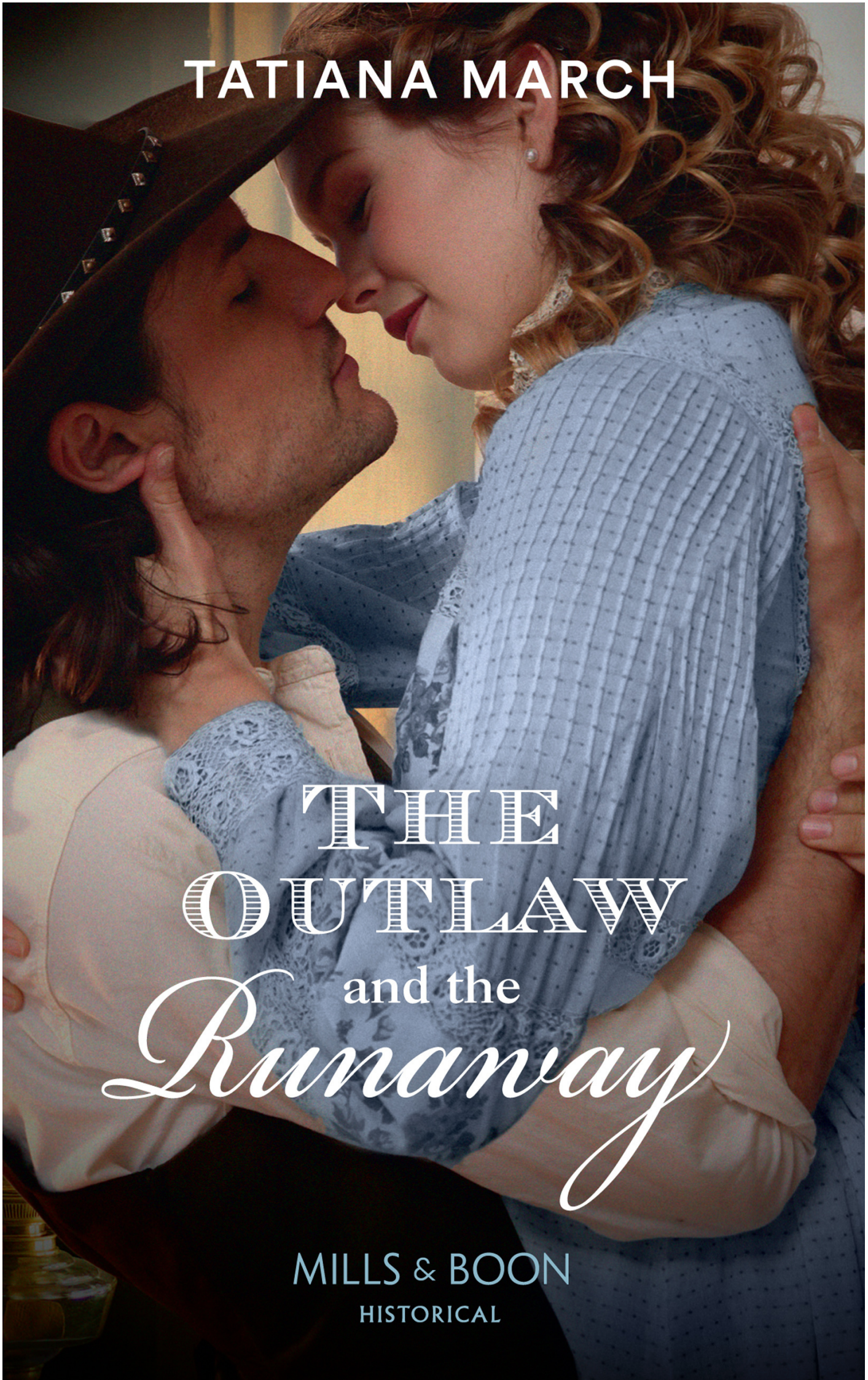
TATIANA MARCH
THE OUTLAW and the Runaway
MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

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Tatiana March

The Outlaw And The Runaway

«HarperCollins»

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He doesn't want to be an outlaw…Can this shy runaway redeem him?When Celia's father is implicated in a robbery she can't stay and suffer the wrath of the townsfolk. Her refuge is brooding Roy Hagan. He's tough enough to protect her, but life with an outlaw is no place for a sheltered young woman like her. Unless Roy can change—and prove that beneath his steely exterior lurks a heart of gold…

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Содержание

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"Exciting, emotional and sensual."

—RT Book Reviews on From Runaway to Pregnant Bride

"Readers will enjoy the robust characters, the authentic setting and the fast pace of this tale."

—RT Book Reviews on The Bride Lottery

Before becoming a novelist TATIANA MARCH tried various occupations—including being a chambermaid and an accountant. Now she loves writing Western historical romance. In the course of her research Tatiana has been detained by the US border guards, had a skirmish with the Mexican army, and stumbled upon a rattlesnake. This has not diminished her determination to create authentic settings for her stories.

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The Outlaw and the Runaway

Tatiana March

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Chapter One

Arizona Territory, 1882

Rock Springs was no different from other Western towns Roy Hagan had seen. Perhaps the single thoroughfare was shabbier than most, the signs over the stores a little more faded. The bank stood at the northern end, just before the boardwalk started. A square building of adobe brick, it had three tall windows that glinted in the midday sun, however the frosted glass prevented prying eyes from seeing inside.

Roy rode past the bank, reined his buckskin to a halt outside the mercantile and dismounted. The two men with him, Zeke Davies and Joe Saldana, also got off their horses.

After tying their mounts to the hitching rail, all three men stepped up to the boardwalk, boots thudding in an unhurried cadence. Saldana wore Mexican spurs with big rowels that made an arrogant jangle as he walked. All three wore their hats pulled low and long dusters that covered their gun belts.

"You stay here," Roy ordered, talking in a guarded voice that carried no more than a whisper. "Roll a smoke, light up. Keep your eyes on the street. Count the number of people you see—men, women, children. Pay extra attention to anyone who goes into the bank."

The other two nodded. Neither of them spoke.

"I'll check out the store," Roy went on. "Then I'll come back outside and we'll sit down over there." He gestured at a timber bench near the saloon entrance. "I'll go into the saloon, buy three glasses of beer and bring them out. For an hour, we laugh and joke while we survey the town. We don't get drunk. We don't get into arguments. If anyone approaches us, we'll be friendly and polite. Is that clear?"

His associates nodded again. Saldana was tall and thin, with a droopy mustache and a long, pointed chin. Davies was compact and muscular, with a square face that gave him the belligerent air of a bulldog. Roy hardly knew either of the pair. All but one of his former associates had been shot to pieces while robbing a train in New Mexico a few months ago. Roy and the only other survivor, Dale Hunter, had taken refuge in the maze of canyons between Utah and Arizona, where they had drifted into joining the Red Bluff Gang.

Most of the outlaws in the gang had a bounty on their head and only left their remote hideout to do a job. Roy had no wanted poster out on him, for despite his distinctive looks he'd never been identified in the course of a robbery. The lack of notoriety served him well, for it allowed him to ride from town to town, scouting out potential targets.

Alert and tense, Roy cast another glance along the somnolent street. A stray dog lay panting in the shade of the water trough by the hitching rail. A tall man in a leather apron had stepped out of the barbershop and stood on the boardwalk, drinking coffee from a china mug. Somewhere in the distance, a woman's voice was calling for a child to come inside and eat.

Satisfied everything remained peaceful, Roy turned around and strode in through the open doorway of the mercantile. As he stepped up to the counter, he kept his hands pressed against the unbuttoned edges of his duster to stop the garment from flaring wide and exposing his pair of Smith & Wesson revolvers.

Inside the store, homely scents—coffee, peppermint, lamp oil—tugged at some distant corners of his memory. Roy crushed the sudden yearning for a normal, peaceful life. He would enjoy the few moments he could glimpse into that long-forgotten world and discard any pointless dreams of making it his again.

Behind the store counter, the elderly clerk climbed down from the ladder he'd used to stack bolts of calico on the higher shelves. He jumped down the last step, turned toward Roy and greeted him with a polite nod. "Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?"

Alert and nimble despite his advanced years, the clerk appeared prosperous. His white shirt was pristine, his sparse hair neatly combed, the lenses of his steel wire spectacles sparkling. A man who took pride in himself and his profession. Roy felt another stab of regret, accompanied by some vague emotion that might have been shame.

"Matches," he said. "In a waterproof tin."

"Certainly, sir."

While the clerk bustled about, taking a small metal box from a drawer and filling it with wooden phosphorus matches, Roy felt a prickle at the back of his neck. Slowly, he shifted on his feet. His right hand eased to the pistol hidden beneath his duster, while his left hand went to the brim of his hat, making the twisting motion appear natural as he turned sideways to survey the store.

