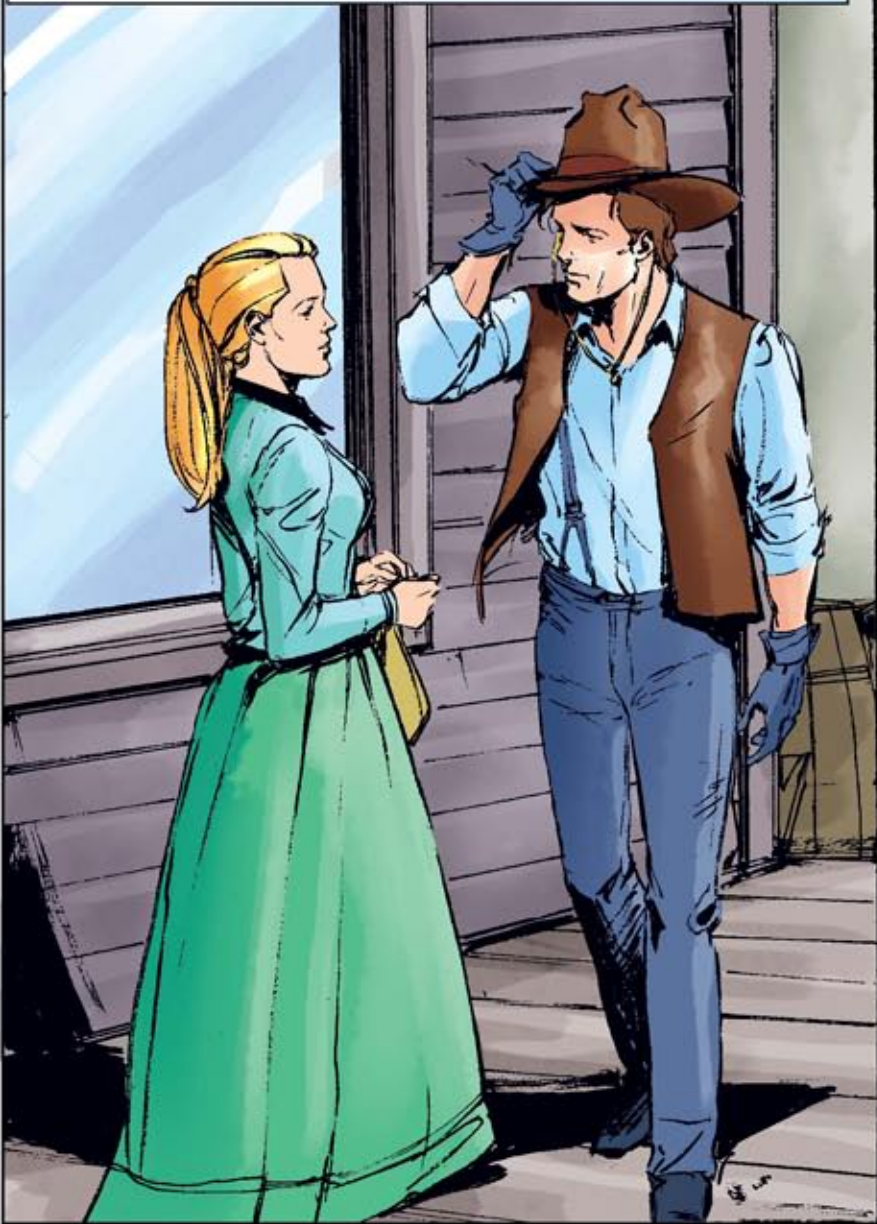


THAT ALICE IS SOON GOING TO BE THE ONLY ONE LEFT. WHY DID SHE COME HERE IF SHE WON'T PICK ONE OF US?

WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER FOR EVERYBODY IF I HAD JUST KEPT MY HANDS OFF HER. BUT...I COULDN'T...



