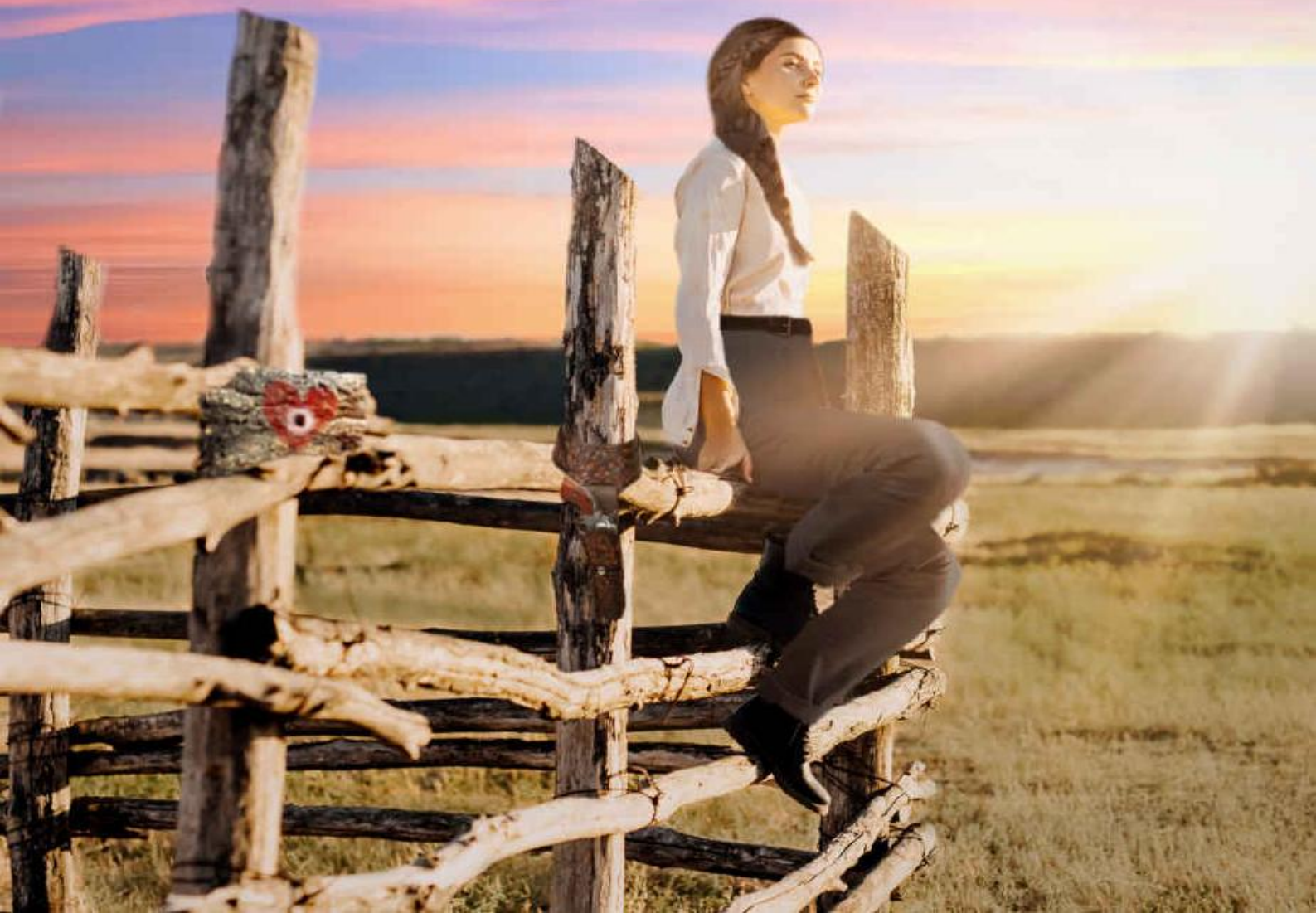


SHANNA HATFIELD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Love on Target



Love on Target

A SWEET HISTORICAL WESTERN ROMANCE

BY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANNA HATFIELD



BOOK 2

LOVE ON TARGET

Copyright © 2023 by Shanna Hatfield

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, transmitted, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, now known or hereafter invented, without the written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. Please purchase only authorized editions.

For permission requests, please contact the author, with a subject line of “permission request,” at the email address below, or through her website.

shanna@shannahatfield.com

shannahatfield.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Published by Wholesome Hearts Publishing, LLC.

wholesomeheartspublishing@gmail.com

*To those
who forge their own path.*

CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15
16. Chapter 16

17. Recipe
18. Thank You
19. Author's Note
20. Stay in Touch
21. Love Under Fire
22. Excerpt
23. Excerpt Holiday Hope
24. Books in the Pink Pistol Sisterhood Series
25. Books by Shanna Hatfield
26. About the Author



Eastern Oregon

April 1894

“WE’RE ALMOST SOMEWHERE, SCOUT.” Rena Burke patted the neck of her faithful mule as she stared between the slats of the stock car where she traveled on a rocking train bound for Portland, Oregon.

She’d argued with the stationmaster back in Colorado until she’d given herself a headache about riding with Scout instead of taking a seat in a passenger car. When she’d refused to defer to his commands, the man must have realized it was pointless to tell her otherwise. He’d finally relented and allowed her to

stay with her mule. Once he'd elicited her promise to remain in the stock car, the stationmaster had given her a discounted fare.

If Scout hadn't been worn out past endurance after carrying her from Amarillo to Denver, she wouldn't have splurged on the expense of boarding the train. However, it wasn't just Scout's weary state that had compelled her to pay the fare. Weeks of traveling alone coupled with a handful of frightening encounters along the way due to beasts with four legs, as well as some with two, had removed any doubt about continuing the trip on a train.

The last thing Rena wanted was to sit among people who gave her curious glances or disapproving glares. Just because she chose to wear trousers and her father's old brown hat didn't mean people should automatically judge her. Then again, the stares might be aimed at her because of the limp she couldn't hide no matter how hard she tried.

Thoughts of life before she'd acquired the limp made her maudlin, so she returned her attention to watching out of the stock car slats as the train entered what appeared to be a prosperous town. She'd fallen asleep last night after dark and had only awakened an hour ago. Dawn was just beginning to stretch across the sky, but it was light enough she could see houses, businesses, and wide streets as the train screeched to a stop.

She heard someone, presumably the conductor, raise his voice above the racket. "Welcome to Baker City, folks.

Welcome to the queen city of the Inland Empire!”

At least the man’s loud announcement assured Rena she had arrived at her destination to disembark the train. She brushed straw from her clothes and hastily braided her hair before settling the hat on her head. She saddled Scout, adjusted the saddlebags, and hung another bag of her belongings from the saddle horn. The reins dangled from her left hand as she waited for the door to open.

Part of the trip, she and Scout had shared the stock car with a mare with no manners and a gelding that had appeared half-starved. Rena had fed the gelding a portion of the feed she’d purchased for Scout. Both horses had been led off the train yesterday afternoon, and no more had been brought to their car.

Thankful for the reprieve from being around other animals and humans, Rena had been able to relax last night and get a good night’s rest. She figured she’d need all her strength as she continued on her journey.

Finally, the door to the stock car opened. Two men in denim overalls slid a wooden ramp into place, and she walked down it with Scout’s breath blowing warmth against her back.

“Come on, boy,” she said softly, stepping out into a morning that bore a fresh, pleasant scent, along with the aroma of bacon and coffee. Her stomach rumbled in hunger, but she ignored it as she held her head high, kept her posture stiff, and led Scout away from the depot.

Rena could have boarded another train for the last segment of her trip, but she wanted to take in the surroundings of the place that was to be her new home. She didn't want her first view of Holiday, Oregon, to be from inside the stock car.

Rather than immediately leave Baker City, she wandered through town, stopping outside a mercantile. She would need a few provisions to see her through another night or two on the trail.

Rena looped Scout's reins around a hitching rail, leaned against it, and waited for the store to open. As the sun rose, it carried welcome heat. She tipped her hat and head back until the warm rays of the golden orb caressed her face.

Footsteps behind her drew her from her brief yet peaceful interlude. She opened her eyes and turned around to be greeted by a friendly shopkeeper with a welcoming smile.

"Morning. You waiting to get in?" the man asked, keys dangling from a leather string held between his fingers as he stood near the door.

"Yes, sir. I just need to pick up a few things before I head out." Rena pushed away from the rail and followed him inside a well-stocked store. She breathed in the scents of leather, spices, and kerosene.

"Feel free to look around. I'm Frank Miller, owner of the mercantile." He held his hand out to her in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Miller. Rena Burke. I'm heading up to Holiday." She shook his hand, then stepped back. "My

cousin lives there.”

“It’s a pretty little town, up in the mountains like it is. Have you been there before?”

Rena shook her head. “No, sir. What’s the best way to get there?”

He quirked a bushy eyebrow. “On Hope.”

“Hope?” she asked while doing her best to swallow her annoyance. Hope was a fine thing to have, but her well of hope had run dry two years ago. It sure wouldn’t give her feet wings and fly her and Scout to Holiday. In fact, she was certain the One who gave hope had all but forgotten about her.

Mr. Miller grinned. “Hope is the name of the engine that pulls the Holiday Express train up the mountain. Everyone around these parts refers to the train as Hope.”

“I see. I, uh ... won’t be riding the train.” Or riding hope off into the sunset, for that matter. She’d learned the hard way the only person she could depend on was herself, not some fanciful notion that anyone would help her when she needed it most. “What’s the next best way to get to Holiday?”

“There’s a wagon road. You’ll head east out of town, then northwest a few miles before the trail swings around to the north. There are a few signs posted along the way. You can’t miss it if you stay on the road.”

“How long would it take to get there, do you reckon?” Rena fingered a book from a shelf filled with interesting titles. It had been ages since she’d had anything new to read, but she

wouldn't waste any of her precious pennies on the luxury of a book. Her cousin had a collection of books. She was sure she'd find plenty of reading material at his place.

“If you're planning to ride that ol' mule tied out there to the hitching rail, I'd say it will take you a day and a half, maybe two. The elevation gets higher as you go, and you don't want to push him too hard. There are a few smaller towns along the way. I'd recommend spending the night in one of them. The church in Aldeen, which also serves as the school, would be a good place for a person to get in out of the dark and cold if they didn't have other options. There's a little shed out back where the teacher leaves her horse and buggy during school hours. As long as you didn't disturb anything, no one would care if you stayed there.”

“That's good to know. Thank you.”

While Mr. Miller stoked the pot-bellied stove and made a pot of coffee, Rena browsed around the store. Her gaze lingered on a bolt of brocade peach taffeta. She hadn't worn a dress in two years, and none that she'd owned had been created from such costly, beautiful fabric. A girl like her had no business dreaming about expensive things. It wouldn't matter how she dressed, anyway. Not now. She could look like a queen, and it wouldn't do her a bit of good.

No man would ever want her, and she'd arrived at the point she no longer cared. Who needed love with all the anxiety and heartache that went along with it?

Rena had gotten along well enough on her own. The thought of a man bossing her around, telling her what to do and when to do it, made her balk at the very notion of it. She preferred to remain alone and independent than relinquish her freedom.

Which was precisely the reason she was heading to Holiday to see her cousin. She held high hopes she could start over there without the past dogging her every faltering step. Theo had even hinted in his last letter that he might have a job lined up for her at the mine where he worked.

Rena filled a tin with crackers from the barrel in the store. When she took the crackers to the front counter, Mr. Miller handed her a cup of hot coffee that was the best thing she'd tasted since she'd left Amarillo. While he cut the wedge of cheese she'd requested, Rena sipped the strong, black brew and looked through a display of gloves. A pair of work gloves, made of the softest leather, fit her hands to perfection. She dearly wanted the gloves, but the price forced her to return them to the shelf.

As she finished the cup of coffee, she added dried apples, a tablet with a pencil, and a sack of assorted penny candy to her purchases.

“Is there a place in town where I could buy feed for my mule? I don't want to start up the mountain before he's properly fed and watered.”

“Sure. Head over to Milt's Livery. He's honest and fair and will take good care of your mule. If you're looking for a meal, the bakery should be open by now, or there are a few

restaurants, but you'll get more food for less expense at the bakery. You could go there while Milt sees to your mule."