Between the aisles of merchandise, a young woman had paused in her task of sweeping the floor, and now she stood still, fingers clasped around the long handle of the broom. Medium height, middle twenties, she wore a faded green dress that revealed a full figure with feminine curves. Her hair was light brown, with a touch of gold where it had been exposed to the sun. From the few strands

that fluttered free from her upsweep, Roy could tell her hair would pull into a riot of curls if left unconfined.

He tugged at the brim of his hat. “Ma’am.”

Still and silent, the girl stared at him from the corner of her eye, not facing him squarely. Roy’s posture stiffened. He was used to women staring at him, but there was something different in this girl’s perusal.

Usually, women stared at him with a mix of pity and curiosity, wondering what damage he might be hiding beneath the black patch that covered his left eye. Some studied him with undisguised feminine interest, drawn by the thick waves of golden hair and the vivid blue of his single eye, fascinated by the contrast they made with the air of danger that surrounded him, hinting at his outlaw status, even while his pair of guns remained out of sight.

A fallen angel, a saloon girl had once called him.

But he could detect no pity in this girl’s expression, and neither did he sense the invitation some women conveyed through their bold inspection. She was contemplating him with a hopeful, earnest look, as if in him she might have recognized a missing relation, or perhaps some long-lost friend.

But it could not be.

Roy knew it couldn’t. He had no family, and no friends, except perhaps Dale Hunter. Could he have met her before? It was uncommon for a sporting girl to reform, but even that possibility Roy was able to rule out, for he could remember each one of the few women he had ever followed into an upstairs room.

Silently cursing in his mind, Roy returned his attention to the elderly store clerk and paid for his tin of matches. It might be a problem about the girl. Someone who had stared at him with such intensity might remember his features, could furnish a lawman with a description.

Too bad, Roy thought as he strolled back out to the boardwalk, however it was bound to happen one day. He couldn’t expect to remain unknown forever—not since he had joined the Red Bluff Gang and was forced to take an active part in the raids. Earlier, before his former outfit got wiped out, his role had been limited to training horses for the robbers, but now both he and Dale Hunter had sunk one notch deeper into the outlaw life.

* * *

During the week that followed, twice more Roy rode into town and stopped at the mercantile. The first time the girl was nowhere to be seen, but from behind the aisles Roy could hear the rustle of skirts and the soft clatter of feminine footsteps.

A few moments later, while he was loitering outside on the boardwalk with his associates, Roy noticed the girl staring at him through the big plate glass window of the mercantile. Again, she kept her face averted, slanting a sideways look at him.

Roy couldn’t figure out what bothered him about the girl so much. It was not just the allure of a pretty female with the kind of figure that could send a man’s blood boiling in his veins. Neither was it the danger she posed, in terms of recognizing him.

It was those strange looks she was sending him.

As if they knew each other.

As if they had something in common.

The second time Roy returned to the store, the elderly clerk was alone, with no other customers to overhear the conversation. Roy bought a bag of Arbuckle’s roasted coffee beans. As he dug in his pocket for coins, he spoke in a casual tone.

“The girl who works here, she your daughter?”

The clerk snapped to attention. “Celia Courtwood?”

“The girl with light brown hair.”

“That’s Miss Courtwood,” the clerk replied. “No kin to me. I employ her a few hours a week to tidy up the shelves.” The old man took down his glasses and pretended to polish them with a cloth

he tugged out of his breast pocket. Intent on the task, he spoke with a mixture of embarrassment and eagerness. “She needs a husband, in case you might be interested. Her pa is poorly. Between you and me, I think that’s why they came out West. Hoped it would be easier for her to find a husband out here.”

“I’m a drifter,” Roy pointed out. “I have no use for a wife.”

“Every man has at least one use for a wife.” The clerk took the silver dollar Roy handed out and made change, ill at ease, but something—the urge to help the girl, Roy suspected—kept him talking. “She’s a lady, Miss Courtwood, mark my words. Don’t let the people in town tell you any different. They’re just a bunch of narrow-minded fools.”

Puzzled, Roy picked up his purchase and walked out of the store. He had to fight the temptation to find out more, to discover what circumstances could give rise to such bold hints and veiled comments about the girl’s reputation in the community. However, it wouldn’t do to ask too many questions, attract unnecessary attention.

And yet, as Roy stood on the boardwalk, pretending to be engaged in conversation with his associates while they surveyed the bank, the old man’s comments kept turning over in his mind. Why would a pretty girl like Miss Courtwood struggle to find a husband? And what could the townsfolk possibly have against her? Most of all, what could be the reason why she kept stealing those secretive, somehow hopeful looks at him?

* * *

Her heart racing, her face flushed with excitement, Celia hurried home to the small frame house along a dusty side street. He’d come back again, that man with a patch over his left eye. She’d assumed he was just passing through, but perhaps he was planning to settle in the area, and she’d have a chance to get to know him.

Even as the prospect formed in her thoughts, Celia knew it to be a false hope. The man bore the stamp of lawlessness, guns concealed beneath his long duster, his single eye sweeping his surroundings with the alert tension of a hunted animal. Deep down, Celia had an inkling why he’d come into town, but she refused to accept the idea.

Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to the scar on her cheek. Despite his disability, the young man seemed so confident, so—so *whole*. How did he do it? How did he find the inner strength to ignore the curious stares, to shrug off the pitying glances? She longed to learn his secret, to discover the key that might allow her to tell everyone in town to go to hell, which was where they deserved to be.

Letting the heels of her half boots ring out her anger at the citizens of Rock Springs, Celia clattered up the porch steps and let herself in. The front door opened directly to a parlor furnished with sagging armchairs and crammed bookcases they had purchased with the house. The books had turned out to be a treasure trove, one of the few things that gave her pleasure in this place that had wrecked her hopes.

In the kitchen, Celia stirred the embers in the big cast-iron stove and got a meal started, oatmeal gruel with tinned milk. The bland fare was one of the few things her father could eat without retching, the tumor in his belly having ruined his appetite.

By the time Papa came home, Celia had the table set, with a posy of wildflowers decorating the center. Long walks in the desert were another source of pleasure, something that allowed her to leave her worries behind for a few hours at a time.

As Celia watched her father shuffle into the kitchen and take his seat, a shaft of despair pierced her carefully maintained shield of courage. All his vitality was gone, leaving a thin husk of a man, with sparse brown curls and ashen skin. For as long as she could remember, sickness had been part of her life, first seeing her frail mother succumb to one ailment after another, and now witnessing her father slowly fade away.

But even in his weakened state, Papa managed an encouraging smile at her. “Celia girl, are you all set for the church social on Sunday?”

Celia curled her nervous fingers into the cotton apron she wore to protect her threadbare gown. “Papa, it’s no use...”

“Make your fried chicken,” her father prompted. “Nobody makes it better.”

The reproach in his tone caused Celia’s sense of helplessness to flare into frustration, and she spoke more sharply than she had intended. “Papa, at a box lunch, men don’t pay to eat. They pay to court a girl.”

“You’ve got to keep trying, Celia girl.”

There was such anguish in her father’s eyes, such fear for her future in his manner, it added to Celia’s list of woes. She wanted to tell him their only solution was to go away—to leave Rock Springs and move into some other town—but no business would employ a man in her father’s state of health. The bank manager was only keeping him on because dismissing a dying man might be seen as a callous act that could cost him the goodwill of his customers.

Moreover, Celia knew Papa lacked the strength for a new start. He loved the house, the books, the quiet town and the few friends who had yet to desert him on her account. Ever since Papa had learned his days were numbered, he’d been looking for a place to die in peace, and she could not wrench him away from what he had found in Rock Springs.

Celia sighed in resignation and straightened her spine. She’d not been to a church social since she fell out of grace with the town, but how bad could it be? So far, their only weapon against her had been rejection and ugly whispers. *Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me*, she reminded herself—a gem of wisdom gleaned from one of the old issues of the *Christian Recorder* she’d found in the bookcase.

“I’ll try, Papa,” Celia promised, and made an effort to sound positive. “I’ll make my fried chicken, and I’ll wear my blue dress and put rouge over my scar.”

* * *

Camped by a creek a mile outside town, Roy Hagan stood beneath the morning sun and dictated a message to Zeke Davies, to be delivered to Lom Curtis, the leader of the outlaw gang. It would be too risky to put the information in writing, in case Davies caught the attention of a lawman and the note was discovered.

“We’ll need six men,” Roy repeated, drilling in the information. “Three in the bank and three outside. We’ll hit at noon. The ranchers come into town in the morning, the miners in the evening for the saloon. Midday is the quietest, and the bank does not close for lunch.”

Bulldog features furrowed in concentration, Davies memorized the details. After a week of constant companionship, Roy had learned to know his associates. Davies was slow-witted and liked to follow orders, grateful that some other man had done the thinking.