ALICE INVENTS ERRANDS IN HOPES OF SEEING JEB. WHEN SHE DOES, HE REMAINS STONE-FACED AND OMINOUSLY SILENT. SHE DOESN'T KNOW HE EATS HER UP WITH HIS EYES WHEN SHE ISN'T LOOKING.



WHY CAN'T I FORGET THIS MAN?

SUCH A PRETTY DRESS. I CAN'T GIVE HER ANYTHING LIKE THAT...



WHEN JEB BRINGS HIS ORDER FROM THE FREIGHT OFFICE TO THE HOTEL, HE TRIES HARD NOT TO LOOK AT ALICE'S DISMAYED FACE. HARD MALE PRIDE KEEPS HIM STEADY.

OH... HE'S GETTING READY TO LEAVE!

EVERYTHING HAS TO GO INTO MY CLAIM. I HAVE NOTHING TO OFFER ANY WOMAN RIGHT NOW.



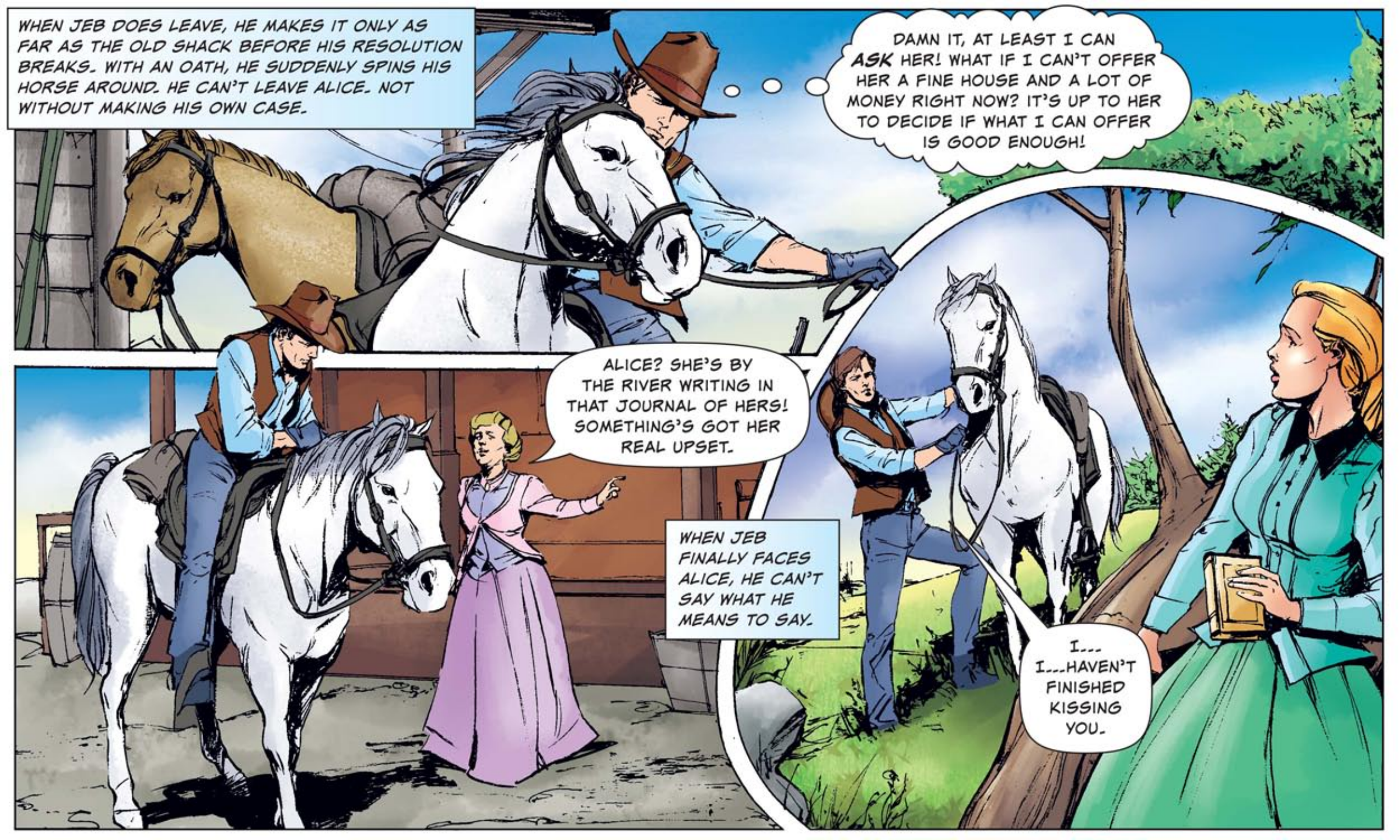
WHEN JEB DOES LEAVE, HE MAKES IT ONLY AS FAR AS THE OLD SHACK BEFORE HIS RESOLUTION BREAKS. WITH AN OATH, HE SUDDENLY SPINS HIS HORSE AROUND. HE CAN'T LEAVE ALICE. NOT WITHOUT MAKING HIS OWN CASE.

