

Northern California

During the night, Samantha had a vivid dream. She was in a rural town wearing her Victorian-style dress. The weather was cool so she wrapped the crocheted afghan around her shoulders. And her sockless feet were cold in her slip-on shoes.

The few men she saw were in worn, soiled work clothes and walked with purpose. The so-called roadways were not paved but dirt paths. No cars or trucks, but horses and carts. A few wooden one-story buildings scattered here and there.

This must be a dream in which the clock has been turned back, Samantha thought. But where am I?

She strolled, aware she had not seen any other women. Pulling the afghan around herself snugly, she walked with her head tilted down to avoid catching the eye of any man in whatever this place was, glancing up often to learn more of her surroundings.

Then two women hurried toward her, each carrying a wooden bucket of water. Their cotton dresses hung to their ankles, with full skirts gathered at the waist of fitted bodices. Plain white cotton

SAM TIME

bonnets covered their heads, and shawls were wrapped around their shoulders. They looked at Samantha disapprovingly. Her dress was too fancy for this rural town. Moreover, she wasn't wearing a bonnet or hat; a bare head was a means of solicitation by prostitutes. She hugged her body with the afghan, which served as a shawl to hide her uncorseted torso.

The dream seemed authentic. Despite her uneasiness, she thought, Enjoy the dream. If I don't like it, I'll wake myself up.

Around a corner, she spotted a few men in uniform. Soldiers. Maybe the army. This might be a small town next to an army fort, Samantha guessed. Still, not a good place for a woman.

Samantha approached a horse stable and heard a man say, "Lieutenant Grant." Another said, "Ulysses."

She snapped her head around.

Oh my God, Samantha thought. Grant was promoted to captain in the middle of the decade, so if he's a lieutenant, it's 1850-ish. And this must be northern California.

The two men approached Grant, and Samantha watched. She no longer cared about keeping her unbonneted head down. This was her dream, and she wanted at least a glimpse of Grant. He was wearing an army uniform: an above-the-knee-length navy coat, with a stand-up collar closed by a single row of brass buttons down the center front; baggy pants; square-toed boots with a one-inch heel; and a black felt slouch hat with a wide brim.

The three men spoke for a few minutes and then the other two left, leaving Grant and the horse he was tending.

Samantha hesitated and recalled what she had learned of American history. Although the United States had separated from its mother country, the former colony still followed many of

DONNA BALON

Britain's customs. Named after Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901, this period is called the Victorian era—with social rules: many dos and even more don'ts.

But Samantha wanted to have fun. So she approached Grant while thinking about all the customs she should abide by.

At age thirty and unmarried, Samantha was an old maid. Without a hat or a bonnet she could be mistaken for a prostitute, and there were plenty of those women around any town adjacent to an army fort.

But this was Samantha's dream, and she could be bold. She stepped forward until she was several feet from Grant and stopped. "Lieutenant Grant," she said softly.

He turned around. His light blue eyes were his most striking feature. Chestnut-brown hair, mustache, and beard. Straight nose. Square jaw. Wide-at-the-temples facial bone structure. About five eight in height. Slim beneath the soldier's coat. This was Ulysses S. Grant. In his early thirties. Good-looking.

He glanced at Samantha and then turned around to tend to his horse.

He's a married man, and he sees an unknown woman. What are the protocols?

Her dream. Her rules.

Samantha persisted, using what she thought was common phraseology for this era. "Lieutenant Grant, I am Miss Samantha. I hear you are an expert horseman. I would be most pleased in taking lessons under your tutelage."

His back still facing her, he made no reply.

She thought quickly of a scheme. "My brothers are in town on business. It would be most helpful to our family business, if I could

SAM TIME

learn how to ride.”

“I am a soldier with duties at the fort.”

He speaks.

“I understand, Lieutenant Grant. But surely you have leave.”

While keeping a distance of several feet, she stepped to his side so she could see his profile. “I understand you will not transact with a lady, but I will return with one of my brothers. He will pay you compensation.”

“Others can teach you.”

“But I hear you are the best. A quarter dollar for a day’s riding lesson. We can meet you here tomorrow, at this hour or the next day or the next. Oh, I would like to ride astride, not sidesaddle.”

Although riding sidesaddle was more conventional for women, riding astride was becoming more common in the West.