“Saldana and I will ride over to Prescott and wait there,” Roy went on. “Tell Curtis to telegraph me at the Western Union office there, to let us know when he plans to arrive.”

Lom Curtis, the leader of the Red Bluff Gang, had an inside contact, someone who would let him know when Wells Fargo was due to collect the gold the miners in the region deposited at the bank. The gang would time their raid just before the next collection, when the amount of gold in the bank’s vault would be at its greatest.

Davies rehearsed the message a few more times, got on his sorrel and trotted off. Roy kept an eye on the man until the trail took him out of sight behind a rise. Then he turned to Saldana. The lanky Mexican was crouching beside the dying campfire, trimming his droopy mustache and admiring the result in the small mirror he carried in his vest pocket.

“We’ll ride into town,” Roy told him. “I want to see how many people come to the Sunday service. It’ll give us an idea of how big a posse they might be able to put together.”

Saldana gave his reflection one final perusal and put the mirror away. Roy had learned that the tall, lithe outlaw came from a good family in Tucson. After a secret tryst with a judge’s daughter, trumped-up charges of rape had forced Saldana to choose between the hangman’s rope and a life on

the wrong side of the law. To Roy's surprise, Saldana showed no bitterness and had not been cured of his womanizing ways.

They broke camp, carefully sweeping the ground and burying the coals to hide the signs of their stay before getting on their horses. Roy rode a buckskin, a color that blended in with the desert scenery. Saldana put vanity before safety and rode a gleaming black stallion, useful for a night raid but easy to spot during a daylight getaway.

In town, a collection of buggies and carts and saddle horses stood outside the small, unpainted lumber church. Roy signaled to Saldana and they drew their mounts to a halt. People were streaming out of the church and congregating on a flat piece of ground where a few women were already bustling around a pair of trestle tables laden with food and stacked with baskets decorated with ribbons and bows.

"It's a church social," Saldana said, an eager glint in his dark eyes. He smoothed the ends of his mustache. "There'll be women. Dancing."

"No," Roy told him. "It's too dangerous."

"Even more dangerous to keep away," Saldana countered. "Men ride a hundred miles for a church social. It will look suspicious if we turn away."

Saldana was right, Roy had to concede. To reassure the town about their presence, they had put out a rumor that they'd been employed as security guards for a freight line out of Denver and were now drifting south, enjoying their leisure time until their money ran out. Those kinds of men—honest men—would feel entitled to take part in the festivities.

While Roy mulled over the dilemma, his attention fell on a girl in a blue dress. It was a different dress, and she wore a wide-brimmed bonnet to match, but no dress could hide those feminine curves, and no bonnet could confine that riot of curls.

Celia Courtwood. Her image had filled his thoughts at night, while he lay awake listening to the ripple of the creek by the camp. Why this particular female had stuck in his mind like a burr might stick to the shaggy winter coat of a horse, Roy could not figure out. He tried to tell himself it was the danger she posed, in terms of recognizing him, but he knew it to be a lie.

Watching the girl through his uncovered blue eye, Roy fought the conflicting impulses to ride away as fast as he could and to stay, to seek an opportunity to talk to her.

"All right," he finally said with a glance at Saldana. "But don't draw attention to yourself. Keep your guns hidden."

They dismounted and adjusted their heavy canvas dusters to make sure their pistols remained out of sight. Instead of tying their horses to the hitching rail outside the church, they picketed them at the edge of the grassy meadow beyond the clearing and walked over to join the crowd.

A few people darted curious looks in their direction as they came to stand on the outskirts of the throng, but most had their attention on a portly man with muttonchop sideburns and a bowler hat, who had taken up position behind one of the trestle tables.

The man banged a gavel against the timber top to demand silence. "Welcome all, friends and strangers alike," he boomed. "I'll just remind you of the rules. Each lady will hold up her luncheon basket and describe the contents. Gentlemen will bid, and the winner gets to share the luncheon with the lady. Bidding starts at twenty-five cents. No bidding over five dollars. All funds go to the church maintenance fund."

A box lunch.

Roy had heard of those, but he'd never attended one. Another wave of regret washed over him. Living in the isolation of an outlaw camp since the age of fourteen, he'd never had a chance to court a girl. Apart from prostitutes, the only females he knew were Big Kate and Miss Gabriela who belonged to the men in the Red Bluff Gang.

Curious, Roy watched as the portly gentleman behind the trestle table gestured toward a gaggle of blushing young females who stood behind him, fluttering like a flock of brightly colored birds. A

slender blonde in a frilly pink dress stepped forward, picked up a basket from the table and held it up. “Meat and potato pie and raspberry crumble.”

A short man in a brown suit instantly bid five dollars. Beaming with pride, the girl moved aside and another one took her place. Mostly, the picnic baskets went for a couple of dollars. An odd restlessness settled over Roy as he watched Celia Courtwood. She was standing slightly apart from the others, looking increasingly fraught as the auction progressed and the group of girls thinned out.

Finally, only one basket remained on the table. The auctioneer glanced around, preparing to wrap up the proceedings and put his gavel down, but a gaunt man with pale skin called for him to wait and hurried over to Celia. With an agitated whisper, he ushered the girl toward the trestle table.

Attempting a smile, she picked up the last remaining basket and held it up. “Fried chicken and apple pie.”

The man with muttonchop sideburns squirmed. Like water rippling across a pond, the entire crowd turned to stare at a tall man dressed in black. The preacher, Roy assumed, and for whatever reason the reverend ignored the questioning glances of his congregation. Silence fell, so thick Roy could hear the crunching of gravel beneath two dozen pairs of boots and shoes as people shifted nervously on their feet.

At the front of the crowd, Celia stood forlorn, her head turned aside. Beneath the brim of her bonnet Roy could see a smear of rouge on her cheeks, evidence of a clumsy effort to appear more attractive. She blinked to hold back the tears but Roy feared they would soon start falling. A slow burn of anger flickered into flame in his gut.

What was wrong with everyone? Why didn’t anyone bid?

He craned his neck, peering over the forest of hats and bonnets in front of him for a better view, planning to call out twenty-five cents to get the bidding started. Surely, someone would follow his lead? Surely, one of the others would be gentlemanly enough to put the poor girl out of her misery?

Roy raised his hand, opened his mouth. “Five dollars!”

It came out of nowhere, through no conscious thought. Beside him, Saldana muttered a curse. A hush went through the crowd. Celia looked up from beneath the brim of her bonnet. Her eyes were tear-bright, but she straightened her spine and lifted her chin.

“Sir, do not seek amusement at my expense.”

“I’m not seeking amusement,” Roy replied calmly. “I’m seeking to eat, and I’m partial to fried chicken and apple pie.”

“Stranger, what’s your name?” the auctioneer called out.

“That’s for the lady to know,” Roy replied. He shouldered his way through the throng, came to a halt in front of Celia and held out his hand. After a moment of hesitation, she lowered the wicker basket to the crook of her elbow to free one hand and slipped her fingers into his. Roy could tell her hand was shaking. He tightened his hold, seeking to reassure her as he escorted her to the grassy meadow where the other girls and their suitors had already spread out their picnic blankets.

“Wait here,” he told her.

He strode off, waving for Saldana to follow. The tall Mexican was grinning and shaking his head, making *tut-tut* noises, like an old woman. When they reached their horses, Roy gave his buckskin, Dagur, a reassuring pat on the neck and took down a blanket from his bedroll.

“Don’t draw attention,” Saldana complained.

“All right,” Roy admitted. “It was a stupid mistake.”

And yet he couldn’t regret what he had done. The girl was a puzzle he wanted to solve. And witnessing her misery had tugged at something inside him, some faint remnant of sentimentality and compassion. He knew what it felt like to be ostracized, to be treated like an outcast. Whatever transgressions the girl might have committed, she didn’t deserve such a public humiliation.

“What do you want me to do?” Saldana asked.

Roy hesitated. The sensible thing would be to escort the girl home and ride away before the townspeople had a chance to get a closer look at him, but doing the sensible thing seemed to be eluding him today. “Take the horses to the water trough by the saloon and make sure they drink their fill. I won’t be long. Half an hour at the most. Then we’ll leave, head north toward Prescott.”

Saldana’s narrow face puckered in dismay. “No dancing?”

“No dancing,” Roy replied, and tried to mollify the Mexican by appealing to his vanity. “You’re too handsome. The ladies would remember you.”

Saldana smirked, tapped his eyebrow to indicate the black patch Roy wore over his left eye—a feature far more memorable than a neatly trimmed moustache or a seductive smile.

“My eye patch don’t matter,” Roy told him. “You’ll understand later.”