Rena nodded, hoping Mr. Miller couldn't hear the gnawing roar of hunger in her empty belly. She'd run out of food yesterday morning and decided she could do without until they arrived in Baker City. Now that they were here, she really should get something to eat, or she might be too weak to journey onward.

When the store owner gave her the total for her purchases, she took money from her pocket and counted it out to the penny.

"I hope you have a safe trip to Holiday, Miss Burke. Just be sure you don't travel at night. There are bears in the mountains and cougars in the hills, not to mention a few unsavory types who wouldn't be above waylaying anyone they see traveling alone."

Surprised by his words of caution, she intended to heed his warning. Old Scout wouldn't stand a chance against a bear or cougar. The crotchety fella was half afraid of cats as it was. Rena could shoot anyone who bothered her, but she'd rather not get into a situation where defending herself was necessary.

"It was nice to meet you, Mr. Miller." She nodded to him in gratitude. "Thank you for the advice and the coffee."

"You're welcome. Come back anytime." Mr. Miller waved as she carried her purchases outside, stowed them in her saddlebags, and then led Scout up the street in the direction the store owner had indicated she'd find the livery.

She crossed a side street and saw the sign for the livery just ahead.

“Mornin’,” a beefy-armed man said as she stepped inside. “Can I help you with something?”

“I was hoping to buy a little feed for my mule and give him a place to rest for about an hour.” Rena glanced around the livery as her eyes adjusted from being out in the sunlight to the darker interior that smelled of hay and horses. At a glance, the place appeared clean and orderly, showing the owner took pride in the upkeep of his business. Assured she was about to leave Scout in good hands, she loosened her tight grip on the reins.

“I’d be happy to help you with that, miss.” He told her what he’d charge, then motioned toward an empty stall. “I about forgot my manners, miss. I’m Milt Owens, and this is my livery. Haven’t seen you around Baker City before.”

“I’m just passing through,” Rena said, leading Scout into a stall that had fresh straw on the floor and a bucket full of clear water. Scout sniffed the water, then took a long drink.

“Where you heading?” Mr. Owens asked as he filled a shallow pan with feed and set it inside the stall. Scout didn’t waste any time in tasting it.

Rena ignored his question and motioned to her mule. “Thank you for seeing to Scout, sir.”

“My pleasure.” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder toward the door. “If you need a meal, I recommend the bakery.

They have the best cinnamon buns I've ever tasted.”

“I'll do that, Mr. Owens. Mr. Miller at the mercantile also recommended the bakery. Thank you again for keeping an eye on Scout.” Rena hated to be apart from Scout, but she was starving. The mention of cinnamon buns made her mouth water. At the rate she was going, she'd start to slobber, and someone would assume she'd gone rabid and threaten to put her out of her misery.

Before she changed her mind, she nodded once to Mr. Owens, marched out the door, and headed back in the direction she'd come. She turned at the corner and pulled up short before she plowed right over one of the most fashionable women she'd ever seen. Thick, dark hair was stylishly arranged beneath a hat that matched a glorious gown in a deep shade of raspberry pink. The woman's skin was flawless, her eyes bright, and her smile wide as she studied Rena.

“Good morning,” the woman spoke in a soft, friendly tone.

“Good morning,” Rena said, wishing she could look even a smidgen as elegant as the woman. “I apologize for not watching where I was going.”

Much to her dismay and mortification, Rena's stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. The heat of embarrassment seared her cheeks. She had to force herself not to duck her head and run off.

The woman's smile widened. “Were you on your way to the bakery, by chance?”

“I was. Mr. Miller at the mercantile and Mr. Owens at the livery both recommended it.”

“I’ll walk with you.” The woman looped her arm around Rena’s. “My husband was going to pick up some pastries for our breakfast and meet me at my shop. I’m Maggie MacGregor.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. MacGregor. I’m Rena Burke. You own a business in town?” Rena asked, taken aback by the notion of such a lovely woman managing a business.

“I own and manage the dress shop here in town. It brings me great satisfaction to create gowns that people seem to love wearing. I also sell ready-made clothing as well as hats, stockings, gloves, and some attire for children.”

Rena glanced down at her dusty trousers, a shirt that had been clean a week ago, and the baggy jacket that had once belonged to her father. It was a wonder Mrs. MacGregor hadn’t taken one look at her and hastened in the other direction.

“Are you traveling, Miss Burke?”

Rena nodded, trying not to gawk as they strolled down a street that was brimming with early morning activity. A man in a duster with a bronze star pinned to the front waved and touched his fingers to the brim of his hat from across the street as he spoke with two cowboys.

“That’s Tully Barrett, the sheriff. We’ve been friends for what seems like forever.” Mrs. MacGregor returned his wave,

then gestured toward a park. “Will you be in town long? Our park is quite glorious when all the trees and flowers are in bloom.”

“I plan to leave in about an hour,” Rena said, standing on a corner waiting for two wagons to pass. “What does your husband do, Mrs. MacGregor?”

“Ian owns the lumberyard. It’s a constant battle to keep sawdust out of the carpets,” she said with a laugh, then playfully bumped her shoulder against Rena’s arm. “Please, call me Maggie.”

“I’ll do that if you call me Rena.”

Maggie smiled at her again. “Where are you from and what direction are you heading?”

“I’m from Amarillo, Texas, and I’m heading up to Holiday to see my cousin. He bought some land up there last year. Theo offered to let me stay with him awhile, so here I am.”

“Gracious! Did you travel all that way alone?” Maggie questioned as they crossed the street and moved into the line that stretched outside the bakery door.

“I had my mule with me. He’s the closest thing I have to a friend.”

Maggie frowned. “Well, now you have two. Anytime you come to Baker City, I hope you’ll stop by my shop. It’s right on the main street that runs through town, not far from the hotel.”

Rena couldn't envision herself in a dress shop, but she nodded to be polite. "I'll do that, Maggie. Thank you for the invitation and the offer of friendship."

"Of course." Maggie leaned around the people in front of them and motioned to someone near the front of the line, held up three fingers and pointed to Rena, then tugged her out of line.

"Ian will get enough for all three of us. Let's go sit on a bench across the street. The one right there by the maple tree is the best spot to soak up the morning light."

Without waiting for Rena's reply, Maggie glided across the street and gracefully settled her skirts around her as she took a seat on a wooden bench.

Rena felt like a filthy pauper next to Maggie, but before she could think of a reason to excuse herself, a handsome man with blond hair and lively blue eyes strode across the street, holding a box in one hand and three cups of something hot that steamed in the crisp morning air in the other.

"Well, hello," he said with the faintest hint of a brogue as he greeted her with a broad smile. "I see my Maggie has coerced you into eating breakfast with us. I'm Ian."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. MacGregor," Rena said, standing as he set the box beside Maggie, handed his wife one of the cups, then kissed her cheek.

He handed Rena a cup, then politely bowed his head to her. "Call me Ian. And you are?"

“Rena. Rena Burke. I’m just passing through town and left my mule with Mr. Owens at the livery while I got a little something to eat. As soon as we’ve both had breakfast, we’ll be on our way.”

“To Holiday,” Maggie said, lifting a plate with a large bun from the box and handing it to Rena. “There are some lovely, lovely people who live there. If you meet the Coleman or Milton families, please give them my regards.”

“I’ll do that,” Rena said, accepting the plate from Maggie.

Ian motioned for her to take a seat on the bench as he lifted a plate holding a huge cinnamon bun from the box, then propped one booted foot on the bench by Maggie.

Rena settled on the bench and took a tentative sip from the cup that warmed her chilled hands. The coffee was even better than the pot Mr. Miller had made. She took another sip before she set the cup on the bench beside her and lifted her fork. Maggie and Ian bowed their heads, and Ian asked a brief blessing on their meal.

Out of long-ingrained habit, Rena bowed her head and said, “amen.” She hadn’t prayed in two years, but today wasn’t the day to examine the reasons why.

Instead, she forked a bite of the cinnamon bun still warm from the oven with gooey icing dripping off the sides. She closed her eyes to better enjoy her second bite.

As they ate, Ian and Maggie filled the quiet, talking about Baker City and Holiday, and encouraging her to seek them out

if she returned to town.

When they finished their simple meal, Rena tried to pay Ian, but he shook his head.

“It was our pleasure, Rena, to share breakfast with a new friend.”

Maggie gathered the dishes into the box Ian had carried, and he picked it up with one hand. “I’d better get these back to the bakery before they think I’ve absconded with them. ‘Twas a wonderful, unexpected gift to meet you this morning, Rena. Safe travels to you.” He kissed Maggie’s cheek. “Wait a moment, my lovely lass, and I’ll walk you to the shop.”

Maggie stood as Ian rushed back across the street with the dishes, then shifted her focus to Rena. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay in town for a while?”

“No. I really need to be on my way, but thank you for your kindness and for breakfast. Are you certain I can’t pay for my meal?”

“Absolutely certain. It was a treat for us to share breakfast with you.”

Rena saw no need to prolong her goodbye. She highly doubted she’d ever see Ian and Maggie again anyway. “I’m thankful I got to meet you both. If you ever venture up to Holiday, let me know. My cousin’s name is Theo Marshall.”

“If we get up that way, we’ll definitely plan to say hello.”

Maggie squeezed Rena’s hand and gave her a thoughtful look before she let go. “Be safe, Rena.”

“I will.” Rena spun around and cut through the park on her way back to the livery. She didn’t know what it was about meeting the friendly, sweet couple, but observing the loving looks they shared made her want to cry.

And Rena never cried.

Ranted, yes.

Brooded, often.

But cried?

Not for a long, long time.

She drew in a deep lungful of air and rushed back to the livery.

Mr. Owens was speaking softly to Scout and patting him on the neck when she marched inside the building.

“There you are. I was just telling Scout you’d be back any minute. He cleaned up every bite of his breakfast and drank a good share of the water. Are you heading a far distance today?”

“Aldeen, I think,” Rena said, putting the worn-out bridle Mr. Owens had removed back on Scout. She’d already decided she’d spend the night in the church in Aldeen. From what Mr. Miller had shared, it seemed like her safest, and least costly, option.

“That’s a fair piece to travel. Do you have a gun or know how to shoot it?”

Rena nodded. “I do.” She’d stowed her gun belt in one of the saddlebags while she’d slept last night and hadn’t put it back on. Now, she pulled it out and fastened it around her hips. It had belonged to her father, and Rena had practiced shooting it until she rarely missed her mark.

Unable to help herself, Rena took the pistol from the holster and spun it around on her finger a few times, holstering it again in a matter of seconds.

Mr. Owens gaped at her with wide eyes, then he grinned. “You’re a regular Annie Oakley, Miss Burke. I reckon you can handle yourself. You do any fancy shooting with that rifle you have in the scabbard?”

His reference to Annie Oakley delighted Rena beyond words. Although she’d never had the opportunity to watch Annie Oakley perform, she’d read every newspaper account she could find about the woman who had become her inspiration and something of a heroine to Rena. Annie had validated Rena’s notion that women could step beyond the roles assigned to them by society and succeed at whatever they chose to pursue.

“Sometimes, Mr. Owens.” She offered the livery owner a pleased smile. “Thanks again for taking care of Scout.” She paid him, led the mule outside, and swung into the saddle.

“Safe travels.” Mr. Owens lifted his hand in departure as she clucked her tongue against her cheek, and Scout began a slow mosey down the street.

Rena glanced over her shoulder and tipped her head to the livery owner, then focused her gaze ahead. She'd found there was no purpose in looking back. None at all. Most of the time, there was no one who cared if she left, anyway.

The following afternoon, she heard the whistle of the train as it rolled into Holiday at nearly the same time she and Scout arrived in the town that would become her new home. Although the trip up the mountain had been uneventful, she was relieved to reach Holiday.

Last night, she'd arrived in Aldeen just before dusk and tracked down the pastor to get his permission to stay in the church, or school, whichever one wanted to call it. He'd invited her to join him and his wife for dinner, which she'd accepted. When they'd insisted that she spend the night with them, she gently refused but thanked them for the meal and the opportunity to sleep somewhere safe and warm.

