

An Exchange of Words

Ruthanna Milligan placed a cover over her rutabaga salad. Her minor contribution to a significant event where she would catch up with friends she hadn't seen in too long. In a few minutes, almost everyone in Prosper would flood the streets to celebrate the town's founding thirty years ago.

"Are you ready?" She looked down the hallway from the kitchen towards her husband's store, where Bertram stood.

He stood back to her in the middle of his store, looking out onto the street. A plaited, charcoal-coloured queue fell to his midback. Tall with lean but strong shoulders, his fine-wool suit fit him well. Very well, drawing out the length of his legs, the squareness of his chest and reflecting the prosperity of his business.

Bertram looked over his shoulder. Intelligent dark eyes met hers. "You know people lived in Prosper before it was called Prosper."

"I know. You mentioned it twice."

"It doesn't make sense to hold a community picnic when there was already a community here."

"It's important for us to be there."

"I didn't say I wasn't going. I said it doesn't make sense to celebrate something being thirty when it's been settled for hundreds more years."

"Have you seen Mama?" Ruthanna asked.

In the kitchen, in her highchair, Rose Aponi fussed to be picked up, and Ruthanna crossed the kitchen to pick her up. At eleven months old, Rose Aponi already had Bertram's seriousness, quiet sense of humour, and dark eyes. She babbled happy sounds.

"She's out there with Dora and Mack," Bertram said.

Ruthanna reached for Rose Aponi's hand and kissed every finger, and Rose Aponi flashed a gummy smile with three front teeth. "What about your father?" Ruthanna asked.

"Talking with Mrs O'Sullivan," Bertram said.

"I think they'd be good together."

Bertram's grunt carried down the hallway. "They do like to dance. Don't think Da would ever remarry."

"It's been over ten years since your mother died."

"I know." Bertram turned to Ruthanna. The lines of his nose and jaw were contoured by shadowing, sharpening them. He tugged on one shift cuff, then the other. Always meticulous in appearance, always the businessman ready to strike the next deal.

Ruthanna's heart ached. A little sigh that was private and profound and best sighed against Bertram's bare skin.

"Think the mine owners will be out there?" Bertram cocked his head towards the street. "The newspaper reported the mayor had extended invitations to the owners."

"Who's going to travel five days from Toronto by train to attend a giant picnic at the base of the Rockies?"

"Someone who likes to examine their money."

"They can inspect their gold bars in bank vaults in Toronto."

Ruthanna laughed. "Their money's from coal. They'd much rather see the billowing black clouds from a train's smokestack."

Bertram strode towards her with confident strides. "They're burning money then."

Ruthanna laughed and adjusted Rose Aponi's bonnet.

"Are you bringing this?" Bertram pointed to a large bowl on the counter.

Ruthanna nodded. She kissed Rose Aponi's cheek and lifted her out of her highchair. Rose Aponi nuzzled against Ruthanna's neck. Ruthanna carried Rose Aponi from the kitchen to the shop, and Bertram followed, bringing the bowl.

Lively fiddle and banjo music came from outside. Townspeople milled around, with some setting up tables and others dancing. Most faces were familiar, but a few weren't. The unfamiliar ones were more serious in expression, and they wore nicer clothes. The unknown men sported gold pinky rings and gold-knobbed walking sticks. Beside them, women paraded in silk dresses with bustles and hats with ostrich feathers.

"They're from Toronto or Vancouver." Bertram lifted his chin towards the street. "They have to if they're dressed like that."

Attending grand dinner parties and five-hundred-person theatres lit by crystal chandeliers had been Ruthanna's life for a short moment. Had her papa's fortunes been better and longer-lasting, she would still be in Vancouver.

Rose Aponi babbled, and Ruthanna smiled. Had Ruthanna's papa had better fortunes, Ruthanna wouldn't have her greatest treasures—Rose Aponi and Bertram.

Bertram held the door open for Ruthanna. "I'm going to chat with them."

"Why?"

"To see if I can get investors."

Investors. A foul word, Ruthanna never wanted to hear in her house. The word had been branded on her young soul, leaving an ugly, unhealable scar. "We can use our funds to build the business."

Bertram eased the door shut, and the sounds from the community picnic lowered. "It'll take longer."

“But we do it our way. We don’t have to run to the telegraph office every time we want to make a decision.”

“The business is growing fast. I need more capital.”

“We can take out a loan—” Ruthanna cut off her sentence.

Bertram frowned.

Ruthanna cocked her hip and rested Rose Aponi on it. “We can go to a bank in Cardston.”

“That’s hours away by horse, and the train doesn’t run every day. Every banker outside of Prosper will ask me why I didn’t go to the local bank.”

“We’re not approaching investors. Especially ones from outside of Prosper. I don’t trust them.”

“I don’t trust the bank.” The rim of his bowler hat shadowed his eyes, and he slid his gaze towards the floor.

A prickly silence filled the store. If more words were exchanged, they’d turn heated and hard to hear. She knew this, and Bertram knew it, too. If no words were exchanged, the matter would never be resolved.

More silence, heavier and thicker, tested the boundaries of their marriage. They had skirted the issue so much that they had worn deep tracks around the topic.

Rose Aponi babbled more, and she twisted her body, reaching for Bertram. She fussed more in Ruthanna’s arms. Ruthanna adjusted how she held Rose Aponi.

Rose Aponi nuzzled against Ruthanna. “Mama.”

Was that Rose Aponi’s first word? Was it? My daughter’s first word was for me. Surprised, Ruthanna turned to her daughter. “What did you say?”

Bertram straightened. His frown transformed into a surprised smile.

“Mama.” Rose Aponi giggled.

Joy spread through Ruthanna, warming her. “And who’s that?” She pointed at Bertram.

Rose Aponi babbled some syllables, starting with p.

“That’s right. That’s papa.”

Bertram’s lips twisted in a proud smile.

“Mama.” Rose Aponi clapped her hands.

“That’s right.” Ruthanna pressed a kiss to Rose Aponi’s head.

The tension in the air evaporated, leaving behind hope and possibilities.

“What about a local investor?” Ruthanna asked. “What if we find someone that we both trust?”

Bertram’s gaze met hers. “Who?”

An Exchange of Words is a short story based a year after Jaded Hearts

“Bertie and Vernon. Pernilla and Lars. Or even Clement Marshall.”

Bertram gave a slow nod and opened the door. “That would work.”

She’s out to protect her family’s future, and he’s out to hide his family’s past. Both need each other to survive.

Mail-order bride Ruthanna Helms travels to Prosper, District of Alberta, to marry Bertram Milligan. Determined not to repeat her mother’s mistakes, Ruthanna will only say “I do” once her papa’s debts are repaid.

Bertram is a family-oriented man with a quiet presence, a struggling business, and a dark past. He signs up with an agency seeking a well-respected wife to help his standing in the community. Working hard to build a future, he’s dragged back into the quagmire of his father’s sordid deals. When Bertram’s past catches up with him and threatens Ruthanna’s future, Ruthanna is faced with a hard choice. Will she choose independence or love?

What’s a woman to do when her future is snatched from her? Fight for it.

If you like historical westerns set in small frontier towns, with a mail-order bride and a former outlaw hero, and you like medium heat, then you’ll love this book.

**

The author uses British spelling. The book contains sex and mild swearing.

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