DAMN IT, AT LEAST I CAN ASK HER! WHAT IF I CAN'T OFFER HER A FINE HOUSE AND A LOT OF MONEY RIGHT NOW? IT'S UP TO HER TO DECIDE IF WHAT I CAN OFFER IS GOOD ENOUGH!

ALICE? SHE'S BY THE RIVER WRITING IN THAT JOURNAL OF HERS! SOMETHING'S GOT HER REAL UPSET.

WHEN JEB FINALLY FACES ALICE, HE CAN'T SAY WHAT HE MEANS TO SAY.

I... I...HAVEN'T FINISHED KISSING YOU.



OVER ALICE'S FEEBLE PROTESTS, HE TAKES HER INTO HIS ARMS. HIS MOUTH FINDS PARADISE.

ALICE PUSHES JEB AWAY FURIOUSLY.

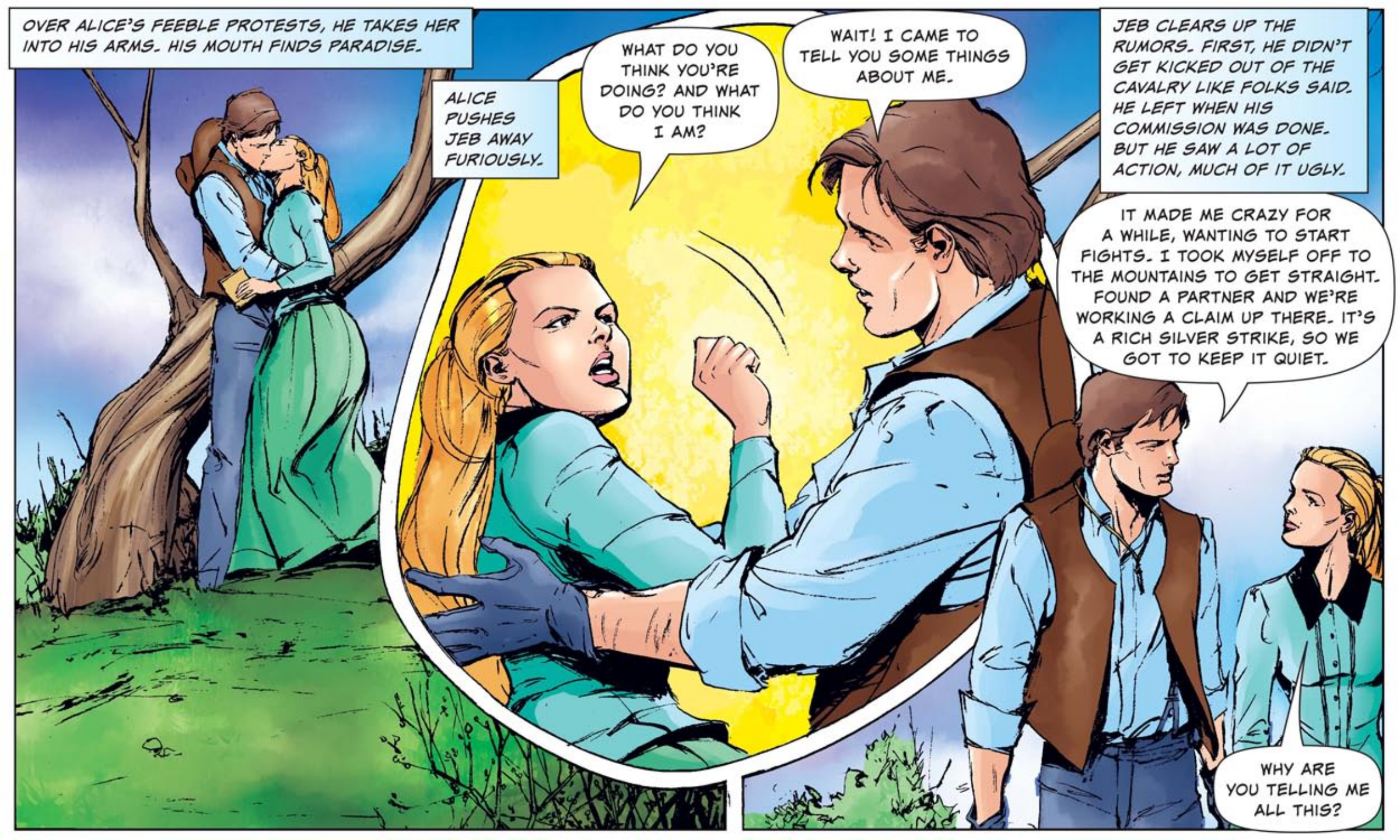
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING? AND WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM?