After Rena had settled Scout in the lean-to the teacher used for her horse and given him a portion of feed and a bucket of fresh water, she'd bedded down on a blanket on a pew in the church, staring at the shadowed ceiling before sleep had finally claimed her.

She'd awakened at four that morning and ridden out of town a few minutes later. The early start was the only reason she'd made it to Holiday before dark. Scout seemed as anxious as she felt to reach their destination.

Holiday appeared to be a growing, busy town. The wide main street was a beehive of activity with wagons coming and

going. She saw two wagons full of lumber rumble by and wondered if Ian ever shipped lumber up to Holiday. Likely not. Theo had mentioned a lumber mill located near some of the mines.

As she entered the outskirts of town, Rena rode past a beautiful home set back from the road with a broad porch that looked inviting. Across the pasture from it, she passed a livery and blacksmith shop.

Further up the street, a sign painted on a window proclaimed the camel-colored building to be the assay office.

Next door, a little girl with a mop of blonde curls stood on top of a saddle in the window of the saddle shop. She held a doll in one hand and waved at Rena with the other.

Rena smiled and returned the tiny fairylike child's wave, then fixed her attention on the town of Holiday. Across the side street from the saddle shop was a large hotel with a restaurant sign. The smell of roasting meat made her wish she'd purchased more food yesterday. She'd eaten the last bite of cheese and the remnants of broken crackers hours ago when she'd stopped for a rest at lunch.

She made note of the mercantile, a post office, and a dress shop. The colorful frocks in the window made her think of Ian and Maggie. Rena felt a sense of gratification in knowing if she ever did return to Baker City, she had two friends there who might be pleased to see her.

The sight of the church made Rena look the other way, taking in the stage office, marshal's office, and the jail instead.

She rode on the main street until she reached the other end of town and continued north.

Theo had written that his place was a few miles from town on the east side of the road. He'd told her to ride around a curve in the road, then look for a stump that was shaped like a chair. His cabin—or shack, as he called it—was a hundred yards back in the trees.

Rena removed her hat and tilted her face up to the sun as she traveled along on Scout's swayed back, breathing in the lush mountain air. She could grow accustomed to the scent of the breeze that carried a hint of pine and smelled like Christmastime.

The peacefulness surrounding her calmed her jittery nerves at seeing Theo again after so many years apart. He had already left home to pursue his own adventures before her world had fallen apart. However, he and his sister, Laura, had always been close to her, more like siblings than cousins. As an only child, Rena had cherished time spent with them when they were younger, even if they'd all traveled different paths as adults.

When Rena happened upon a stump that did indeed look like someone had roughly hacked out chunks of it until it resembled a chair, she turned and rode along a path through the trees.

At the edge of a meadow, she found a weathered cabin she assumed had to be Theo's home. She stopped Scout near the door, grateful to see a barn that would keep wild critters away

from the mule. From the straight lines of it and the fresh coat of red paint, she assumed Theo had built it after purchasing the land last year.

As she swung out of the saddle, she cocked an ear, listening to the sound of water. There must be a creek nearby. If Theo didn't have a well, a creek would be a handy thing to have on his place.

She tied Scout's reins around a half-rotten post that was sunken into the ground, patted his neck, then strode to the door. Rena lifted her hand and knocked twice, waited, then knocked two more times. When no one answered, she tried the knob. It turned in her hand, so she pushed open the door.

"Hello? Anyone home? Hello?" Hesitant to intrude in case it wasn't Theo's home, Rena cautiously stepped inside. Her gaze followed the dust motes dancing in a beam of sunlight streaming in the window by the door. A table covered by a checkered cloth sat beneath the window. An oil lamp, a stack of books, and a glass sugar bowl with a lid on top rested in the center of the table.

"Hello? Theo?" Rena moved further into the room, taking in the simple furnishings.

The cabin was all one big room. At the far end was a fireplace and to the right of it, a cookstove. A coffee pot on the top of the stove made her long for a cup. There'd be time enough to make a pot later.

A sink with a pump handle to draw water and a small window above it were on the same side of the room as the

stove. Two wooden crates with shelves built into them were fastened to the wall on either side of the sink. One held an assortment of dishes. The other crate held tins and jars that appeared to contain spices.

A large bed took up the space to the left of the fireplace. Pegs held a few shirts, a heavy wool coat, and a black hat. On the floor beneath the pegs were a pair of newer-looking boots. Another oil lamp sat on a trunk pushed into the corner that appeared to serve as an end table. The only other piece of furniture on that side of the cabin was a small chest of drawers.

On the opposite end of the cabin were two rocking chairs and another table, this one strewn with papers. A ladder nailed to the wall went up to an open loft area. By stepping into the doorway and tipping back her head, Rena could see a bed in the loft covered by a colorful quilt.

She walked across the room to a bookcase, made of rough lumber, that held numerous books, interesting rocks, and keepsakes. A small wooden box that had once belonged to her aunt brought sweet memories to mind. The letter “M” engraved on the outside of it was unmistakable. Rena opened the lid to see a stack of letters. One she’d written to Theo before she’d left Amarillo rested on top.

Even if her cousin wasn’t at home, at least she was in the right place. Relieved she wasn’t poking around a stranger’s home, Rena returned outside. She led Scout to the barn and

settled him in a stall with feed and a bucket of water she filled from the pump she'd found near the barn.

Exhaustion overtook her as she carried her bags and rifle inside the cabin. The only thing she could think of at that moment was rest, but she was filthy. She set her bags on the floor, propped the rifle behind the door, and removed her hat and gun belt, hanging them on a peg behind the door. She then retrieved a clean shirt and pair of trousers. Although they were wrinkled, at least they didn't smell like sweat, dirt, and mule.

She rummaged through her things and retrieved a comb and bar of soap, then searched the cabin. Towels were stacked on a shelf near the bed. Rena took her pistol from the holster, then carried everything outside and followed the sound of water to the creek.

After looking around to ensure she was alone, she removed her filthy clothes and rolled them together in a bundle, left her pistol on top of them, and stepped into the chilly water that moved with a rapid current. The first feel of the frigid water against her skin made her want to jump right back out, but instead, she waded into the middle of the creek where it came up past her knees, sat down, and scrubbed away miles and days of dirt. She washed her hair and shook away the droplets, then returned to the bank where she wrapped one towel around her and the other around her head. Briskly rubbing her skin dry, she hastily dressed, then combed the tangles from her hair. She sat on a large rock in a pool of sunshine that spilled through the trees, closed her eyes, and immediately fell asleep.



“**R**IGHT, PAPA? PAPA? ARE you wooly gathering again?”

A small hand tugging on his sleeve brought Josh Gatlin out of his wandering thoughts and back to the moment. He smiled down at his impish daughter, so vibrant and full of energy. His mind struggled to accept the fact that she would soon turn five.

Where had the years gone? It seemed like just yesterday Gabrielle Joy was learning to walk and talk, and now she raced everywhere and chattered nonstop.

He tenderly brushed a hand over her mop of blonde curls, then gently pulled her back on the buggy seat. She'd fidgeted

over to the edge without his even realizing it. One big bump and she might topple off the seat into danger.

A vision of what could happen left him rattled, so he shoed away the terrifying thoughts and smiled at his only child. “What did you ask, Gabi?”

“Uncle Theo will be happy to see us, won’t he, Papa?”

Josh nodded as he shifted his gaze from his daughter to the road. “He will be, especially since we’re bringing supper with us.”

“Uncle Theo does like food.” Gabi giggled. “Member last time we brought fried chicken from the hotel? We gobbled it all up!”

“We did. It was good, wasn’t it?” Josh shifted the reins he held in one hand to two and guided Hawkins, his horse, into a wide arc to make the turn onto the path that led to Theo Marshall’s cabin.

When Theo had arrived in Holiday last year, he’d stopped by Josh’s saddle shop to look at a saddle on display in the window. The two of them had become fast friends. Gabi began calling him Uncle Theo, and neither of them felt the need to correct her. Not when Theo felt like family to both Josh and his daughter.

After losing his beloved Maxine to blood poisoning when Gabi had been a baby, Josh had struggled to let people into his life. It had been easier to keep them all at bay and avoid the risk of more pain when they left.

Yet, something about Theo encouraged him to make a new friend. He'd not once regretted that decision. Once he opened the door of his heart again, it seemed half the people in Holiday had poured into his life, offering encouragement and friendship. However, Theo had become like a brother to him.

The first time Theo had visited the saddle shop, he'd gotten down on Gabi's level to speak with her, and he didn't brush her aside as insignificant, as some of Josh's customers tended to do. He never seemed too busy or too tired to play with Gabi, another reason Josh had welcomed Theo's friendship.

Theo had helped him with numerous projects at his place and filled the role of fun-loving uncle to Gabi. In turn, Josh had helped Theo dig a well and install a pump faucet with a sink in the small cabin that had come with the land he'd purchased. He'd also been the one who'd organized the barn raising when Theo had purchased the lumber and lamented the short time to get the structure he'd envisioned built before the snow began to fly.

Friendship was something Josh treasured. Now that winter was behind them and everyone in the community of Holiday anticipated milder weather with the arrival of spring, there would be even more opportunities to gather with the people who he considered his friends.

Although Theo worked at one of the mines a few miles up the road from his cabin, he returned home each evening to take care of his animals and property. He'd told Josh he planned for his next project to be removing a sagging, falling-down fence

and installing a sturdy new one so he could get started on his plans to begin raising beef cattle.

Twice, Josh and Gabi had accompanied Theo to Elk Creek Ranch to study the Angus herd raised by the Coleman family. Grant Coleman had offered to sell Theo a few head at a great price as the foundation for his herd, but before he could accept the deal, Theo needed a secure place to keep them. The meadow ground behind the cabin was perfect for a pasture, but the fence was in terrible shape, at least what was left of it. Theo had burned part of it this winter for firewood.

“Look, Papa! Uncle Theo is here. He left the door open for us!” Gabi bounced on her seat, eager to see her overgrown playmate.

Josh was surprised Theo had arrived before them this evening, though. He generally didn’t get off work at the mine until five, and it took him about twenty minutes to ride home. After consulting the watch he kept in his vest pocket, and finding the time to be a quarter past five, Josh considered it was possible Theo had gotten off work early, or had ridden faster than normal to beat them to the house.

He’d barely pulled the buggy to a stop when Gabi scrambled down and raced into the cabin, hair bouncing wildly around her face and shoulders with each step. One of these days, he would master the ability to style it properly, but it wouldn’t be anytime soon. He felt like he had eight extra thumbs every time he attempted to subdue Gabi’s hair into a braid, or even tie it back from her face with a ribbon.

Then again, she'd inherited her unmanageable hair from him. His blond hair had always curled and waved in every direction, which was why he kept it cut short.

The idea of cutting off Gabi's hair to control it made him feel sick to his stomach, so he renewed his resolve to learn how to tame it in a suitable fashion.

If his daughter had her way, she'd wear it pinned on her head with a crown since she loved to pretend she was a princess and he was her loyal subject.

She wasn't far off the mark. He would do anything for his little girl, but he also wanted her to grow up without being indulged. Theo was the one in danger of spoiling the child, often giving Gabi a candy stick or peppermint drop when he thought Josh wasn't looking. It was a game Gabi played with Theo, and Josh truly didn't mind.

"Papa?" Gabi stood in the open doorway. "I can't find Uncle Theo. Where is he?"

"Maybe he's in the barn or down at the creek," Josh said, stepping out of the buggy and lifting the large basket that held their dinner. The smells emanating from it made his mouth water. He'd ordered the meal from Edith Piedmont, who owned the Holiday Hotel and restaurant with her husband. She could pack a picnic basket better than anyone else in town.

"Let's go look for him," Gabi ran over to him and grabbed his hand. "Come on, Papa."

“I’ll set the basket inside first, then we’ll go,” Josh instructed. “You wait right here, Gabi.”

Although his daughter looked like she wanted to argue with him, she remained in place. “Hurry, Papa!”

He hid a smile and turned toward the cabin, fully aware she wiggled off one foot and onto the other, anxious to locate Theo.

Josh set the basket on the table, glanced around to make sure no critters had snuck inside, then closed the door on his way out. Gabi reached for his hand and latched onto two of his fingers, tugging them in her haste to reach the barn.

They were halfway there when she looked up at him, curiosity evident in her expression. “Papa, what would you do if you had four arms?”