He left Saldana to deal with the horses and returned to the girl. She was sitting on the ground, arms wrapped around her upraised knees, watching him stride over. Roy spread out the blanket beside her, gestured for the girl to move onto it and settled opposite her, one leg stretched out, the other bent at the knee, the hems of his long duster flaring about him.

“Thank you,” the girl said. She started to unpack the contents of her basket. “It was a gallant thing to do, to rescue me from standing out there like a convict in front of a firing squad.” She kept her face averted, the words spoken barely loud enough for Roy to hear.

Not wasting any time, he got on with solving the puzzle she presented. “Why didn’t anyone else bid? What do the townsfolk have against you?”

The girl didn’t reply. She merely handed him a piece of fried chicken wrapped in a linen napkin and refused to meet his gaze. At her reticence, Roy let his irritation show. “Wipe that red muck from your face,” he told her curtly. “You don’t need it.”

Still she didn’t speak. Not acting insulted or angry, she pulled a handkerchief from a pocket in her skirt, uncapped the bottle of lemonade she had lifted out of the basket and tilted the bottle to dampen the scrap of cotton. With movements that were slow and deliberate, she lifted the handkerchief to her face and rubbed her cheek clean of the rouge, finally turning to face him squarely.

Roy stared. It hadn’t occurred to him that every time he’d seen the girl, she’d presented him with the same side of her face. Now he understood the reason. The other side of her face bore a scar. Not a great blemish by any means, but an unusual one. Two lines of pale, slightly puckered skin that formed a cross, and beneath it an incomplete circle, as if someone had drawn some kind of a symbol on her cheek.

“That’s why they didn’t bid?” Roy frowned at the idea. “But the scar on your face is hardly noticeable. It certainly is not unsightly.”

When the girl showed no reaction, when she merely contemplated him with a pinched, forlorn expression on her pretty features, Roy decided not to press the topic for now. Lowering his attention to the piece of chicken in his hand, he took a bite and spoke around the mouthful.

“This is good, very good.”

After a moment of enjoying the food, he glanced up at the girl. Appearing more in control of herself now, she was studying him—his eye patch, to be more accurate. *So that was it.* That’s why she had stared at him with such intensity—in him she had identified a fellow sufferer of some physical deformity.

“How did you get the scar?” Roy asked gently.

“I fell against a stove when I was small. The hatch had a decorative pattern. A cross, like a plus sign, and a circle at the end of each spoke. Part of the pattern burned to my skin.”

“It’s very faint. Hardly worth worrying about.”

“I know.” Her voice was low. “When I grew up, the scar faded. The skin is a bit puckered, but the blemish isn’t terribly obvious. Not enough to ruin my appearance. But out here in the West the sun is stronger. The scar doesn’t tan, and I like taking walks in the desert. As my face got browner and browner from the sun, the scar stood out more and more...and then the bishop came...”

The girl fell silent and darted a glance toward the crowd, where a teenage boy was playing “Oh! Susanna” on a violin and the others were singing along.

“The bishop?” Roy prompted. “Is he the tall man dressed in black?”

“That’s the preacher, Reverend Fergus. The bishop is his superior.” Abandoning any pretense of eating, the girl folded her legs to her chest again and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Have you ever heard of a satanic cross?”

Roy met her gaze, unease stirring within him. “Can’t say that I have.”

“It’s a cross with an upside-down question mark at the base.” The girl touched her fingertips to her cheek. “Like the open circle at the end of my scar. The bishop came out to bless the new church a few months ago. He is a fanatic, and he told people that I bear the mark of the Devil on my face.”

Startled, Roy lifted his brows. “And they believe him?”

The girl’s lips twisted into a disparaging smirk. “I don’t think they really do. I think they want the reverend to tell them it is all complete nonsense, but he is a weak, spineless man, and he doesn’t have the courage to contradict his bishop.”

Roy swallowed. The chicken had lost its flavor. Now he could understand those questioning glances the townsfolk had been sending to the preacher while Celia stood holding up her lunch basket, and why the reverend had been pretending not to notice them.

“I wish I could help you,” he told her quietly. “But I can’t.”

“I know. I am grateful for this.” The girl released one arm from around her knees to gesture to the lunch basket. “I’m supposed to collect your five dollars and hand it in, but I won’t do it. I’ll tell them I forgot. I know it’s petty, but it will make me feel better.”

“If you like, you can tell them I refused to pay.”

She let out a bleak gust of laughter. “If I do that, they’ll say it’s because I served you a lousy meal, so it will end up being my fault anyway.”

“Don’t...” Roy shook his head. *Don’t beat yourself up so.*

“It’s the same everywhere,” the girl went on bitterly, the words flooding out on a wave of anguish. It seemed to Roy that the hurt had festered, and now it was gushing forth like a boil that needed lancing. “Back in Baltimore, no man would marry me, because my mother was sickly. They feared I’d be the same, and they’d be lumbered with a useless wife and a stack of doctor’s bills. Then my mother died...”

Pausing to draw a breath, the girl dashed the back of her hand across her eyes. “My father has a growth in his stomach, a cancer, and he worries about me being left on my own, so he brought me out here, where women are scarce. To start with, everything went well. I had two suitors, Stuart Clifton from one of the ranches, and Horton Tanner, who works for the stage line and comes by twice a week. No knights on a white stallion but good, decent men...and then that blasted bishop comes along and ruins it all...”

Memories of being shunned flooded over Roy, bringing with them a wave of pain, even now, after half a lifetime. He swept a glance around the picnic meadow to make sure no one was observing them and turned back to the girl. After tugging the brim of his hat lower for added protection, he reached for the patch that covered his brown eye and said, “You’re not the only one who has suffered because some folks claim you bear the mark of the Devil.”

Chapter Two

Celia wished she could stop babbling about her misfortunes but her tongue refused to be reined in. When she paused to fight the urge to weep, the stranger swept a careful look around them and tugged at the rawhide cord securing the patch over his left eye. She’d been wondering what damage he was hiding beneath, and now she felt ashamed for her curiosity. It was no business of hers. She steeled herself against the sight of his injury, and then gasped as she met the blinking gaze of a perfectly healthy brown eye.

“Your eyes,” she breathed. “They’re of different color.”

"One pale blue, one dark brown." The man restored the patch over his brown eye. "It's supposed to be the sign of a witch. Or, the way a girl put it once, God and the Devil are fighting over me, with one half each. A fallen angel, she called me."

Fascinated, Celia studied his face. *Fallen angel*. The description fitted. The stranger had elegant, finely crafted features, with a straight nose and high cheekbones, and wide, well-defined lips. The tall, rangy body and the breadth of his shoulders added a stamp of rugged masculinity to looks that otherwise might have appeared too beautiful for a man.

Shamelessly, Celia let her gaze linger on the man's countenance, wishing he hadn't slipped the black cotton patch back in place. "Is that why you cover up your brown eye?" she asked. "As a protection from prejudice?"

"No." The stranger seemed to hesitate. "Having different-colored eyes is a distinctive mark. When a man rides the owl hoot trail—"

"What's that?" Celia broke in.

"Owl hoot trail. It means the outlaw trail."

"You're an outlaw?" She felt compelled to ask the question, even though she'd already guessed the answer. Even now, she could see the shape of the twin holsters beneath his long duster, knew he was wearing a double rig of pistols, and despite his handsome features there could be no mistaking the air of lawlessness about him.

It occurred to Celia he might know her father was the teller at the bank. Behind his kindness might lurk a plan to extract information out of her. However, so far the stranger hadn't mentioned the bank. Perhaps, after all, he had merely bid for her picnic basket as a caper, an amusing way to spend an hour while his partner was occupied with some errand.

Despite his criminal associations, Celia couldn't help but be drawn to the fair-haired outlaw. His kindness appeared genuine, not calculated. Moreover, there seemed to be an air of decency about him, a sense of honor. With a sudden lurch of her heart, Celia accepted that the outlaw had made himself vulnerable by confiding in her. By revealing his secret, he had offered her a weapon she could use against him.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked quietly. "If such a distinctive feature might give you away, are you not worried that I might go to the marshal and enlighten him?"

"Rock Springs has no marshal and the county sheriff is fifty miles away."

The answer came swiftly, the tone cool and confident. For a week now, the outlaws had been hanging around the town, and the man's reaction solidified Celia's suspicions. *Are you planning to rob the bank?* The question sprang to her tongue but she left it unsaid. As long as her father wasn't placed in danger, she didn't care if the outlaws took every ounce of gold in the vault. Her bitterness toward the town had grown so fierce it overruled her sense of right and wrong.

For a moment, they sat in silence, each absorbed in their own private thoughts, yet with a sense of camaraderie flowing like a current between them. Celia let her eyes roam over the stranger, drinking in his masculine beauty while she searched for something to say, some opening gambit that would trigger a conversation so interesting he would find it impossible to walk away, but she came up with nothing.