WAIT! I CAME TO TELL YOU SOME THINGS ABOUT ME.

JEB CLEARS UP THE RUMORS. FIRST, HE DIDN'T GET KICKED OUT OF THE CAVALRY LIKE FOLKS SAID. HE LEFT WHEN HIS COMMISSION WAS DONE. BUT HE SAW A LOT OF ACTION, MUCH OF IT UGLY.

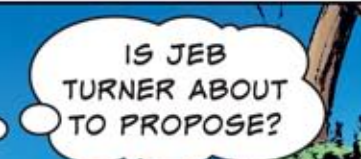
IT MADE ME CRAZY FOR A WHILE, WANTING TO START FIGHTS. I TOOK MYSELF OFF TO THE MOUNTAINS TO GET STRAIGHT. FOUND A PARTNER AND WE'RE WORKING A CLAIM UP THERE. IT'S A RICH SILVER STRIKE, SO WE GOT TO KEEP IT QUIET.

WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME ALL THIS?

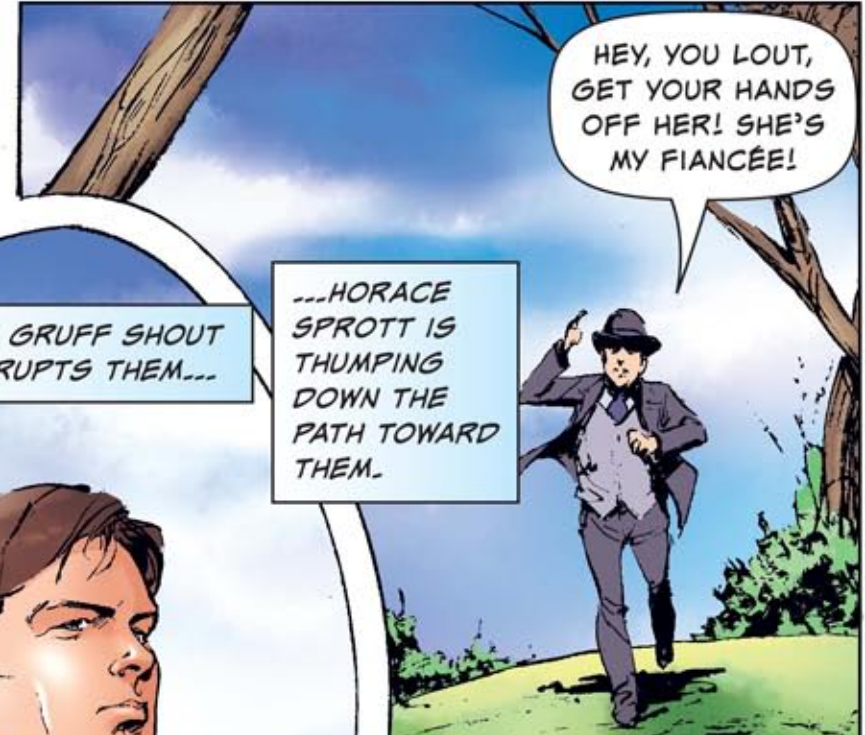




'CAUSE ALL I'VE GOT TO OFFER RIGHT NOW IS A POLE CABIN IN THE ROCKS AND IT'S NO PLACE FOR A WOMAN. BUT YOU'VE GOTTEN UNDER MY SKIN. AND YOU SAID YOU WEREN'T SCARED OF HARDSHIP.



IS JEB TURNER ABOUT TO PROPOSE?



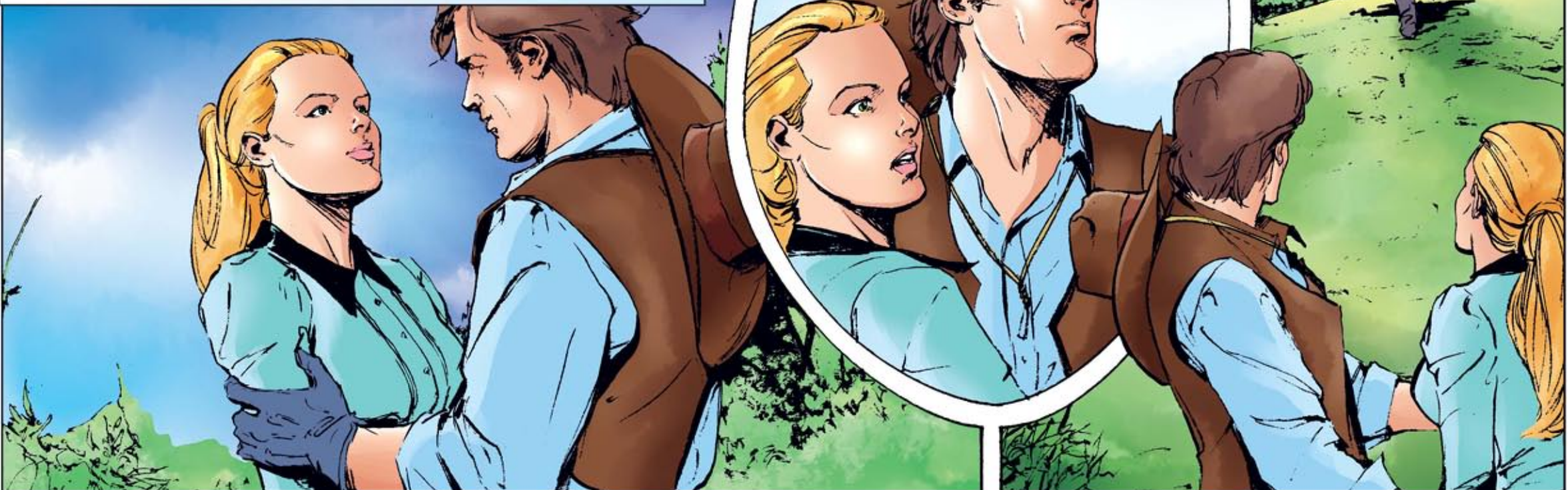
HEY, YOU LOU, GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER! SHE'S MY FIANCEE!



BUT A GRUFF SHOUT INTERRUPTS THEM...

...HORACE SPROTT IS THUMPING DOWN THE PATH TOWARD THEM.