Gabi’s odd question didn’t faze him. She’d started asking him things others might view as strange about a year ago. He always made a point to answer each question because, to him, it showed what a creative, inquisitive mind his child possessed.

“What would I do with four arms?” Josh stopped and rubbed a hand across his chin, as though he were deep in thought. “Hmm. I suppose that would give me two extra arms to do this.”

He swept her up and tickled her sides, making her giggle and wriggle before he kissed her rosy cheek and set her back on her feet.

“Four arms would be fun,” she said, then ran ahead of him to the barn. She paused at the doorway. “Uncle Theo? Are you here?”

When no one answered, Gabi shrugged and turned back to him. “I’ll look down by the creek.”

“You do that, Gabi, but promise to stay back from the creek bank. The water is still running high from all the snow that’s melting and I don’t want you getting close enough to it that a water nymph might grab you.”

He’d created any number of mystical, magical beings in an effort to keep his daughter safe. Nymphs swam in the creeks and rivers around Holiday. Trolls hid in the woods and came out at night to catch children who roamed around in the dark, although trips to the outhouse were safe. Gnomes kept watch from behind the flames for little ones who dared to get too close to a fire. Sprites—those cagey sprites—just waited for a misbehaving child to wander off alone, ready to snatch them away.

Josh knew he shouldn’t create such outlandish tales, but as the lone parent raising an active little girl, he had to devise some way to keep her from hastening headlong into trouble.

Gabi tossed her hair as she gave him a disparaging glance over her shoulder. “I’m too quick. No nymph can catch me!” Then she skipped ahead through the trees on the path that led to the creek.

Josh decided to check in the barn to make sure Theo wasn’t hurt or something along those lines before he followed Gabi to

the creek. He stepped inside, and the first thing he noticed was a mule—a tired fellow, getting on in years—asleep in a stall. He'd never seen the mule at Theo's place or around town and wondered how it had gotten there. Theo hadn't mentioned having company, although he was expecting a cousin from Texas to arrive toward the end of May.

Josh's gaze landed on a saddle in such poor shape, he wondered how it stayed together as it balanced on one of the poles Theo had fastened to the barn wall to hold tack. A bridle hung off the saddle horn. Josh lifted it and shook his head. The thing was so old and used, he was sure he could hold it up and see the sky in places where the leather had almost completely worn away. It was a wonder it hadn't fallen apart and left the rider at the mercy of the mule.

Then again, the old mule didn't likely require a lot of direction to get him to amble on his way.

Josh returned the bridle to the horn of the saddle and walked through the barn, not finding anything amiss. Just to be sure, he climbed up the ladder into the loft and glanced around, but no one was there. He was nearly back down the ladder when Gabi's blood-curdling scream reached him. He jumped off the last three rungs of the ladder and took off in a dead run toward the creek, terrified his daughter had fallen in the cold, raging water.



THE UNCANNY, UNSETTLING FEELING of being watched pulled Rena from her restful slumber. She opened one eye to find a blue eye so close to hers, she could count the blonde eyelashes framing it, although the rest of the face was too close and therefore blurred.

With a gasp, she sat up on the rock where she'd fallen asleep and automatically grabbed her pistol, pointing it at the intruder.

An ear-shattering scream erupted from the tyke who'd been peering at her. Rena lowered the weapon and released her breath.

“Are you a nymph?” the youngster questioned, clearly frightened as she backed away.

“No. I’m not a nymph or a sprite, but might you be a fairy?”

The little girl shook her head, sending her curls flying into a state of greater disarray. They already looked like they’d been whipped with an eggbeater, but the child was adorable with her big blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and stubborn chin. She wore a pale blue dress trimmed with blue and yellow flowers embroidered across the yoke and around the hem. A pair of sturdy black boots looked impossibly tiny on her small feet.

The little one tilted her head. “I’m not a fairy, but I want to be a princess when I grow up.”

Rena hunkered down so she didn’t tower over the child and smiled. “When you become a princess, will you live in one of those big, drafty castles with a moat and a dragon that breathes fire?”

“No. I want a big house with white fluttery curtains, and a yard full of smelly-good flowers, and a whole room full of beautiful dresses, and a piano, and someone to play it for me. And I want my papa to live next door and come have breakfast with me every morning. We’ll have bacon and berry jam on biscuits every day!”

“You can’t go wrong with bacon or biscuits. That’s quite a wish list, but if you are a princess, I’m sure you can make it happen. Does your ...”

“Gabi!” a man’s voice boomed through the silence around them. The sound of fast-moving footsteps preceded the arrival of a man who looked so much like the child, Rena had no doubt he was her father. “Gabi!”

He dropped to his knees and pulled the little girl to him in a hug that looked like it might squeeze the air right out of her, except that the man appeared to be careful in not holding her too tight.

“Are you well? Are you hurt? Why did you scream? What’s going on?” His questions peppered the air as he ran a hand over his daughter’s head, across her shoulders, and then picked up her tiny hand to examine it.

“I reckon that’s my fault, mister. She woke me up and caught me by surprise, and I pulled my pistol out of reflex. My apologies for frightening her.”

He appeared shocked as he realized Gabi wasn’t alone. He lifted his daughter in his arms, then faced Rena.

Beneath the brim of his dark, dust-coated hat, Rena could see a hint of blond hair. He had a nice face with a pug nose, rounded jaw, and eyes the same lovely shade of blue as his daughter. His shoulders were broad although his waist appeared trim in the brown canvas vest he wore over a dark blue shirt.

After giving the man a second glance, Rena concluded he had kind eyes. The lines fanning from their corners caused her to assume he was someone who laughed with regularity.

“Gabi shouldn’t have startled you awake,” he said, giving his daughter a stern look before turning back to Rena. “Who might you be?”

“Rena Burke. Theo Marshall is my cousin.” Rena waved her hand around them. “This is his place, isn’t it?”

Before the man could answer, Gabi leaned forward. “You know Uncle Theo?”

Rena grinned. “I do know him. How is it he’s your uncle?”

“Cause he’s nice and plays games with me, and gives me candy when Papa isn’t looking.” Gabi clapped a hand over her mouth, then shrugged and giggled. “I wasn’t supposed to tell that part.”

The child’s father rolled his eyes and jiggled her good-naturedly. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it.” His focus shifted to Rena again, and she battled the urge to shove her wayward hair behind her ears or tuck her wrinkled shirt into the waistband of her pants.

She hadn’t planned on falling asleep on the rock at the creek; however, the sun had felt so warm and pleasant on her face, she’d gone to sleep before she could do more than rest her head on her arm.

A few more wrinkles had joined the abundance already in her shirt and trousers. The right side of her face felt flushed, probably from a sunburn. The breeze carried her hair, which she’d left down, into her face. At least she was clean and no

longer smelled like she'd spent weeks on the trail sleeping curled up to a mule.

Regardless, she was acutely aware that she more closely resembled a gangly, awkward boy than a woman. For reasons she didn't care to examine, it bothered her that the good-looking man eyeing her was seeing her for the first time in such a disheveled state.

"You're the cousin Theo said was traveling from Texas. I don't think he expected to see you until late next month."

Rena couldn't stop her fingers from reaching up and nervously twisting her hair into a loose braid that draped over her shoulder. "I ended up taking the train part of the way. It cut off several weeks from the trip."

"I see," he said, then shifted his daughter to his other arm and smiled at Rena. "In that case, welcome to Holiday. We were planning to eat supper with Theo this evening. He ought to be home soon from the mine. I'm Josh Gatlin, and this is my daughter, Gabrielle Joy, although we call her Gabi."

"It's nice to meet you both." Rena politely tipped her head, then gathered her things. "Shall we head back to the house?"

"Yes. I'm hungry, and Uncle Theo will be too," Gabi said, squirming to be set down. Her father placed her on her feet, and she skipped a few paces ahead as Josh fell into step with Rena. By sheer determination, she did her best to hide any hint of her limp.

Although she was tall for a woman, Rena liked that Josh was a handful of inches taller. She looked up at him and found him studying her.

He held her gaze rather than looking away. “Now that I’m not scared Gabi’s life is in immediate danger, I can see you share a resemblance with Theo. Your mothers are sisters, is that right?”

Rena nodded. “They were. My mother passed two years ago.”

“I’m sorry about your mother. It’s hard to lose the ones we love.”

From the sadness in his voice, Rena figured he’d experienced at least one heartbreaking loss in his lifetime.

“Do you have other children or just Gabi?” Rena asked, wanting to change the subject. She was still exhausted and figured she hadn’t been asleep long before Gabi had awakened her. When she was weary, it made her prone to dwell in sadness. Today should be a joyful day since she intended it to be a new beginning for herself. One that would start here in Holiday.

Mr. Gatlin chuckled. “Only Gabi. She is more than I can handle most days.”

Rena watched the little girl stop to observe plants along the pathway. “How about her mother? Is she as lively as Gabi?”

A shadow of grief passed over Josh’s face, and he shook his head. “No. Not now. She was, before ...” He released a long

sigh. “She, um ... she passed when Gabi was still a baby. Had a bad case of blood poisoning that killed her before we realized there was even a problem. The doctor did all he could once we realized something was wrong, but it was too late.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Gatlin. It had to be doubly hard to lose your wife with Gabi so young. Despite your tragic loss, she seems to be quite a happy child.” Rena looked ahead to where Gabi twirled in a circle, holding the skirt of her dress in one hand and a white tri-petaled flower she’d plucked along the way in the other.

“Call me Josh.” He glanced at Rena, then back to his daughter. “As for Gabi, she is my ray of sunshine. She gave me a reason to go on when I didn’t want to.”

Rena understood grief all too well. She longed to offer a word, not of sympathy but one of commiseration, only she had no idea what to say. Instead, she fell silent as they walked back to the barn.

“I saw a mule I didn’t recognize. He belong to you?” Josh asked.

“He does. I should check on him,” Rena said, rounding the corner of the barn and smacking into her cousin.

“Well, look what ol’ Scout dragged in,” Theo said in a jesting tone before he wrapped Rena in a warm hug. “I was just coming to find you. When I realized the mule was Scout, I about plumb forgot to take care of Thomas.”

Rena walked over to the stall where her cousin's horse slurped water from a bucket. "He looks grand, Theo." She let the horse sniff her hand, then scratched him in all the spots he used to enjoy when they were younger.

Scout made a noise from his stall, declaring his need for attention. Rena stepped over and patted his neck. "You're a good boy, Scout. We made it all the way here in one piece."

"And how, exactly, did you get here so quickly?" Theo asked as he dumped feed into the stall for Thomas. "With your insistence on riding Scout the whole way, I figured it would be nearly June before you arrived."

Rena shrugged and shoved her hands in the pockets of her loose trousers. "Let's just say, by the time we reached Denver I knew we needed to make the rest of the trip on the train."

"Did you come in on Hope today?" Theo asked as he opened a door at the back of the barn and a red roan cow with a heavy bag ambled inside.

By sheer determination, she kept from rolling her eyes at the mention of the train engine named Hope, and the outlandish notions it stirred in her about hope carrying her along her journey. Rather than let it annoy her, Rena brushed thoughts of hope, and her lack of it, aside. "I got off in Baker City. Scout and I made the rest of the trip on foot. It was actually quite a lovely ride up the mountain. I saw several places where wildflowers are starting to bloom. Is that a sign spring has arrived?"

“A fairly sure sign. We’ve been known to get snow in June a few years,” Josh said, joining the conversation. “But it doesn’t last long.”

Rena couldn’t quite fathom snow in the summertime and fervently wished that wouldn’t be the case this year. She was ready for warm days full of blue skies and sunshine after the cold nights and several rainy days she’d endured on her journey.

“I see you met Josh and Gabi Jo,” Theo said, reaching for the child, then stepping back. “I’d better wait to give you a proper hug, honey, until after I clean up a bit.” Theo was covered in dust and grime from the top of his head to the tips of his boots.

When he’d hugged her, he’d smeared some of it on Rena, but she didn’t care. She was far too happy to see her cousin.

“Were you blasting today?” Rena asked, curious about her cousin’s job as one of the men who worked with explosives at the mine. She knew it was highly dangerous, but it also paid well. Theo’s sister, Laura, was terrified he’d end up maimed or worse, but Rena thought he was brave to take on the job. He’d mentioned in one of the letters he’d written that he only intended to work at the mine for another year, saving all the money he could before he turned his hand to working his land and tending the cattle he hoped to purchase.