The man rolled up to his feet, adjusted the brim of his hat and slipped one hand beneath his duster. For a few crazy seconds, Celia thought he was going to pull out a gun and shoot her, like one might shoot a lame horse to put it out of its misery, but instead he produced a ten-dollar gold piece out of his pocket.

"I don't have five dollars and I expect you don't have change." He dropped the coin to the blanket, where it landed with a soft thud. "If you don't want to give it to the church, hold on to it for me."

Celia darted out a hand and clasped the coin in her fist before anyone could see it, gripping it so hard the edges dug into her palm. She'd cherish the gold piece as a keepsake. A talisman, to bring

her luck. “Hold on to it for you?” She arched her brows, her attention riveted on the stranger. “Does that mean you intend one day to come back?”

The man said nothing, merely gave her a nod, the dip of his chin so faint it might have been in her imagination. When he took a step back, the edges of his duster flared wide, giving Celia a glimpse of the gun belt circling his lean hips. One of the pistols was holstered butt forward. Heavy and functional, they were the tools of his trade, like a hammer might be for a carpenter, or a shovel for a grave digger. The thought made her shiver.

“You can keep the blanket,” the stranger told her.

Startled, Celia looked down at the gray wool blanket she was seated upon. She’d forgotten it was his. Another keepsake. Something stirred in her chest, a dangerous wave of warmth that could only lead to foolish dreams and pointless longings. She tried to quash the sensation but it refused to go away.

The man touched the brim of his hat in farewell. “Ma’am.”

Celia watched him turn to leave, realizing they hadn’t introduced themselves.

“Wait!” she called out. When the stranger turned back toward her, she spoke in a throaty whisper, making it clear she intended the information to remain a secret between them. “What is your name?”

The corners of his mouth lifted in the tiniest of smiles. Again, he offered no reply, only a slight shake of his head. “Goodbye, Miss Courtwood.”

He knew her name! Desperately, Celia wanted to hold on to the moment, wanted to build on their conversation, add to the enchantment of shared confidences, the two of them against the world. A question popped into her head. “A moment ago, you said that God and the Devil are fighting for your soul. Which one do you think will win?”

That shadow of a smile she’d witnessed a moment ago vanished and instead something cold and hard settled over the man’s handsome features. “Why, Miss Courtwood,” he said softly. “Surely, you know the answer. The Devil has already won.”

With that, the outlaw whirled around on his feet and walked over to the edge of the meadow, where his tall Mexican companion already stood waiting with their horses. They exchanged a few words, and then the man with mismatched eyes vaulted into the saddle and rode away without looking back.

* * *

Roy loitered outside the bank with an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. The midday sun baked down from a clear blue sky, making his scalp itch beneath the black horsehair wig he always wore during a raid, with a tuft arranged to hang over his blue eye, leaving only the brown eye visible. His skin was darkened with a thick brew of tea. He wore denim trousers and battered boots and a dust-stained white tunic with a sash around his waist, and no gun. At a quick glance, he would pass for an Indian.

Ten yards up the street, Jimenez and Keeler stood with six horses, ready to bring them over at his signal. Curtis and Saldana and Davies were already inside the bank. Roy glanced at the fob watch hidden in the folds of his sash. Five minutes. It was taking too long. He put the watch away and dropped the cigarette to the ground—the signal to leave.

A bell jangled down the street. Alert, Roy surveyed the boardwalk. A jolt went through him. The girl, Celia Courtwood, had come out of the mercantile, as if conjured up by the thoughts of her that never seemed to be far from his mind. She began to clean the display window with a bucket of water and a rag. Apart from the girl, the street was quiet. Roy pivoted on his tattered boots and sauntered into the bank.

Inside, Curtis was holding the bank manager and the teller at gunpoint. Behind the wooden partition, Saldana and Davies were busy in front of the open vault. All three wore hats pulled low

and neckerchiefs to hide their features. Roy avoided situations that required such a disguise, for it would draw attention to his unusual eyes.

"Time to go," he declared.

"We need a couple more minutes." Curtis spoke without turning, keeping his gun aimed at the two hostages who sat huddled on the floor, their backs pressed against the wall. "The manager had trouble remembering the combination for the safe."

Saldana called out from behind the counter. "Take some of the load." He tossed a small canvas bag over the partition, then another. Roy caught them in the air. The bags were heavy with gold, the seams straining with the weight.

"Let's go," Roy said again. "Carry what you can and leave the rest."

Saldana and Davies came out through the open hatch and hurried past him, each loaded with bags of gold. Roy swept a look over the hostages. The manager was trim and dapper, in his sixties, dressed in a fine broadcloth suit. The expression on his face conveyed more anger than fear, and Roy suspected his inability to recall the combination had been a deliberate delaying tactic. The other man was gaunt and pale, with thinning brown hair that pulled into tight curls.

In that instant, recognition struck Roy. It was the man he'd seen talking to Celia Courtwood on the day of the box lunch. He must be her father, for there was a resemblance, and he bore the signs of a man suffering from terminal illness. Instinctively, Roy took a step closer. From the corner of his eye, he could see Curtis lift his arm and take aim, pointing at the teller's chest.

"What are you doing?" Roy blurted out and darted forward.

A gunshot boomed around the bank. Roy felt a slam at the back of his shoulder. The room dimmed in his eyes. He dropped the bags of gold. Stumbling forward, he braced his hands against the wall to remain upright. He could feel no pain. From experience he knew that the shock numbed the nerves. The pain would come later.

Behind him, Curtis swore. "You fool. Why did you get in the way?"

Keeping his right hand against the wall, Roy pivoted to face the outlaw boss. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded to know.

Curtis lifted his gun, pointed the barrel at Roy. "Can't leave no loose ends."

With effort, Roy stood straight. He sucked in a deep breath to steady himself. "I'm fine," he said sharply. "I can ride." To prove his fitness, he bent down and picked up the two bags of gold from the floor.

Curtis gave him a quick perusal and nodded. He glanced at the hostages cowering against the wall and shrugged, as if to say it didn't really matter. Then he ushered Roy out of the building. Roy could tell Curtis was keeping an eye on him. The gang leader wanted no injured man left behind, for he did not trust any of his associates to keep their silence if captured by the law.

Out in the bright sunshine, Roy felt his head swim and his mouth go dry. He tossed the bags of gold to Keeler. Saldana and Davies were already cantering away. Roy gripped the pommel of the saddle, gathered his strength to climb up on Dagur. Spooked by the smell of blood, the buckskin took a frightened sidestep, causing Roy to stumble. The others got on their horses and thundered out of town, dust billowing in their wake.

From the boardwalk came the rapid clatter of footsteps. Roy turned to look. The girl was heading the formation of people charging toward the bank. The elderly clerk from the mercantile and the barber in a leather apron followed close behind. Still farther back, three men had burst out of the saloon. One had hurried to his mount at the hitching rail and was pulling a rifle out of a saddle scabbard.

Roy vaulted on his horse, pain throbbing in his shoulder. Once more, he glanced back, as much to look at Celia Courtwood as to assess the danger. The girl had jumped down at the end of the boardwalk, only a few paces away from him. Their gazes collided. From the way he saw her against the backdrop of the weather-beaten buildings and the dusty street, with a full depth perception instead

of the flat vision of a one-eyed man, Roy knew the protecting tuft of horsehair in his wig had shifted aside. And from the way the girl came to a halt, the shock of recognition stamped on her pretty features, he knew that she had noticed his mismatched eyes—had identified him despite the disguise.

For a moment, time stood still as they stared at each other, the air between them charged with unspoken questions and apologies and explanations. Then Roy turned to face forward, dug his heels into the flanks of the buckskin and shot down the street. Behind him came the girl's frightened scream. "Papa! Papa!"

Your father is fine, Roy thought with a trace of irony. *I took the bullet meant for him.*

He couldn't understand what had happened, why Curtis had fired at the teller, unless it was a random act of violence. Some men went crazy with the outlaw life, got into the habit of using gunplay as a means to demonstrate their power, or simply to alleviate the boredom of being shut away in the hideout for months on end, with little to amuse them apart from gambling and drinking and brawling.

A rifle shot cracked through the air. The rancher who'd burst out of the saloon must have fired, and soon others would fetch their hunting weapons and start shooting. Roy heard the bullet whizz by, chasing him. He squatted low in the saddle and urged Dagur on. One hole in his hide was enough.

As he left the town behind, the sun in the sky seemed to grow hotter and hotter. His vision wavered, making the landscape hazy. Pain rolled over him in waves that appeared to swallow him up. Sweat coated his skin, mixing with the stream of blood from his shoulder.

In the distance, he could see a cloud of dust where his associates were making their escape. He twisted awkwardly in the saddle to survey the trail behind him. A burning pain sliced through his side at the motion, but he saw no sign of anyone chasing him.