JEB'S EYES GO DARK AND HOT WITH EMOTION. ALICE FEELS HIS THUMBS SLIDING ALONG THE SIDES OF HER BREASTS. HER HEART THUDS ERRATICALLY AS SHE WAITS FOR THE FATEFUL WORDS.






NOW HOLD ON THERE--


YOUR UNCLE WARNED ME YOU'D GET INTO UNSPEAKABLE TROUBLE WITHOUT A MAN TO WATCH YOU. AS SOON AS I FOUND OUT ABOUT THIS NEWSPAPER MADNESS FROM MY NO-ACCOUNT STEPBROTHER, IT WAS MY DUTY TO BRING YOU BACK. HOW COULD GRIFF LET A WEAK-MINDED FEMALE UNDERTAKE SUCH AN ENTERPRISE!

JEB FEELS HIS INSIDES TURN TO LEAD AS ALICE CONFESSES WHAT SHE'S REALLY DOING IN WOLF RIDGE.



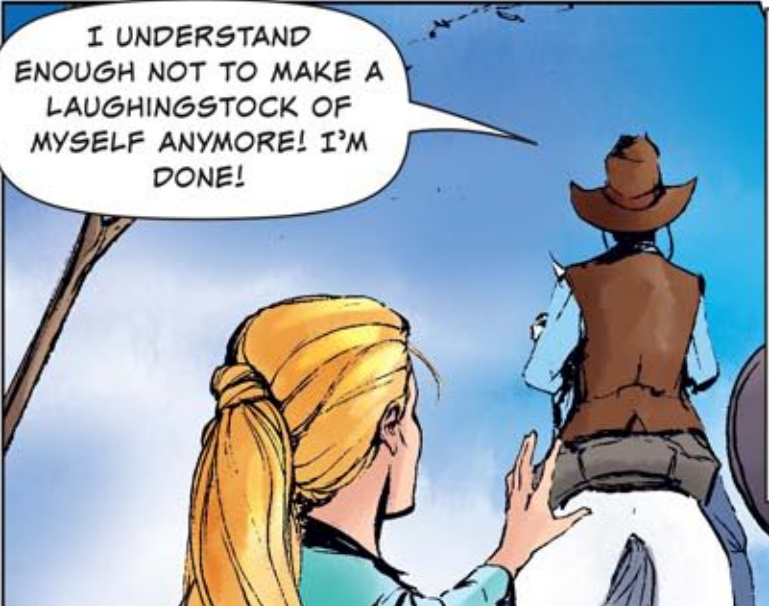
SO YOU WEREN'T LOOKING FOR A HUSBAND AT ALL. YOU WERE JUST PLAYING US FOR FOOLS. ALL SO EASTERNERS COULD HAVE A BIT OF SPICY READING.

NO, JEB. YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND...