“We did do some blasting today, which is why I’m so filthy. I’ll milk Sue, then take a plunge in the creek before I join you for dinner. You all should go on inside.” Theo took a bucket

off a peg and scooted a stool over to the cow's side as she stood in a stall munching hay.

"I'll milk. You go get cleaned up; then we'll be able to eat that much faster," Josh said, rolling up his shirtsleeves as Theo stood with the milk bucket in his hand.

"Go on," Josh said, moving next to the cow.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Theo asked but held the bucket out to Josh.

Josh grabbed the bucket, then gave Theo a playful shove. "Gabi and I are starving, so the faster the chores are finished, the quicker we get to eat."

"I'll make the table pretty," Gabi volunteered, then latched onto Rena's hand. "Come with me. You can help."

Rena tossed a helpless look at Theo, then allowed Gabi to tug her into the cabin. The delicious aroma of dinner filled the space and made her realize how hungry she was. She returned her pistol to the holster hanging from a peg behind the door, left her dirty clothes next to her bags, and washed her hands at the sink. Fascinated, she watched as Gabi hummed to herself and pulled a kitchen chair over to the sink, pushed up the sleeves of her dress, and soaped her hands with unbridled enthusiasm while Rena worked the handle on the pump.

"What do we need to do to set the table?" Rena asked when Gabi hopped off the chair, flinging water droplets in her wake. The chair legs screeched across the rough wooden floor as the child shoved it back over to the table.

“The plates are up there.” Gabi pointed to the crate on the wall that held plates, cups, and bowls. Cutlery stood upright in an empty canning jar.

At least Theo had four sets of everything.

Rena took down the dishes and carried them to the table, then retrieved the cutlery. Gabi flitted around the table, arranging the spoons, forks, and knives at each plate.

“Uncle Theo keeps the napkins in there,” Gabi said, pointing to the chest of drawers.

“Which drawer?” Rena asked with her hands poised at the knobs of the top drawer.

“The next one down.” Gabi twirled around a few times as Rena retrieved four plain but serviceable napkins from the drawer that held a few tablecloths and a stack of dish towels.

Gabi insisted on showing Rena how to fold the napkins and arrange them at each place setting. It wasn't until she finished that she realized the table was shoved against the wall and no one would be able to sit at the fourth place setting.

“We need Papa and Uncle Theo to move the table,” Gabi said, starting for the door.

Rena pushed the chairs aside and grabbed the edge of the table. “I think if you help, we can take care of it ourselves.” Rena had no intention of asking one of the men to do something she could easily see to herself. She'd learned a long time ago to be self-sufficient.

She pulled on the table, and Gabi rushed over to it. Although the child's assistance made no difference, Rena couldn't help but smile as Gabi's tongue slipped out the corner of her mouth and her brow furrowed in concentration as she yanked on a table leg.

The heavy oak table groaned as it moved a few inches at a time. Rena felt the pull in her arms as she strained against the weight of it. She experienced a great deal of satisfaction when she'd moved it enough that someone could maneuver around it and sit in the chair Gabi shoved into the place nearest the wall.

"You're strong, Miss ... What is your name?" Gabi asked, wrinkling up her face as she searched for the right name.

"Miss Burke, but you may call me Rena."

Gabi hugged her around the waist, and Rena hugged her back, grateful for the simple gesture of affection. It made warmth curl through her and a smile wreath her face. The child looked up at her and grinned. "Is your name really Rena, or is it like my name is Gabi and Gabrielle?"

"Everyone calls me Rena, but my name is Renatta Liliana Burke."

Gabi pulled back and studied her. "Why do you wear pants like my papa? I've never seen a lady in pants."

Rena was of a mind to inform her she wasn't much of a lady but refrained. She could only imagine the barrage of questions that would incite. Instead, she danced a few steps of a jig she'd

learned from a boy she once liked at school, then ended the performance with a sweeping bow.

Gabi clapped her hands and squealed in delight.

“Oh, do it again, Rena. Please? Do it again!”

Despite the pain it caused her leg, Rena was set to give the child a second performance when the floor creaked and Josh stepped inside with the milk bucket.

“Do what again?” he asked as he walked over to the sink.

Rena hoped he hadn't seen her impromptu performance. Because of the growing ache in her leg, she eased onto one of the chairs, surprised when Gabi climbed onto her lap, then gave her father an innocent grin.

“Rena was showing me why she wears pants like you, Papa. Only hers are gray like Noah Coleman wears instead of brown.” Gabi patted a hand on Rena's leg. “I like dresses. I don't think a princess wears pants.”

Rena nodded in agreement. “I think you're probably right. It's good you like dresses if you want to be a princess.”

“How come you don't like dresses, Rena?” Gabi asked with such an earnest expression on her sweet face, it made Rena want to hold the child close and shelter her from all the pain life tended to rain down on a person when they least expected it.

“That's enough questions for now, Miss Nosy,” Josh chided softly as he strained the milk into a pitcher. When he finished, he rinsed out the milk bucket and the cloth he'd used to strain

the milk. He set the pitcher on the table, then hefted a basket to the chair across from where Rena and Gabi sat and began taking out items.

The sight of a platter of golden, crispy fried chicken made Rena want to snatch a leg and start eating, but she tried to ignore her growing hunger.

“That creek water is still cold,” Theo proclaimed as he walked into the cabin in a set of clean clothes, his face shining from a recent scrubbing. He knelt down and held out his arms. “Now I’m ready for my Gabi hug.”

The child hopped off Rena’s lap and raced over to Theo, throwing her arms around his neck. Theo lifted her in his arms and stood, then noisily kissed her cheek. “How was school today, Gabi?”

“It was fun. I got to help the teacher pass out papers.”

Rena was surprised the little one was old enough to attend school.

As though he could read her mind, Josh leaned down and whispered, “She won’t officially be in the first grade until the fall, but she likes to sit in class and learn. The teacher has been good to let her. If she gets tired, she comes to my shop to rest.”

“I see,” Rena said, standing as Theo walked over to the table and deposited Gabi on the chair closest to the wall.

“Rena moved the table, and I helped. We’re strong!” Gabi made a face that she’d perhaps intended to be fierce, but it caused all three adults to laugh.

“Well, since you’re the strongest one here, Gabi Jo, how about you offer grace tonight?” Theo asked as he motioned for Rena to take the seat across from Gabi.

She sank onto the chair, draped the napkin across her lap, and bowed her head.

Gabi offered a sweet prayer, one her father had no doubt taught her, then they all joined her for a hearty “amen.”

“The food is from the hotel, Miss Burke. The chef at the restaurant is good, and Mrs. Piedmont is a wonder at packing picnic baskets.” Josh set a drumstick on Gabi’s plate, then passed the platter to Rena.

It hadn’t escaped her notice that Theo had directed her to sit between him and Josh. She hoped he didn’t have any matchmaking plans in mind. If so, he’d be sadly disappointed. Besides, he knew her feelings about remaining alone. Even if she were interested in marriage, there wasn’t a single decent man alive who’d want her. Certainly not a man like Josh Gatlin who exuded virility along with kindness.

Throughout the meal, Rena observed how attentive he was to Gabi. The child ate quietly and with fine manners, further impressing Rena that she’d been taught well.

When they’d consumed the meal and enjoyed the dried apple pie Mrs. Piedmont had sent along, Josh stood and carried dishes to the sink.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Rena volunteered, seeking any distraction from how comfortable it felt to be around Josh and

Gabi.

“I’ll help,” Theo said, carrying more dishes over to the sink. He glanced over his shoulder at Josh as he shaved a few slivers of soap into a pan of warm water he’d dipped from the reservoir on the stove. “Thanks again for bringing out such a fine meal. How about I treat you to lunch at the hotel Sunday after the church service?”

“That’s an offer I won’t refuse,” Josh said with a grin. He slapped Theo’s shoulder, then tipped his head to Rena as she plunged her hands into the hot water. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Burke. If I don’t see you before, I’ll look forward to seeing you Sunday.”

Before she could explain all the reasons she would not attend the church service, Josh picked up a sleepy Gabi and carried her outside. Rena listened to the jingle of the harness as he left, heading back toward the road that would take him to Holiday.

“Do Josh and Gabi live in town?” she asked Theo as he took a clean dish towel from a drawer and began drying the dishes.

“Almost. They have a place just beyond the outskirts of town to the east. It’s close enough Gabi can walk to school if needed, but Josh drops her off. She’s still so young, he’s afraid she’ll get hit by a runaway wagon or abducted by nefarious mountain men or eaten by bears running loose through town.”

Rena’s eyes widened, then she realized Theo was teasing. “An abundance of nefarious mountain men and bears to contend with in Holiday, are there?”

Theo shrugged with feigned innocence. “You just never know.”

Rena elbowed his side, and they both laughed, falling into the easy camaraderie she’d always shared with her two Marshall cousins. Well, they were her only cousins, but she’d adored them both as long as she could remember.

Laura, a milliner by trade, had moved to Caldwell, Texas, where she’d made friends and settled in like the town had always been her home.

Theo had left Texas a handful of years ago, working on ranches and in mines, learning a variety of trades as he’d made his way west. Last year, he’d arrived in Holiday, bought the land, and gone to work at the mine.

Rena had missed them both but was grateful they’d continued to keep in touch through letters.

“Do you really like it here in Holiday?” Rena asked, as she rinsed the last dish and handed it to Theo.

“I do, Rena. Holiday is a newer, growing place, but the majority of the people here are caring and kind. It’s not just a town. Holiday is a community full of people you can count on.”

“Like Josh?” Despite herself, Rena couldn’t keep her thoughts from dwelling on the saddle shop owner. She’d learned he’d been in Holiday for nine years, that he and Gabi both loved fried chicken, and that he had intellect as well as wit.

She knew she could be friends with Josh, just as Theo had found a good friend in him. But to consider the possibility of anything more was ludicrous. Ridiculous. Painfully preposterous.

A handsome man like Josh Gatlin wouldn't want a thing to do with a woman like Rena. It was all for the best if she locked that idea in her head and didn't let it tumble out.

The past was far too painful to consider, and she hoped that by coming to Holiday, she'd finally free herself of the memories that haunted her. Holiday was her opportunity to begin anew, and there was nothing in her plans that included romance.

Rena would have scoffed at herself and her meaningless musings if Theo hadn't been standing right next to her.

"Tell me more about your job," she said, and he launched into describing his mine blasting work, and the men with whom he worked.

She listened to him as she packed clean dishes into the picnic basket that had come from the restaurant. Josh had said they could drop it off at the hotel the next time they were in town. From the sound of things, that would be Sunday, unless she ventured into Holiday sooner.

"So, what do you think?" Theo asked.

Rena yanked her wandering thoughts back to the present. "I'm sorry, Theo, I wasn't paying attention. What did you ask?"

“I said there’s an immediate opening at the mine working with me. In your last letter, you mentioned your interest in gaining employment at the mine. The office and cookshack positions have been filled, but they need a new blaster. I already spoke with the manager and the mine owner. They are willing to give you a chance if you can do the work.”

“What?” Rena gaped at her cousin and nearly dropped the bowl in her hand. She set it on the table and stared at him. “Please repeat what you just said.”

Theo grinned, set the bowl into the basket, and closed the lid. “I said there’s a job at the mine if you want it. The work is hard and dirty, but it pays well. The added bonus is that I’ll be right there, working beside you. It is dangerous, and you have to be careful, but you’re smart, and you’ve always caught on quickly to learning something new. If you want to come with me on Monday, you can give the job a try. If you aren’t interested, that’s fine too. I just wanted you to have that option.”

Although her mind whirled with questions, she threw her arms around Theo and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Theo. Thank you so much. Are you sure you want me to work at the mine with you? People will talk.”

“That’s a bunch of twaddle. If anyone says something to upset you, just tell me. They’ll only say it once. Besides, I don’t care what people say, and I didn’t think you did either.”

“I don’t care what they say about me, but I don’t want that to flow onto you. This is your home. The mine is where

you've worked for nearly a year. I don't want to make anything difficult for you by ...”