Grant didn’t reply, but he didn’t say no, either.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Grant, for considering our offer. My brother and I will return.”

That was fun, thought Samantha. I’ll play along as if this dream is real. So, what’s next? I need riding clothes. And I need money. I’ll worry about that later. Riding clothes first.

Close by there was a petite woman in a worn apron, a faded tan dress, and a plain white bonnet.

“Good day,” Samantha said.

“Good day,” the woman replied, then turned away.

“I’m Samantha Hunter.” The woman seemed suspicious because Samantha wasn’t wearing a bonnet. Knowing this, Samantha said, “My family settled here a few days ago. And I lost my bonnet!”

Satisfied with Samantha’s explanation that she wasn’t a harlot,

DONNA BALON

the woman turned to Samantha. "Alice."

"A pleasure to meet you, Alice. I will sew myself a simple new bonnet. But I lack expert sewing skills. And I need riding clothes. I will be taking riding lessons. I need a split skirt. A woman's riding habit." Samantha knew the nomenclature for a complete woman's "costume" for horseback riding. "Do you know where—"

Before Samantha finished her sentence, Alice said, "Yes. I get. I get." She turned and went into the house, waving for Samantha to follow.

The small one-room home with a fireplace smelled of stale air. The ceiling was barely six feet, and two small windows did not provide much light, giving a dreariness to the space. It was sparsely furnished: a table with four chairs, a bed, a sideboard, and a trifold dressing screen. And the wide-planked wooden floor creaked with every step.

Alice walked to the back corner and returned, placing the clothes on the table. Her eyes welled with tears. "Edith, my daughter."

Samantha thought: Alice is probably a Chinese immigrant who had arrived with her husband and daughter during the early years of the gold rush. Alice is her adopted American name, and English is her second language. I understand only a few words, but I gather the clothes were worn by Alice's daughter Edith, who had died of consumption (tuberculosis) last year.

"I am sorry to hear of your dear daughter. May I see if these fit?"

Alice showed Samantha the screen to stand behind for dressing and undressing.

Samantha emerged wearing a white cotton chemise under a brown waist jacket, with a stand-up collar, closed by a dozen small buttons down the center front from the neckline to the waist

SAM TIME

hem. Pairs of darts on the left and right front and back shaped the jacket's waistline. A short peplum adorned the center back jacket hem. The brown split skirt gathered at the waistband and looked like a woman's dress skirt with a full hem but was split into wide culottes so a rider could comfortably straddle her horse's back. A suede brimmed hat with a chinstrap was topped on her head.

Samantha couldn't see herself. There weren't any full-length mirrors. But the garments felt ill fitting. The sleeves of the chemise and the jacket were too short by several inches, as was the hem of the split skirt. The jacket was snug, and the skirt waistband was too tight.

Alice tugged at the sleeves of the jacket and chemise, then the skirt waistband and the skirt hem. She nodded, indicating there was enough fabric in the sleeve and the skirt hems to lengthen, and extra fabric in the waistband for a roomier fit.

"I fix," she said.

Samantha said, "I would like to buy these clothes with the alterations. What is the cost?"

Alice held up four fingers.

"Four dollars. I will return with four silver dollars. I come a distance to get to the stable. I would prefer wearing my dress to walk through town and to the general store. May I leave the clothes here and dress in them before I ride? Are you here most of the day, so I may enter?"

Alice nodded yes to both questions.

Samantha went behind the screen to change back into her dress. Afterward she came around the screen and folded the riding clothes on the table with the hat on top. "Alice, in a few days, I will return with four dollars. And with this lovely habit, I can learn to

DONNA BALON

ride. You are so kind.”

Samantha walked out the door and toward the area where she had arrived. Time to wake up. How could she do that? She landed here while sleeping, so she should mimic her sleeping position. Samantha found an isolated spot, closed her eyes, placed her hands at her sides, and took a deep breath.

It worked. She was at home on the sofa. Grabbing her cellphone, she checked the time: 1:21 a.m.

The dream was exceptional. It was self-directed and realistic, not broken up in pieces or disjointed.

She took off the gown, dressed in one of Aaron’s T-shirts, and went to sleep in her bed—dreaming of tomorrow night’s adventure.