He slowed his pace, teetered in the saddle. He was losing too much blood. Unless he attended to his wound and got some rest, he'd never survive the long ride north, to the maze of canyons where the law didn't reach.

The gang had arranged to regroup at an abandoned mine, to inspect the haul and to retrieve the provisions they had stored there for the return journey to the hideout. However, Lom Curtis might feel that leaving behind an injured man posed too great a risk. He had a cast-iron rule that any man who joined the Red Bluff Gang could never walk away or be left behind, and in his weakened state Roy would be no match for the outlaw boss—not with fists, not with guns, nor in terms of outwitting him.

Taking a sharp turn into an outcrop of boulders, Roy pointed the buckskin toward the west, along a trail overgrown with sagebrush and creosote. Unlike Saldana and Davies, who'd spent their idle hours gambling, Roy had roamed the surrounding hills. He'd come across an abandoned homestead, with a log cabin and a spring.

If he could make it that far, the cabin would offer a place to hide, a refuge from both a posse and the outlaw leader who placed no value on loyalty.

* * *

Celia shook herself free from the trance she'd tumbled into when she'd recognized the man with mismatched eyes in his Indian disguise. She jumped up the front steps of the bank, shoved the door open with both hands and hurtled through.

"Papa! Papa!" She could hear the shrill ring of terror in her voice, could feel her heart hammering in the confines of her chest.

She raked a frantic glance around the room, divided by a polished oak counter and a glass partition above. Her father and the manager, Mr. Northfield, sat sprawled with their backs against the wall on the customer side. Celia rushed up to them, sank to her knees in front of her father.

"Papa! Are you all right? Are you all right?" With searching hands, she patted his freshly laundered shirt and the suit coat that hung on his emaciated frame. No blood. No blood. But a glazed look filled her father's eyes and beneath her searching palms Celia could feel his frail body trembling with fear.

While she completed her examination, her father sucked in a calming breath and expelled it on a sigh. “I’m fine, Celia girl,” he reassured her. “Just a bit shaken up.”

She turned to the manager. From an affluent Baltimore family, Mr. Northfield had employed her father on a recommendation from shared acquaintances. In his sixties, cool in manner, trim in appearance, with neatly clipped graying hair and a pencil moustache, the manager kept himself aloof from his employees. Celia possessed no fondness for him, but she was grateful for the opportunity he had extended to her father.

“Mr. Northfield, are you all right?”

“I am unharmed, if that is what you mean.” The manager sat upright on the floor and tugged at the lapels of his broadcloth suit. “But I am far from all right. They emptied the vault, all of it. Forty thousand dollars’ worth of gold, the most we have ever held in the bank.”

Her panic receding, Celia twisted on her knees to survey the disarray. A crack ran across the glass partition and ugly scratches marred the front of the oak counter. Behind the partition, the vault stood open, empty coin trays scattered about. Overturned chairs and papers strewn about completed the scene of destruction. In the air, the acrid smell of gunpowder mingled with the familiar scents of beeswax polish and lemon cleaner.

Anger flared in Celia, the edge of it dulled by a sense of guilt and shame. In her bitterness toward the townspeople, she had secretly welcomed the disaster, had gloated over having figured out what no one else seemed to have the brains to suspect.

Now, regret flooded her conscience. Her father loved his job. It gave him dignity, a position in the community. During the robbery, his place of business, the citadel of finance in which he took such pride had been violated, equipment damaged, order and precision replaced with chaos and lawlessness.

She turned back to the men. “I heard a gunshot.”

Her father swallowed, his thin throat rippling. “That’s the damnedest thing, Celia girl. One of the outlaws, the gang leader, pointed his gun at me. I believe he was going to shoot me, but another one of the robbers got in the way. The Indian, with long black hair. I think he got hit.”

Celia’s thoughts reverted to the stranger with mismatched eyes. She’d been waiting for him to return, and for the briefest of instants out there in the midday sun, as she jumped down from the boardwalk and her eyes locked with one brown eye and one blue, the thrill of recognition had made her forget everything else.

Just as she had suspected, the stranger had come back to rob the bank. And he had protected her father. Why had he done it? Was it to rule out the prospect of being hanged for murder if the gang got caught? Or had he known the teller was her father? Had he done it for her, to protect her from the loss of a parent?

“He got hit?” she asked, urgency in her tone as a new worry seized her mind. Such concern for one of the robbers might appear unwarranted, but she had to know. “The man with long black hair who stepped between you and the gunman got hit?”

Her father nodded. “A bullet in the shoulder. He walked out on his own steam, but he was in pain. I could tell.”

As her mental processes sprang back to their normal clarity, Celia recalled hearing rifle shots out in the street while she’d been kneeling to examine her father for injuries. In her mind, she played back the image of the man with different-colored eyes. He had struggled to get on his horse while his companions were already making their escape. The last one to get away, he’d have been the target for those rifle shots.

Fear closed around her, startling in its intensity. She jumped up to her feet and spoke in a breathless rush. “I need air. I have to go outside.”

As she whirled about and darted toward the exit, she noticed Mr. Northfield studying her father with a sharp, assessing look. Perhaps the manager was concerned about her father's fragile health, the impact the frightening events might have on it.

Out in the street, the bright sunshine made Celia blink. Vaguely, she worried about not wearing a bonnet, an omission that would deepen the tan on her skin and cause her scar to stand out even more vividly.

"Did you shoot him?" she cried out to the cluster of men who stood staring into the distance. There was Mr. Selden, her boss at the store, and Mr. Grosser, who ran the barbershop, and three ranchers, one of them holding a rifle. A crowd was gathering around them, but no one was shooting or going to fetch their horses.

"Sorry, Miss Celia," Mr. Grosser replied. "He got away."

He got away.

Her hand went to her chest, where her fingers felt the round shape of the gold coin she'd hung around her neck in a tiny pouch sewn from a scrap of silk. The stranger with mismatched eyes had managed to escape. A sense of destiny, a sense of an inevitable crossing of paths, solidified inside Celia. Every instinct told her that their fates would be intertwined.

Chapter Three

Roy hung grimly in the saddle, pain burning in his shoulder, the blood-soaked shirt sticking to his back, cold shivers racking him. He ought to have packed his wound to stem the bleeding, but he daren't stop, not even to take off the itchy black wig and put his hat on.

He'd slipped the cotton patch back in its place, to protect his brown eye, unused to daylight, from the glare of the sun. Already, his body was shutting down, making him light-headed and giving him a tunnel vision that closed out everything except the trail ahead that led to a place of safety.

At last, the small log cabin, half dug into the hillside, with an earth roof over it, hovered in his sights. With one final burst of effort, Roy urged Dagur up the path, reined in and slid down from the saddle. He stumbled to the entrance and kicked the door open. Ducking his head, he stepped in through the low frame and pulled the buckskin inside after him, then kicked the door shut again.

Darkness filled the cramped space. The horse gave a frightened whinny. Leaning against the heavy flank of the animal to steady himself, Roy stroked the lathered coat.

"Easy, boy. Easy now, Dagur. We're safe."

He tugged aside the patch that covered his brown eye. Protected from light, the eye needed no time to adjust to the darkness, allowing Roy to survey his surroundings.

The place was just as he'd left it two weeks ago. Sturdy log walls, floor of hard-packed earth swept clean, the single window firmly shuttered. Some previous occupant must have burned any remaining furniture for firewood, but they had left the water barrel that stood in the corner next to the primitive stone chimney.

A standard-sized whiskey barrel, it held fifty-three gallons. During his earlier visits Roy had painstakingly cleaned the timber container and filled it from the spring outside, spending hours shuttling to and fro with nothing but a canteen to transport the water.

To complete his preparations, he'd gathered firewood into a tall stack along the rear wall, and with handfuls of desert sand and grit he had scrubbed away the layer of grease from the rusty iron pot that stood on tripod legs inside the stone hearth.

Now he turned to Dagur and pulled his hat from the folds of his bedroll where he had tucked it away, pushed the crown back into shape and sank to his knees beside the water barrel. Using a piece of firewood to knock loose the wooden plug, he lined his hat beneath the hole in the barrel and filled the hollow of the crown to the brim. After replacing the plug on the side of the barrel, Roy held up the hat for the buckskin to drink.

"Good boy," he murmured. "Rest now. Later, when it gets dark, I'll let you out to graze. There's a strip of grama beyond the spring, much better than the desert grass you've been eating recently."

The horse blew and snorted, as if to agree. Twice more, Roy filled his hat and let Dagur drink. Then he took out his canteen and quenched his own thirst. After allowing himself a moment of rest, he poured water into the iron pot in the hearth, arranged firewood beneath the tripod legs and took out his tin of matches to start a fire.