When she hesitated to say more, Theo placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “By what?” he questioned.

Rena dropped her gaze to her fingers as she worried a loose thread on her shirt. “By being me,” she said softly.

“I happen to like you, cousin. It makes no difference to me if you wear trousers or skirts, if you attend tea parties or blast holes up in the hills in a mining camp. None of that makes a whit of difference as to who you are.”

She gave him a studying glance. “Your employer really doesn't care that I'm a woman?”

“Nope. He just said don't wear anything that will get in the way of your work or distract the miners.”

Rena couldn't help the snort that rolled out of her. She motioned to her wrinkled shirt and trousers. “I think I can meet those criteria without any trouble at all.”

Theo shook his head and tugged on her braid. “You're a lovely woman, Rena, whether you realize it or not. Your limp, your scars, and your attire don't detract from that fact. One of these days, you're going to have to face the truth.”

She held up a hand to stop him, and he snapped his mouth shut, then strode over to his bed and pulled a box and small trunk from beneath it.

“Laura sent your birthday gift. She’d hoped to get up to Amarillo to tell you goodbye in person, but it didn’t work out, so she mailed this to you instead. I also picked up something for you the last time I was in Baker City. If my calculations aren’t too far off, you should have been close to Denver when you celebrated your birthday.”

Rena nodded and accepted the box from Theo, taking a seat at the table and placing it in front of her. “I was almost to Denver then. I guess I should look at the expense of the train tickets as a birthday present to myself.”

“I’m glad you spent that money, Rena. Laura and I were both worried half to death about your traveling alone like that. I’ll get a note off to her tomorrow to let her know you’ve arrived unharmed.”

“I’ll send her a note as well. If I don’t need to report to work until Monday, that gives me a few days to rest and catch up on laundry.” She untied the ribbon and folded back the paper on a box that held sketching pencils, drawing paper, and a small set of paints.

“I remembered how you used to love to draw, Rena. I hoped some of the beauty of our area might inspire you to draw or paint again.”

Touched by her cousin’s thoughtfulness and gift, Rena blinked away the tears stinging her eyes and trailed her fingers over the paint set. It had been a long time since she’d drawn anything, but she would like to start again. “That’s so kind of

you, Theo. Thank you. The first picture I draw belongs to you.”

“I look forward to seeing it.” He set the small trunk in front of her after she slid his gift to the side. “I have no idea what Laura sent, but she made it clear in her letter she wanted me to make sure you received this as soon as you got here.”

“I wonder what it could be?” Rena excitedly lifted the lid on the trunk to reveal a box wrapped in paper and tied with a yellow ribbon. An envelope with her name written across it rested on top of it.

Rena opened the envelope, and a brass key on a thin silver chain fell into her hand. She clasped it while she skimmed through a letter from Laura. Words like “romance” and “hope” and “love a chance” jumped out at her, leaving her annoyed. Laura knew there was no place for love or romance in her life, so the fact that she was trying to push the possibilities toward Rena from all the way in Texas made her more than a little irritated.

With great effort, she tamped down her anger, removed the ribbon and paper, and stared at a beautiful mahogany case. Theo set the trunk aside as Rena lifted out the case.

A mother-of-pearl inlay in the center of the lid made it seem more like a work of art, especially with shiny brass hinges and locks. She inserted the key in the lock, listened to the click as it turned, and pushed the lid open. The green velvet lining looked rich in the lamplight glowing around her.

A low, long whistle beside her reminded her that Theo was as curious as she about the contents of the box.

Reverently, Rena took a .32 caliber nickel-plated pistol from the case.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Theo said, bending closer to get a better look at it. “That’s a double-action, five-shot revolver. And look at the handle. That looks like real mother-of-pearl, just like on the case.”

“It does,” Rena agreed, lightly rubbing her fingers over the cool surface of the pale pink handle. It was a gun that looked like it had been made for a fine lady.

“Is it as light as it looks?” Theo questioned as Rena continued studying the weapon.

“Here,” she said, setting it on his palm.

Theo lifted his hand up and down a few times. “That can’t even weigh a pound. You’ll have to test it out and see how it fires.”

“It’s too pretty to shoot,” Rena said, taking it from Theo and setting it back in the case. She tucked Laura’s letter inside, then closed the lid.

“You should at least shoot it once, just to see what it can do.” Theo gave her another hug. “I’m really glad you’re here, Rena. I’ve got a bed set up for you in the loft. I thought it would give you more privacy up there than down here, but if the ladder is too much for you, we can switch.”

“The loft is perfect.” Rena kissed his cheek. “Thank you for letting me stay with you, Theo. I’ll do my best not to be a burden to you.”

“You’d never be a burden, so get that idiotic notion right out of your head.” He stepped back and scowled at her. “You’re like another sister to me, Renatta, and you’d best remember that. Now, I’ve got to be at the mine bright and early in the morning, so I’ll try to leave without waking you up. Help yourself to any food you can find. Rest up tomorrow, or do whatever you like. I should be back around half past five.”

“I’ll have dinner ready when you get here.” She hugged him once more, then turned to carry her things up to the loft. Theo beat her to it and hauled her saddlebags, traveling bag, and birthday gifts up the ladder.

“Do you really like the paints and pencils?” he asked as she started up the ladder.

She stopped with her foot poised above a rung and smiled at him. “I love them, Theo. It’s a perfect gift. Thank you. If you want to write Laura a letter, I could take it into town tomorrow and mail it. I thought I’d ride into Holiday and get a few supplies.”

“I’ll leave some money on the table with the letter.”

Rena thought about making it clear to him that she intended to pay her share but decided it wouldn’t do any good. She’d just leave the money on the table and argue with him tomorrow.

She smiled and made her way up the ladder, more than ready to change into a nightgown, crawl beneath the warm quilt on her soft bed, and fall into a deep sleep.



JOSH WORKED ON STAMPING a design of acanthus scrolls onto a piece of leather while whistling a rather boisterous rendition of “Listen to the Mockingbird.”

He wasn’t one who normally whistled while he worked, but he’d whistled nearly every tune he knew, some of them twice, as he worked in his shop.

The reason for his good mood wasn’t something he cared to think about. If he traced the source, an image of Rena Burke immediately popped into his thoughts.

Yesterday, when he’d heard Gabi scream, he’d felt his heart plummet to his feet while he’d raced off to battle whatever demon had laid siege to his child. He’d charged through the

trees by the creek to find Gabi happily speaking with a woman who was a complete and utter mystery to him.

Rena had worn wrinkled clothes that hung loose and large on her thin frame. If it hadn't been for her glorious waves of rich brown hair flowing around her, and her lovely face, he might have mistaken her for a boy.

As it was, he couldn't get a vision of that hair or her teasing smile out of his mind. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

Nearly four years had passed since he'd lost his wife, and in that time, he hadn't given another woman more than a passing glance.

Yet, one evening spent in the company of Rena Burke had him whistling tunes and so lost in his daydreams he was likely to wound himself or mess up the custom piece he worked to create.

Josh shook his head to clear his thoughts and examined the belt over which he labored. The pattern he was stamping flowed beautifully across the leather. Since it looked exactly as he wanted, he returned to tamping in the design. Jace Coleman had ordered four belts: one for his wife, which Josh worked on now, and one for each of his young sons.

As Josh envisioned the looks on the faces of the Coleman lads when they received the belts, he grinned. They were just like the belts the cowboys at Elk Creek Ranch wore. No doubt, the three boys would race out to the bunkhouse and show the hired hands their new belts as soon as they received them.

A chuckle rolled out of him as Josh thought of the youngest Coleman boy. Zach was absolutely daffy about trains. Considering the years Jace had worked as an engineer, it wasn't any wonder at least one of his boys would also love trains. Jonah and Noah, though, were going to be ranchers through and through.

Unaware of his actions, Josh began to whistle again. Movement outside drew his gaze to the street. He stopped with his mallet in midair and watched Rena ride by on her mule. The poor critter looked old enough to have carried Methuselah, but he clip-clopped along in a steady rhythm as Rena guided him up the street. He wondered what brought her to town. She hadn't mentioned riding into Holiday last night.

Of their own volition, Josh's feet carried him across the shop to the front windows. He watched as Rena looped the reins around the hitching rail outside the mercantile down the street. If the mule jerked hard, the worn-out leather of that bridle would snap in two. It would be an easy thing to repair. In fact, he had an old bridle in a box of discarded tack he'd gladly give to her.

Josh had his hand on the doorknob to hustle across the street to see Rena before he realized what he was doing.

"Focus. Focus," he uttered to himself and backed away from the door. Just because Rena had come to town didn't mean he needed to abandon all his good sense and rush over to the mercantile just to see if he could make her smile.

Throughout their shared meal the previous evening, he'd found her to be intelligent, amusing, and kind. She'd laughed at his jokes, teased Theo, and sweetly spoken to Gabi when his daughter had joined the conversation.

Gabi had chattered like a magpie all the way home about her new friend and how much she liked her.

Josh liked her too.

Far more than he should, considering he'd just met the woman. After all, there was a process to getting to know a person. Time, patience, and effort from both parties were necessary. The urge to rush headlong into something just because the thought of seeing her made his heart thump around in his chest was absurd.

Since he'd lost Maxine, he'd felt like he didn't have any heart left when it came to romance, but his encounter with Rena had assured him he did.

Theo had mentioned his cousin had been in a terrible accident that had changed her life, but he hadn't gone into any detail. Other than the barest hint of a limp that Rena tried hard to hide, Josh couldn't see any visible marks on the woman. He assumed the accident had something to do with her choice to dress in trousers instead of wearing a skirt. Or maybe she'd found it easier to travel in them since she was out on the trail alone.

It was a wonder that men hadn't waylaid her on her travels from Texas to Oregon. She might not be a raving beauty by polite society's standards, but he'd found her undeniably

striking from that mass of thick hair to the freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks.

Maybe it was that she was more adorably enchanting than pretty, but he'd experienced an immediate attraction to her, and that petrified him. It wasn't so much the notion of being in love but loving a woman who was all wrong for him and Gabi.

Rena wasn't the type of female to sit at home knitting socks or embroidering linens, or fetching his slippers when he arrived home from a day of work at the saddle shop.

From the lively spark in her amber-hued eyes to the slight cleft in her chin, he had an idea Rena would prove to be independent, stubborn, and even a little wild.

That was fine. Josh had no interest in or intention of taming her.

His own wild child was more than enough for him to focus on. He didn't need to become enamored with a woman who seemed as unattainable as the fairies and sprites he'd convinced Gabi really existed.

Frustrated with the direction of his thoughts, Josh yanked them in line and went back to work. Only, instead of keeping his attention on the belt, his gaze roved to the window while his thoughts wandered to the mercantile, contemplating why Rena was there and what had brought her into town.

When he struck his thumb with the mallet, Josh tossed it down and shook his hand in hopes of relieving the pain.

“Tarnation,” he muttered even as he strode across his shop, grabbed his hat from the rack by the door, and stormed outside. He crossed the street in a few long strides, marched past the bank, and jogged up the steps to the mercantile. He reached for the door, ready to charge inside when it swung open and Rena stepped out, her arms loaded with paper-wrapped parcels.

“Oh, Mr. Gatlin,” she said, smiling at him when recognition set in. “How does this day find you?”

“Well,” he said, lying through his teeth. Hadn’t he been well until he’d spied her riding up the street? Nothing seemed well now, though. “And you? What brought you into town today?”

“Theo and I both wrote to his sister, letting her know I arrived. I wanted to mail the letters. Since I was in town, I returned the basket and dishes to the hotel. Mrs. Piedmont is wonderful. I also needed a few supplies.” She glanced down at the packages she carried.

Josh realized he must look like a big oaf, blocking her way. He removed his hat and stepped aside. “May I help you with those, Miss Burke?”

“I’ve got them, but thank you.” She rushed down the steps and began tucking parcels into the saddlebags straddling the back of the mule. When she had them all secured, she looked back to find him watching her.

Josh hadn’t even realized he’d followed her down the steps until the breeze carried her fresh, sweet scent to his nose. He wanted to bat it away like a bothersome gnat but instead

inhaled a deep breath. She smelled like flowers and sunshine with a hint of adventure thrown in just to further ensnare his senses.