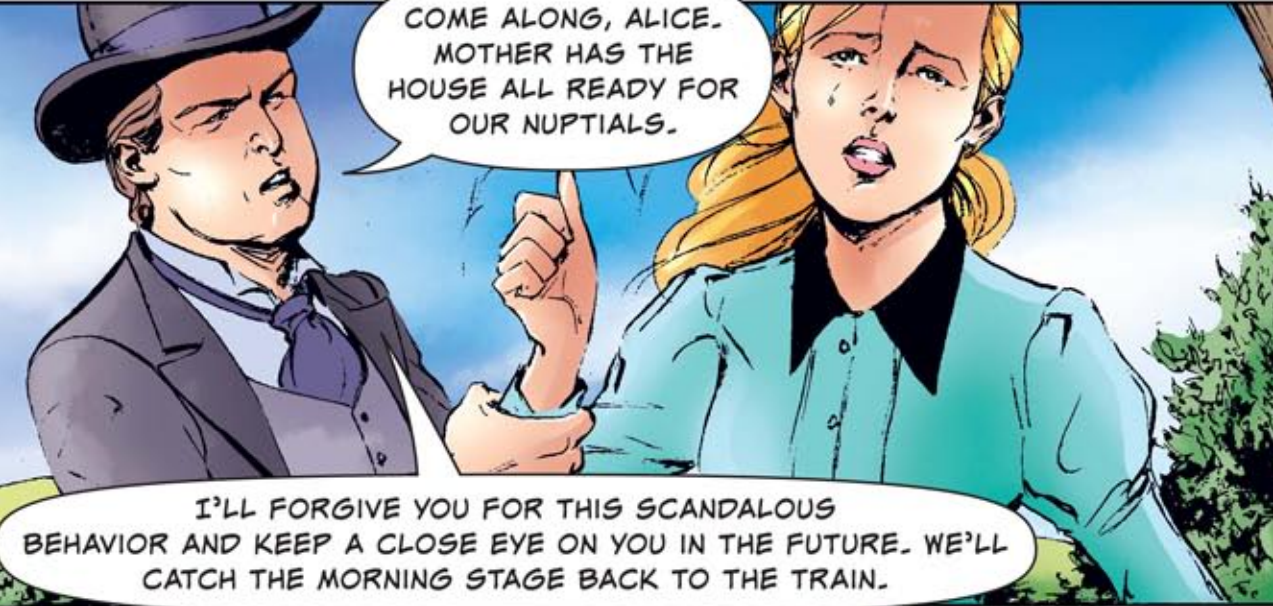
LOOK AT YOU! YOUR UNCLE IS BARELY DEAD AND YOU'RE GALLIVANTING ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO WRITE LURID NEWSPAPER TALES...AND YOU'RE NOT EVEN DECENTLY CLAD IN BLACK. THIS HAS TO STOP AT ONCE!

ALICE, IS THIS TRUE?



I UNDERSTAND ENOUGH NOT TO MAKE A LAUGHINGSTOCK OF MYSELF ANYMORE! I'M DONE!

AS JEB VANISHES FROM SIGHT, ALICE REALIZES HOW MUCH SHE LOVES HIM. SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN HONEST WITH HIM FROM THE START. BUT NOW IT'S TOO LATE.



COME ALONG, ALICE. MOTHER HAS THE HOUSE ALL READY FOR OUR NUPTIALS.

I'LL FORGIVE YOU FOR THIS SCANDALOUS BEHAVIOR AND KEEP A CLOSE EYE ON YOU IN THE FUTURE. WE'LL CATCH THE MORNING STAGE BACK TO THE TRAIN.



WAIT! MARRYING HORACE WAS MY UNCLE'S IDEA, NOT MINE.

I CAN'T LOSE HIM NOW. I JUST CAN'T!

I'LL NEVER MARRY YOU, HORACE. NEVER!

YOU'LL THINK DIFFERENTLY WHEN YOU CALM DOWN. YOUR UNCLE MADE CAREFUL PROVISION FOR YOUR FUTURE. I INTEND TO KEEP MY END OF THE BARGAIN!

IN HER ROOM, ALICE CRIES HERSELF OUT. THEN SHE STARTS A LETTER OF DEEP APOLOGY TO JEB. HER LIFE HAS UTTERLY CHANGED. SHE MUST AT LEAST SHOW HIM SHE IS NOT SHALLOW.

JEB, I'M SO SORRY I COULDN'T TELL YOU MY TRUE PURPOSE HERE. BUT NEVER DOUBT THE REGARD IN WHICH I HOLD YOU.

I AM ENCLOSING MY JOURNAL IN GOOD FAITH. I NO LONGER CARE ABOUT PUBLISHING "SPICY READING".....

ALICE WORKS UP HER NERVE TO GO TO THE HOTEL, ONLY TO FIND JEB LONG GONE. DETERMINED TO GET HER PARCEL TO HIM, SHE HIRES A YOUNG COWBOY.