The pain closed around him, burning like a hot poker in his shoulder and streaking down his side with every move he made. He needed to get the wound cleaned and dressed before he passed out. The bullet wouldn't kill him, but the fever that followed might, if he didn't manage to stem the bleeding and prevent an infection.

As the flames caught in the hearth, a warm yellow glow danced over the log walls. The reassuring scents of wood smoke and pine resin, familiar from a thousand campfires, filled the cabin. Roy imagined primitive man, living in caves, hunting and gathering. For him, a bonfire must have meant life, just as much as water and food did, and more—a fire must have been the first step toward civilization, mastering the elements of nature.

Sitting cross-legged in front of the stone chimney, Roy pulled a knife from the scabbard in his boot and sliced away his shirt. Easier than trying to lift his arms overhead to undress. The coarse white cotton was matted with blood but the bleeding had slowed to a trickle.

Gently, Roy felt the wound in his shoulder with his fingertips. There was no exit hole, but high up on the front he could feel a small lump beneath the skin. The surge of relief nearly made him faint. From the way he'd been able to move his arm, he'd known the bone remained intact, but had the bullet lodged deeper inside his shoulder, it might have been impossible for him to remove.

Leaning toward the fire, Roy enjoyed the comfort of heat while he held the tip of his knife to the flames to purify it. When he was satisfied the blade was clean, he made a small incision at the front of his shoulder, in the fleshy part where the muscle sloped toward the neck, to create an exit wound. With pressure from his fingertips, the bullet slid out.

It was a .36 caliber homemade lead ball. Despite the small size, had the bullet struck lower, it would have shattered the bone, most likely leaving too many fragments to remove. And even if Roy hadn't already known, the small lead ball would have revealed the shooter to be Lom Curtis. Short and slight, the leader of the outlaw gang liked his pair of lightweight Navy Colts and had never switched to more powerful weapons or jacketed ammunition.

Roy tossed the bullet into the fire and inspected the remains of his shirt, assembling the back panel like a jigsaw puzzle. A small circular piece was missing. He swore. During his years on the outlaw trail, he'd seen plenty of doctoring for gunshot wounds, both by qualified surgeons and by anyone with a knife and a steady hand, and he understood that a piece of fabric left inside the wound could kill as effectively as a vial of poison.

Behind him, Dagur was snoring, asleep on his feet. Roy twisted around and raised his voice. "Dagur, sit down."

The horse blinked his eyes open, gave a protesting whinny but folded his legs and sank to the earth floor. Roy reached over and tugged his saddlebags free. Summoning all his strength, he loosened the cinch on the saddle girth and pulled the weight off the horse, letting the saddle tumble to the ground.

"It's okay, boy," Roy said. "Go to sleep." With another whinny, Dagur rolled over to his side and extended his legs, filling half the cabin, and resumed his snoring.

Roy tore a section from the clean part of his shirt and spread the piece of fabric on the earth floor. From his saddlebags, he took out a piece of rawhide string, a flask of whiskey and a bottle of kerosene, and a needle. Moving stiffly, fighting the pain, he arranged the objects on the cloth. Last, he snatched the black wig from his head, used his knife to snap away a couple of the horsehairs and dropped them into the iron cauldron on the fire to boil.

Using the rest of his shirt for rags, it only took him a minute to wash away the dried blood. When he was finished, Roy soaked the rawhide string in the bottle of kerosene, took a gulp of whiskey

and then he pushed the string into the exit wound he had made, feeding the rawhide through his shoulder with his fingers until he could reach over to his back and pull the cord through. Stoically, he closed his mind to the fiery pain and lifted the rawhide string to inspect it in the light of the fire crackling in the hearth.

No scrap of cotton clung to the cord.

Fighting a dizzy spell, Roy soaked the rawhide string in kerosene again, tied a knot to one end and repeated the process. On the fourth pass, a piece of fabric clung to the knot. His body shaking with exhaustion, his movements clumsy, Roy lined the scrap of cotton with the hole in the back panel of his shirt. It fit. Relief cut through the haze of pain that dulled his brain. He'd gotten all the cotton fibers out. He had a good chance now.

Three more times, Roy dragged the kerosene-soaked string through the wound, sipping whiskey in between to revive himself. When a man had someone else to do the doctoring, he could escape the pain into unconsciousness. A man alone had no such luxury.

Satisfied the wound was clean, Roy compared how much kerosene and whiskey he had left. About the same, a couple of inches. But there was no lamp, so he kept the whiskey for drinking and poured the kerosene over the wound, front and back.

Once more, he held the blade of his knife to the fire, keeping the steel in the flames until it glowed white-hot. Gritting his teeth, he pressed the tip of the blade to the exit wound to cauterize the skin and did the same to the entry wound, awkwardly reaching around to the back of his shoulder. Finally, he fished the horsehairs out of the boiling water. After checking they had softened enough, he cleaned the needle with a drop of whiskey, threaded it with a strand of horsehair and closed the holes in his flesh with a few crude sutures.

He longed for a cup of coffee, but his strength gave out. Barely able to muster up enough energy to rummage in his saddlebags, he took out his tin cup, scooped it full of boiling water, tossed in a few lumps of sugar, added a dollop of whiskey and drank the mixture as soon as it had cooled enough not to scald. Then he yanked his bedroll free from the straps behind the saddle, rolled into the single remaining blanket, laid his head down and let unconsciousness slide over him.

* * *

When darkness fell over the surrounding hills and filtered in through the closed shutters, Roy roused himself long enough to strip the bridle from Dagur and shove the door open. The horse wouldn't stray far from the spring.

The fever came on the second day, drenching Roy in sweat and sending icy shivers through his battered frame. Days and nights blurred together in the shadowed interior of the dugout cabin. He ate nothing but drank plenty of water, boiling it first, in case it had gone stale inside the oak barrel. At all times, he kept his pair of loaded guns within an easy reach.

In dime novels, when an injured outlaw came to, there would be a pretty girl standing by his bedside, smiling down at him and patting his brow with a cool cloth. There was no girl with a cool cloth for him, and no soft bed, only the hard earth floor, but when Roy's mind grew hazy, he imagined Celia Courtwood leaning over him, her gold-streaked curls tumbling down to his naked chest, a smile brightening her features. Then reality would intrude, and he realized it was only a dream—could never be anything but a dream.

* * *

Celia squatted on her heels by the oak counter of the bank, rubbing furniture polish into the ugly scratches the outlaws had made with the rowels of their spurs. She'd already scrubbed every inch of the floor, as if the violence had left behind a layer of filth she must remove. On the polished timber planks, a few drops of blood had painted a trail toward the exit.

His blood. The man who had protected her father. Before scrubbing away the dark stains, Celia had pressed her fingertips to them, relishing that small connection to the stranger whose memory filled her with a flurry of mixed emotions—from gratitude to disapproval, from resentment

to fascination, and beneath all those other emotions a strange longing that felt almost like a physical ache in her chest.

With increased vigor, as if to banish the handsome outlaw from her thoughts, Celia smeared more polish into the wood. For two days now, she had worked—unpaid—helping her father and Mr. Northfield to restore order in the bank. In truth, her father wasn't contributing much. Mostly, he was sitting down, gasping for breath, his hands clasped together in front of him, palms pressed to his belly.

Every now and then Celia noticed the bank manager casting a hostile glance in her father's direction. She suspected Mr. Northfield was ready to overcome his scruples about dismissing a sick man, which would leave them to survive on whatever little she could earn in her part-time position at the mercantile.

Refusing to give in to despair, Celia straightened on her feet. She dropped the turpentine-soaked rag into the steel bucket on the floor, wiped her hands on a piece of clean linen cloth and raised her voice to carry across the cracked glass partition.

"That's the best I can get it."

Before Mr. Northfield had a chance to come around and pass judgment on her efforts, footsteps thudded by the entrance. All day, curious visitors had crowded into the bank. Celia moved aside. It was up to the manager to deal with anxious inquiries from customers who might be worried about the safety of their deposits.

The man who strode in was thin and wiry, with a walrus mustache and a piercing blue gaze beneath an expensive tan-colored Stetson hat. Celia noted the pistol at his hip, then homed in on the tin star pinned to the man's rawhide vest. He must be the county sheriff from Prescott, fetched by one of the saloon keeper's sons.

Mr. Northfield ushered Celia away with a flap of his hand. "You can leave now, Miss Courtwood." The dismissive gesture conveyed no gratitude for her unpaid labor.

"Perhaps my father could leave, too?" Celia suggested, her brows lifted in a tentative appeal. "He is still very shaken up after the ordeal and could do with a rest."

"No," the manager replied, his tone sharper than the request warranted.

"It's all right, Celia girl," her father cut in. "I am needed here. I shall have to make a statement, tell the sheriff what happened."

Celia glanced from her father to the bank manager. There was something going on between those two, some undertone of hostility she failed to comprehend. Since the robbery, Mr. Northfield had been looking at her father with a dislike that bordered on disgust, even though the two of them had always been on cordial terms before.