Infuriated with himself, he brushed his finger beneath his nose and took a step back.

Rena gave him a curious look, as though he was a puzzle with missing pieces. “It was so nice to meet you and Gabi yesterday. Thank you again for such a lovely meal.”

“My pleasure. Gabi couldn’t stop talking about you. In fact,” Josh glanced up at the position of the sun in the sky, “she’ll be getting out of school any minute, so I’d best return to the shop.”

“Of course. Did you come to the mercantile for a reason?” Rena picked up the reins she’d tied around the hitching post and walked around to her mule’s left side.

Mindful of appearing like the dunce he was sure she thought him to be, he nodded. “I did. I reckon we’ll see you Sunday if not before.”

“See you later,” she said, easily swinging into the saddle with her long legs.

Josh remained rooted to the street, watching as she turned the mule north and headed out of town with a friendly wave over her shoulder.

It took a moment before Josh realized someone stood beside him. He looked over at Doctor Evan Holt as the man held his doctor’s bag in one hand and a box of supplies in the other.

“See something of interest?” the doctor asked with a smirk.

“Nothing at all,” Josh said, glowering at the doctor before storming back toward his shop. The man’s laughter followed him across the street.

Josh slammed the door so hard, the windows rattled when he returned to his shop. Too worked up to continue the detailed work on the belt, he went into the back room and decided it was a perfect time to start the spring cleaning he’d been putting off.

However, the onerous task of scrubbing shelves and polishing windows until they shone did nothing to remove the image of Rena’s smile from his mind.



GUILT OVER HER REACTION to Laura's gift, and the fact that she hadn't actually read the entire letter from her cousin, weighed heavily on Rena. From the moment she awoke Saturday morning, she knew she wouldn't be at peace until she read the letter in its entirety and then properly thanked Laura for the gift.

Even if Rena didn't believe romance was in her future, Laura had meant well.

Still not quite ready to read what her cousin had shared, Rena kept herself busy, tidying the cabin and then baking cookies. She thought about taking Scout for a ride, but the animal needed his rest. Theo had been asked to work extra

hours at the mine, so he'd left early again that morning, and Rena had another day to herself.

After cleaning the barn and bathing in the creek, she returned inside, aware she'd put off Laura's letter long enough. With a careworn sigh, Rena climbed up to the loft, removed her boots, and settled onto the end of the bed. Her hand brushed over the inlay in the lid of the case that held the unique pistol. It really was quite a splendid case. Something to be treasured.

So, why on earth had her cousin shipped it all the way to her in Holiday?

Likely, the answer was in the letter she'd angrily skimmed the other night. Had she taken the time to read it thoroughly, perhaps it wouldn't have left her so exasperated and out of sorts with Laura.

Then again, the combination of exhaustion, meeting Josh and Gabi, and finally reaching Holiday after weeks of travel might have added to her reaction.

Rena glanced out the window that allowed light into the loft area. She could see trees and sky, and it calmed her to know nature was so near. The loft room Theo had prepared for her was more than she could have hoped for. Although it was open to the room below, he had hung a curtain on a rope across one corner to give her a private area for changing. There was a small desk and chair beneath the window, a dresser with a mirror above it, and a soft, comfortable bed with a fluffy

pillow and warm blankets, which seemed essential during the cool mountain nights.

“I’m grateful for this new home and my cousins,” Rena mumbled to herself, refusing to consider her thoughts a prayer. Not after what she’d suffered through. Alone.

Unwilling to let her thoughts linger in the past, Rena turned her attention back to the gun case before her. She lifted the lid, again admiring the pink-handled pistol, then removed her cousin’s letter from the envelope and read each word.

Dear Rena,

I realize this might seem like a strange gift for your birthday, but I felt such a compelling urgency to send it to you. The trunk seemed the best way to ship the case and keep it unharmed, so I hope you’ll find a use for it too.

If you look inside the gun case, you’ll find not only a beautiful pistol but also a pocket in the lining that holds a very special letter. You’ll also find a note from my friend Tessa. She recently wed Jackson Spivey. I’m sure you’ll recall I mentioned them in previous letters.

Anyway, aware as I am of your unflagging admiration for Annie Oakley, I think the story of this pink pistol will become part of your own legacy.

I know you are hurting, dear cousin, and I don’t mean from the scars left on your body, but those that cut so deeply into your tender heart. You’re a brave, brave girl to journey to

Oregon and attempt to start anew, but I hope you'll keep in mind that until you release the past and all the pain that was part of it, it will always haunt your future.

My hope—and fervent prayer—for you is that you'll find a way to let it all go and give yourself permission to fall in love again. I know you scoff at the very notion of romance, but one day a man will come along who will change your mind.

Read the letter, heed the wisdom shared, let hope fill your being, and open your heart to love again, dear one. Give love a chance. It might surprise you.

Watch over Theo for me and make sure he eats properly. I'm sure he still avoids vegetables like they carry the plague, and the only fruit he enjoys is baked into a pie.

Thinking of you always, and giving my prayers wings that you'll find what you seek there in Holiday.

All my love,

Cousin Laura

Rena's first inclination after reading the letter was to wad it into a ball and toss it into the stove downstairs. Then she forced herself to read it again. Laura was only trying to help, to offer hope.

Her cousin failed to realize Rena just didn't have it in her to love again. Not when her heart and her entire life had shattered two years ago.

Convinced she'd regret it, she found the pocket in the lining of the case, carefully removed the letter tucked away there, and read the words penned by someone she'd never know.

She who possesses this pistol, possesses an opportunity that must not be squandered. Cast in the tender dreams of maidens from ages past, the steel of this weapon is steadfast and true and will lead an unmarried woman to a man forged from the same virtuous elements. One need only fit her hand to the grip and open her heart to activate the promise for which this pistol was fashioned—the promise of true love. Patience and courage will illuminate her path. Hope and faith will guide her steps until her heart finds its home.

Once the promise is fulfilled, the bearer must release the pistol and pass it to another or risk losing what she has found.

Accept the gift ... or not.

Believe its promise ... or not.

But hoard the pistol for personal gain ... and lose what you hold most dear.

Rena scoffed. “What a bunch of foolish claptrap!” She started to tuck the note back into the pocket, then noticed there was more written on the parchment.

A gift from the great Annie Oakley, this pistol carries a legacy of love. If you possess this pistol and find love, please

record your name and a bit of your story to encourage those who follow.

Tessa James married Jackson Spivey on March 3, 1894, in Caldwell, Texas - I was aiming for his heart but accidentally winged him in the arm. Thankfully, forgiveness and love cover a multitude of mishaps.

“Laura has lost her mind if she believes all this romantic nonsense,” Rena groused as she returned the letter to the pocket in the case and set Laura’s letter aside to tuck into the packet of correspondence she’d kept from both of her cousins over the years.

“Of all the silly, pretentious ...” A snort rolled out of her. “True love my foot. I’m more likely to lasso the moon than I am to fall in love because I held this gun. Although, it is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship.”

She started to close the case, but changed her mind and lifted out the pistol. The thought that the gun had been in the possession of her hero, Annie Oakley, made her long to shoot it. Just once.

With a plan in mind, Rena set aside the case, tugged on her boots, and rushed down the ladder. She gathered a pocketful of cartridges and her gun belt with her father’s pistol in the holster. It just happened to be the same caliber as the pink-handled weapon. Excited at the prospect of shooting targets, Rena headed outside. At the woodpile, she selected a large slab of bark that had fallen off a chunk of wood. She took it to

the barn, where she painted a red heart on the bark, then added a white circle in the center of it.

She experienced an almost giddy sensation as she carried the bark and the pistols to what had once served as a corral. The whole thing needed to be rebuilt, which was on Theo's long list of tasks he wanted to finish before summer arrived.

Rena knew he wouldn't care if she practiced her shooting there since there was nothing behind the fence she could damage.

She used a nail to hang the bark on the fence, then retreated to the burn pile by the outhouse, where she retrieved half a dozen tin cans that had once held peaches. It had been a while since she'd practiced shooting targets.

To make sure she hadn't lost the skill, she arranged the cans on fence posts on either side of the heart she'd painted on the bark, took out her pistol, moved back several yards, and loaded rounds into the cylinder.

After widening her stance, she lined up her first shot, released a breath, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the bullet pinging the target rang out as the can flew backward off the post. Rena shot the remaining cans, then smiled with satisfaction as she climbed over the fence to retrieve them. She set them back up on the posts, and rested for a minute on the top pole of the fence, face turned to the sunshine as she soaked up the warmth. Then she hopped down and riddled the cans full of more holes before she stowed her gun in the gun belt and draped it over a fence post. Reverently,

she lifted the pistol with the delicate pink handle from where she'd set it on a stump.

“Promise of true love,” she whispered, rubbing her thumb over the handle before she loaded five shots in the revolver and took aim at the target she'd painted. “True love. What an absurd notion. Laura really should mind her own business and cease meddling in mine. If she thinks this gun will lead me to romance, she needs to have her thinker checked for defects. Instead of dreaming of true love, setting love on a target seems like a much better idea.”

She blasted five holes in the middle of the white circle she'd painted inside the heart on the slab of bark, taking a great deal of satisfaction in blasting holes into something that represented romance and love, at least in her mind.

“Now that's some fine shooting, Miss Burke.”

Rena yelped in surprise and spun around, the pistol still in her hand, as she pointed it at the intruder who dared to interrupt her target practice.



JOSH HAD TOLD HIMSELF a dozen times he wouldn't stop by Theo's place. He'd managed to ride past it on his way to drop off a new harness to a customer a mile further up the road. He didn't usually make deliveries, but it was such a beautiful, warm day, he'd jumped at the excuse to be outside.

He refused to admit fresh air wasn't his only reason for closing his shop for a few hours. Not when the other reason he wanted to get away was Rena Burke. She'd been in town less than a week, but in that time, she'd infiltrated his thoughts with an unsettling frequency.

If he had even the tiniest lick of sense, he'd think of her as just a friend and get back to his regular life. Only nothing had

seemed the same after meeting Rena. There was something about her that intrigued him and left him feeling disconcerted.

She was different than any female he'd ever encountered, and it wasn't just because she wore trousers. It was something ... well, he wasn't exactly certain what it was, but she had definitely piqued his interest.

She'd also enchanted his daughter. Granted, Gabi didn't know a stranger and happily talked to anyone, but she seemed especially taken with Rena. It struck him as odd since Gabi and Rena were so very different.

Gabi's favorite color was pink, she dreamed of being a princess and balked like a fractious donkey anytime he suggested she wear the pair of britches he'd bought for her to put on when he took her riding. In the past, she'd gravitated toward women who exuded femininity, like Anne Milton, the blacksmith's British-born wife, and Henley Holt, who was married to the doctor.

Josh had no idea what Rena's favorite color might be, but she didn't strike him as a woman full of feminine wiles or given to preening in front of a mirror. He couldn't picture her spending an idle afternoon sipping tea or completing a needlepoint project. A vision of her riding wild and free, hair blowing like a banner behind her, painted a vivid picture in his mind. For a moment, he longed for the vision to be real, just for the opportunity to watch her ride.

However, with her plodding old mule, she'd have to borrow a horse if she planned to race anywhere. Josh would almost

guarantee ol' Scout had one speed and it was slow. A picture of Rena trying to gallop anywhere on the aging mule struck him as funny.

He chuckled as he guided Hawkins, his faithful mount, off the road and along the path to Theo's cabin. The sound of gunfire sent panic racing through him. Was Rena in danger? Had someone attacked her while she was outside the cabin?

Josh jumped off Hawkins and followed the sound of a gun being fired to an old corral behind the barn. When he rounded the corner of the barn, he stopped short and watched Rena rapid-fire old tin cans off the fence posts. She looked like she belonged in a Wild West performance, not a cabin in Eastern Oregon.

Rather than disturb her, he decided to watch the show she unwittingly provided. Rena was good with a gun. An excellent shot, in fact. Josh wondered if Theo was aware of Rena's shooting abilities.

Josh leaned back against the barn and watched as Rena took a pink-handled revolver from a stump and loaded it.

He bit his lip to keep from laughing when he heard her grousing about true love and people meddling in her life when they ought to mind their own business. It seemed she'd made love a target, painting a heart on a piece of bark and adding a circle in the center for a bullseye.