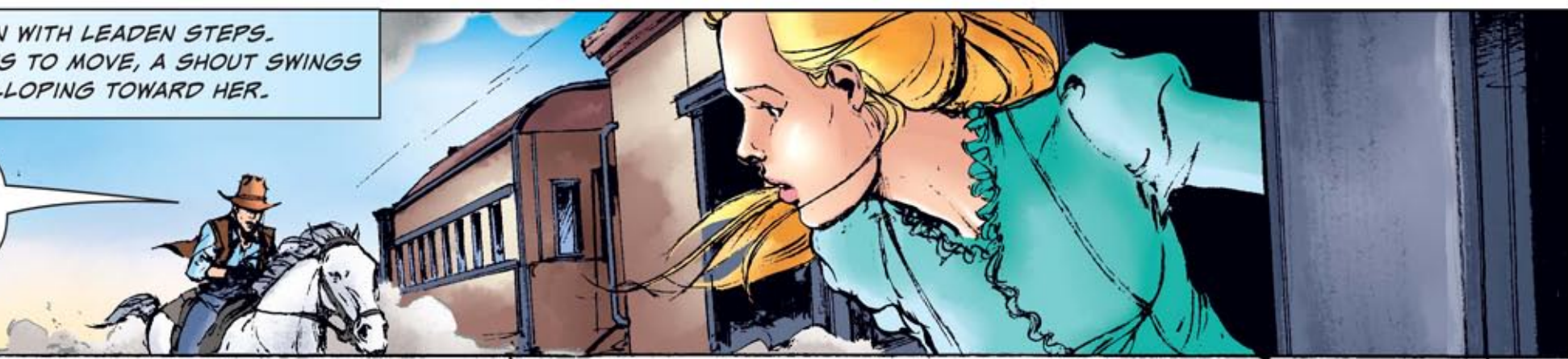
SURE, MA'AM. I'LL GIVE IT TO JEB IF I CAN FIND HIM. BUT THERE'S ALL KINDS OF TRAILS HE COULD HAVE TAKEN.

ALICE CAN'T STAY IN WOLF RIDGE NOW, THOUGH WHAT SHE WILL DO BACK HOME SHE CAN'T IMAGINE. HORACE REMAINS CERTAIN SHE WILL MARRY HIM. SHE ONLY HOPES SHE CAN STILL BEG GRIFF FOR A JOB.

ONCE I STEP ON THAT TRAIN, EVERYTHING HERE IS...FINISHED FOREVER.

ALICE BOARDS THE TRAIN WITH LEADEN STEPS. BUT AS THE TRAIN BEGINS TO MOVE, A SHOUT SWINGS HER AROUND. JEB IS GALLOPING TOWARD HER.

ALICE! I'VE READ EVERYTHING! I WAS A FOOL! I WANT YOU TO STAY!



I AIN'T GOT MUCH RIGHT NOW, ALICE, BUT JUST WAIT UNTIL OUR MINE GETS GOING! WILL YOU MARRY ME?

THAT RUFFIAN AGAIN!

JEB REALLY LOVES ME...



AS THE TRAIN SPEEDS UP, JEB'S HORSE CAN BARELY KEEP UP. HORACE TRIES TO DRAG ALICE BACK INTO THE COACH. IN A MOMENT IT WILL BE TOO LATE.

LET GO, HORACE!



WITH ONE
DARING LEAP,
ALICE MAKES
HER CHOICE.



YOU'RE MAKING
A BIG MISTAKE,
ALICE GREEN!



BUT IT IS LATER, AFTER THE PREACHER HAS WED THEM,
THAT ALICE LEARNS THE TRUE ECSTASY OF LOVE AS JEB'S
URGENT HANDS CARESS SOFT PLACES NO MAN HAS EVER
TOUCHED BEFORE. AS JEB ENFOLDS ALICE IN HIS ARMS,
ALICE KNOWS SHE MADE THE RIGHT DECISION. THEY
ARE BOTH THE MARRYING KIND AFTER ALL.

THE
END

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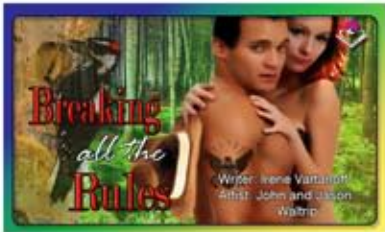
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