"All right." Celia attempted a bright tone. "I'll get supper started. I'll expect you home shortly, Papa." She nodded to the men and walked out past the wiry sheriff. At the hitching rail outside, a bay gelding stood basking in the afternoon sun. Iron shackles and a coil of sturdy rope hung from the saddle, in readiness for a prisoner.

Tools of a man's trade, Celia recalled thinking two weeks ago when she'd caught a glimpse of the pair of guns the outlaw with mismatched eyes wore beneath his long duster. And just like on that other occasion, a shiver of apprehension rippled over her.

Her hand crept up to her chest, to touch the small silk pouch where she wore the stranger's gold coin on a string around her neck, like a keepsake to make sure they would meet again. But why dream of such an encounter, when an outlaw was like a hunted animal and any romantic interest in such a man could only bring a woman grief?

* * *

Footsteps thundered across the porch. Even before she hurried to the door, Celia knew it could not be her father, for a tired shuffle would announce his arrival. It was the barber, Mr. Grosser, a tall, rawboned man whose body always seemed to be listing to one side.

"Come quick, Miss Celia," he said, even in his haste polite enough to snatch his hat down from his head. "I have your father at the back of my shop."

Startled, she stared at the gangly barber. *At the back of my shop*. Rock Springs had no jail, and no marshal since Todd Lindstrom had been gunned down by rustlers a year ago. When someone needed to be detained, he was locked up in the small, windowless storeroom at the back of the barbershop, and kept there until he sobered up or, in the case of more serious crimes, until the county sheriff from Prescott arrived to fetch him.

"But why?" Celia implored. "Why?"

"Well, Miss Celia..." The barber turned his hat over in his hands. "They say he was in on the robbery. That he tipped off the gang of outlaws about all that gold in the bank and advised them how to go about stealing it."

"W...what...?" After she'd overcome her startled reaction, indignation flared within Celia, like a flame licking at her insides. Her poor, sick father, to be bothered with such crazy accusations. "That is nonsense. Complete, utter nonsense." She squared her shoulders, bracing for a confrontation. "Where is the sheriff?"

"He's in the saloon, having his supper. When he's finished, he'll take your father to Prescott for a trial. It is a full moon tonight, light enough to travel after sunset." Mr. Grosser replaced his hat on his head and turned to go. "Miss Celia, you'll need to come quick if you want to see your father. I'm here against the sheriff's orders. He does not want you to talk to your father, in case he might use you to pass a message to his accomplices."

"Use me?" Her voice grew shrill at the incongruity of it. "To pass a message? To his *accomplices*?" Never had she heard such utter balderdash. Could this be some kind of a practical joke at her expense? Yes, that's what it had to be. She'd play along, act her part as the hapless victim of the warped sense of humor of the citizens of Rock Springs.

Celia snatched her bonnet from a peg by the door, flung it over her upsweep and marched out, tying the laces beneath the chin as she tried to keep up with the barber's long strides. On the normally quiet Main Street, a dozen people were loitering about in artificially casual poses, men flicking dust from their coat lapels, women pretending to be inspecting the displays in the store windows, while their true purpose was to steal covert glances at her.

Not looking left or right, Celia clattered up the steps to the boardwalk in her leather half boots. For an instant, she was forced to stand still while the barber bent his head to unlock his premises. The force of all those curious stares bombarded her in the back, like a flurry of Indian arrows landing between her shoulder blades.

Finally, the lock clicked open and the barber held the door wide while Celia stepped through. The pungent smells of cologne and shaving soap filled her nostrils. She'd never been to Mr. Grosser's premises before. In normal circumstances, she would have enjoyed the opportunity to inspect such a bastion of masculine grooming, but today she paid scant attention to her surroundings.

The barber ushered her past the big leather chair to the rear of the shop and slid open the crudely made hatch in a thick, iron-studded oak door. Equipped with heavy steel hinges and twin bolts, the storeroom had been specifically reinforced to act as a place of detention.

"I want to go inside and talk to him," Celia said.

"Sorry, Miss Celia. You must talk to him through the hatch." The barber retreated to the front of the premises and busied himself by arranging the jars and bottles lined up on the mahogany cabinet behind his chair. He turned his back on her, offering an illusion of privacy, but Celia could tell he was keeping an eye on her through the big gilt-framed mirror mounted on the wall.

She pivoted on her feet to face the jail room and rose on tiptoe to peer through the hatch, positioned for a man's height. Her father was sitting on the edge of a narrow cot. The room had no other furniture, only the cot, and beside it no more than two feet of empty space. Should a prisoner

feel restless, he might take three steps toward the far wall, turn around and take three steps in the opposite direction, while trying not to trip up on the slop bucket in the corner.

"Papa!"

Her father glanced up. For an instant, Celia could see despair etched on his gaunt features. Then his lips curved into a shaky smile. Moving slowly, he got up and eased over to her. The hatch in the door framed his face, making him appear like the portrait of a dying man.

"Papa, what is this all about?"

"Well, Celia girl, they think I had something to do with this robbery. The bandit leader tried to shoot me, and the sheriff claims it is typical behavior for these outlaw gangs. They get a man inside to help them with the robbery, and then they kill him, so he can't talk and give them away."

"But that is nonsense! Anyway, the robbers didn't kill you. The theory does not fit the facts."

"The sheriff says there are often internal feuds in these gangs. Maybe the leader wanted to shoot this other man, too, but he ran out of time and couldn't kill either of us."

"Ran out of time?" Celia said tartly. "Just how slowly does a bullet fly?" She gave her head a determined shake. "We'll have to put a stop to this foolishness. I'll speak to the sheriff. If that fails, we'll get a lawyer. Someone competent, from Prescott or Flagstaff."

"Celia girl, listen to me."

There was an odd shine in her father's eyes, a strange fervor in his expression. Celia held her breath. A terrible fear unfurled in her belly. Surely, the accusations could have no merit? Surely, there was no possibility that her father had actually been involved in the crime?

"Yes, Papa?" she prompted him, her body rigid with tension. "I'm listening."

Her father spoke with a breathless eagerness. "This is the solution I've been looking for. Soon I'll be too weak to work. You'll be left to support me, with little money coming in. You spent your young years nursing your mother, and I don't want you to bear the burden of nursing me, too. If I go along with what they claim, the authorities will have to take care of me. And you'll be free. The house is in your name, and I've got a bit of money put aside, not in the bank but elsewhere, and I'll get it sent out to you."

"No, Papa, no! We'll fight them. Prove your innocence."

"No, Celia." Her father frowned, looking pained. "I'll not hear a word from you against this plan." His expression softened. "Don't you understand, Celia girl, I want you to have a chance. I'll send you the money. You can sell the house and go away, start over in some other town."

"I'd rather nurse you than move to a place full of strangers."

A smile eased her father's gaunt features and he spoke tenderly. "Come closer."

Celia flattened her palms against the reinforced oak panel and hovered on her toes, her face lined up with the hatch. Her father pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I love you, Celia girl. And I understand that you want to look after me, give me comfort in my final days. But the greatest comfort you could give me is to write to me in Yuma prison and tell me that you've settled safely in some other town where people have no prejudice against you. Then I'll be able to die in peace."

"Papa..." Her voice caught in her throat. It was an unreasonable demand for him to make, and yet how could she ignore it? How could she deny her father what he was asking for? And in some horrible, practical way, she understood the logic in his thinking. With only her meager earnings to rely upon, they might not have enough money for doctor's bills and other expenses. This way, the territorial government would have to take care of him, feed him and eventually bury him.

"All right," Celia replied, anguish tightening her chest. "I won't try to reason with the sheriff. But promise me this—when they question you, you'll tell no lies. And if they end up releasing you, you'll come home to me, and let me nurse you, like I nursed Mama."

"I promise you that, Celia girl."

Voices erupted on the boardwalk outside. The barber hurried over to Celia. He shoved her aside and slammed shut the hatch in the oak door. Speaking with a nervous agitation, he grabbed her by the elbow and bundled her toward the rear exit. “Go out the back way.”

Celia wrenched herself free. “I’ll go out the way I came in.” Holding her head high, she marched out of the shop. In the street, she could see the lean, wiry sheriff with the expensive tan Stetson hat leading over two horses, his bay and a dun gelding she recognized as rental stock from the livery stable.

The sheriff came to a halt by the boardwalk and turned to detach the shackles from his horse. Carrying the clinking chains in one hand, he climbed up the steps to the boardwalk. Celia stood still, her wide skirts blocking the entrance to the barbershop. When the sheriff came toe-to-toe with her, she held her position for a moment, then shifted aside to let him through. There was no point in resisting. If the sheriff knew his job, he’d get her father to reveal the truth and send him home to her where he belonged.

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