Admiration for her skill filled him as she shot through the middle of the circle five times in a row.

Unable to stop himself, he pushed away from the barn and strode toward her. “Now that’s some fine shooting, Miss Burke.”

Rena’s yelp of surprise caught him off guard. She spun toward him, pistol raised, but he wasn’t overly concerned, considering she’d emptied all the rounds into her love target.

When recognition set in, she scowled at him. “You about scared the stuffin’ out of me, Josh Gatlin! What are you doing sneaking around anyway?”

He frowned. “I wasn’t sneaking around. I’ve been standing over there watching you blast cans off the fence and shoot that bullseye. Love seems to be a prime target for you.” At her dark glower, he motioned to the gun she still held. “Who taught you to shoot like that?”

Rena set the pink-handled pistol on a post, climbed over the fence, and retrieved the tin cans she’d shot full of holes. It wasn’t until she held one up to the light that Josh realized she’d shot a star pattern into each one of them.

“You’re good, Miss Burke.”

“Call me Rena, and thank you. My father taught me how to shoot, but I used to have contests with Theo when we were kids. I guess competing against him encouraged me to practice and get better.”

“You ever hear of Annie Oakley?” Josh asked as he took the shot-up cans from her. She climbed back over the fence,

picked up her gun belt and the pistol from the fence post, and then started toward the barn.

“Annie Oakley is someone I greatly admire. She’s not only an incredible shot but a wonderful person.” Rena gave him a look, as though she dared him to argue with her. When he remained silent, her stiff posture relaxed. “I wish I could be more like her. Did you know she’s been teaching women how to shoot, not just as a form of exercise but to defend themselves?”

Josh shook his head, adjusting his stride to stay in step with Rena’s long legs. “I had no idea she did that. It’s wonderful she’s willing to share her talents by helping others.”

Rena looked completely taken aback by his statement and would have stumbled over a tree root if he hadn’t dropped the cans he carried and caught her elbows in his hands. A sensation of something heated chased up his arms as he steadied her. She pulled away from him, picked up the cans he’d dropped, and strode over to the burn pile where she left the cans.

Josh blew out a long breath, feeling utterly befuddled by the fascinating woman. When he’d caught her arms along with a whiff of her soft fragrance, it was easy to forget she was wearing trousers and could outshoot him. In that moment, she seemed feminine and entrancing.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked as she stopped to pat Hawkins where he grazed on the grass near the cabin. Rena took his reins and looped them around the hitching rail

before she opened the door to the cabin and glanced over her shoulder. “You might as well come in.”

Josh thought it sounded more like a term of defeat than an invitation, but he felt helpless to refuse.

“Was there something you needed from Theo? He was unexpectedly asked to work today.” Rena glanced at him when he stepped inside. For propriety’s sake, he left the door open.

Although the air blowing in was fresh and cleansing, the thought of being alone in the cabin with Rena made him both overheated and nervous. He swept the hat off his head and ran a hand through his hair before he met her gaze.

Her unusual amber eyes that held an almost copper hue sparkled with life and a bit of mirth, as though she found him amusing for reasons he couldn’t even begin to comprehend. He took a moment to study the brown eyelashes rimming her beautiful eyes, the freckles that danced across her nose and cheeks, and the slight cleft in her chin he suddenly longed to kiss.

Josh shoved his hands into his pockets and took a step away from her. “I made a delivery just up the road and thought I’d stop by to say hello. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You didn’t, not really. I was about finished shooting anyway. Theo’s sister, Laura, sent me this pistol for my birthday. According to the note that was included in the gun case, it was once in Annie Oakley’s possession.” Rena set to the task of cleaning the revolver. “This pistol is too fancy and pretty to use all the time, but I had to shoot it just once. I could

almost picture Annie herself standing beside me, hand on my shoulder, as I shot the bullseye.”

“You did a good job of hitting your love target. Want to talk about why you detest the notion of love so much?”

“No,” Rena snapped, her gaze lifting to his before she returned to cleaning the revolver. “Tell me more about your daughter. Gabi is cute and funny and so sweet, quite a marvelous combination.”

“I try not to spoil or indulge her, although I’ll admit sometimes it is hard.” Josh took a seat across from Rena at the table and balanced his hat on his knee, watching her work. She certainly seemed to know her way around firearms. “Gabi is a joy and a blessing to me, even if she keeps me on my toes. Ever since the Coleman family gave her a book of fairy tales for Christmas, all she talks about is becoming a princess when she grows up. The other day, she asked me if we could paint her room pink with sparkles.”

Rena smiled and glanced over at him. “That would be quite a trick, not the pink paint, but the sparkles. What do you plan to do about it?”

Josh shrugged. “I was thinking about painting her room for her birthday next month. My only hesitation is what to do if she decides purple is her favorite color six months from now and wants her room that color.”

“I think she would understand she can’t have every wish and whim indulged, but pink does seem to be her favorite color. She mentioned it several times the other evening.”

“She’s always favored the color. My wife did too. There are days when looking at Gabi is like seeing Maxine again.”

Rena stopped working and gave him a sympathetic glance. “Is that hard?”

“No, not like you might think. Gabi is a reminder that I was married to a kind, good, lovely woman. Part of her lives on in our daughter.”

Rena’s eyes filled with moisture, and she dropped her gaze to the pistol, then finished cleaning it.

Quietly watching her, Josh pondered what was wrong with him. He ought to hustle back to town and open his shop. Goodness only knew how much business he was losing, closing down for no good reason on a Saturday. Anne Milton had offered to let Gabi play with her boys, so he could get more work done without her underfoot. Instead of taking advantage of it, he was whiling away the hours watching Rena.

He needed to get up and return to his shop, but he remained right where he was. Something about Rena drew him in a way he couldn’t begin to put into words.

“Want to stay for lunch?” she asked as she stood, holding the pistol in her hand.

“I don’t want to be any trouble.”

She shrugged. “You aren’t. I was just going to slice some ham and cheese and open a jar of pickles. I baked cookies earlier. Theo likes having them to take to work for a snack, or

maybe he eats them on the way there. At any rate, it isn't any bother to make an extra sandwich for you, and I don't mind your being here."

Josh considered her words. Not minding if he stayed was far different than saying she'd like him to join her, but he assumed if Rena wanted him to leave, she'd say as much. She didn't seem like a woman given to anything other than speaking her mind.

"That would be nice, Rena. Thank you. What can I do to help?" he asked, watching as she climbed the ladder up to the loft. Without thinking about what he was doing, he rose from the table and moved back against the wall so he could watch her movements. It looked like she tucked the pistol into a case before she walked back to the ladder, unaware of his study of her as she backed down the ladder.

He'd noticed the way she favored her right leg when she walked, and especially going up the ladder, but he wouldn't mention it. Not only would it be rude, but he had a feeling it would make Rena mad, and that was the last thing he wanted.

"There's a loaf of bread to go with the meat and cheese," she said as her feet touched the floor. "If you'd like a glass of milk, there's a jug down in the springhouse you could fetch."

"I'll get the milk," Josh said, leaving his hat on one of the dining chairs, then hustling out to the springhouse that was barely visible as it nestled back in the trees by the creek. The water running through it kept things cold, even in the summer.

Josh retrieved a jug of milk and a wedge of cheese, carrying them to the house. When he walked inside, Rena stood with her back to him, slicing ham. He thought she moved with such grace, but he sure wouldn't tell her that either. He could almost see her stiffen at the slightest mention that he found her to be attractive.

"I brought the milk and cheese," he said, setting the jug on the table and carrying the cheese over to her.

"Thanks. I forgot to ask you to bring in a wedge. That's perfect." She took the cheese and sliced it, arranging it with the ham on a plate. Slices of bread were on another plate. She'd opened a can of pears and poured them into a bowl.

"This looks like a regular feast," Josh said, carrying the pears and bread plate to the table. Rena brought over two glasses and the plate with meat and cheese. Josh retrieved cutlery, then pulled out a chair for Rena at the table.

She stared from the chair to him, then finally took a seat, as though it shocked her that he'd extend the polite gesture to her. Once she was seated, Josh took the seat across from her, bowed his head, and offered a blessing for the meal.

He heard Rena mutter a soft "amen" before he opened his eyes and looked over at her. She slid meat and cheese between slices of buttered bread, then placed two pickles on the plate and handed it to him.

"Thanks. This looks good."

“I don’t know where Theo got the ham, but it has a wonderful smoky flavor.” Rena assembled her sandwich and took a bite, then glanced at Josh. “If you do decide to paint Gabi’s room, I’d be happy to help you. When I was younger, I used to like to paint pictures and things. Maybe I could add some embellishments to one of the walls.”

Josh stopped with the sandwich halfway to his mouth and returned it to the plate. “Really? You’d be willing to do that?”

“Of course. I could give you a list of supplies, and we could figure out a time to do it.”

“I’d be happy to pay you, Rena. I wouldn’t expect you to do the work for nothing.”

She tipped her head to the side and studied him for a moment. Apparently, she found what she was looking for because she nodded. “We’ll figure out the details later. Tell me more about the things Gabi likes, besides the color pink and princesses. What’s her favorite flower and animal? What does she like to do when she isn’t at school or at your shop?”

“Her favorite flower is a daisy, she loves butterflies and bunnies, and when she isn’t at school or bossing me around at the saddle shop, she pretends to read. She’s learning, but not quite proficient enough to tackle a story on her own yet.”

Rena bit into the crunchy pickle, then smiled. “She seems smart and maybe a smidgen advanced for her age.”

“That’s what the teacher says. Normally, the teacher wouldn’t let one as young as Gabi attend classes, but she

minds her manners and the teacher, and she's learned so much this past year. I have a feeling first grade will be easy for her, and she may end up skipping ahead a grade or two."

"Will you push her to do that? To excel academically?" Rena asked, her expression cool.

"No. Absolutely not. I just want her to be happy and enjoy her childhood as much as she can. Long before I'm ready, she'll be all grown up and some boy I detest will be asking to court her."

Rena grinned. "Detestable boys will be knocking down your door, I have no doubt. Gabi is intelligent and sweet. She's going to grow up to be a beautiful woman. Those three characteristics are guaranteed to leave boys entranced and exasperated."

Josh couldn't argue with her, so he took a big bite of his sandwich. Rena asked him about his business and the town, and he got her to talk about what it was like to live in Texas. She kept her answers vague, which made him switch to asking her to share childhood stories about Theo.

They laughed through the remainder of lunch as Rena told one funny story after another. Josh had no trouble picturing her and Theo rushing headlong into trouble while Theo's sister tried to keep them out of it.

By the time he'd eaten three delicious cinnamon-topped jumble cookies, he knew he needed to leave. He carried the plates to the sink, retrieved his hat, and smiled at Rena as she

stood and wrapped four cookies in a napkin and handed them to him.

“For Gabi and you to eat later,” she said, shoving her hands in her pockets, seeming to be overtaken with a sudden onset of bashfulness.

Rena Burke didn't seem like a shy woman to him. Nor was she outgoing. She was simply Rena, and every moment he spent with her left him wanting to know more about her.

Which was exactly why he needed to head back to town immediately.

“Thanks for lunch, Rena. I reckon we'll see you at church tomorrow.” He tipped his head to her before settling on his hat.

She didn't answer but followed him to the door and stood watching him as he walked over to Hawkins, stowed the cookies in his saddlebag, and swung onto the horse.

Without saying a word, he lifted a hand in parting, turned the horse toward the road, and left, wondering the whole way into Holiday what, exactly, about Rena Burke had bewitched him so.



“I’M NOT GOING, THEO, and that is all there is to it.”
Rena fisted her hands on her hips and met her cousin’s disapproving glare with one of her own.

“But, Rena, it would be good for you to go. Besides, you’ll get to meet many of the townsfolk after the service. Please? Won’t you please go to church with me?” Theo pleaded as if he were ten, not a man nearing thirty. “I promised Josh and Gabi I’d take them out to lunch at the hotel’s restaurant. It won’t be the same if you don’t join us.”

“No. For the last time, I’m not going. The building might explode or at the very least combust into flames if I walked inside the church. I haven’t been in one since ...” she paused

as memories assailed her, “the accident. I’m not going, Theo. I don’t mean to upset you, and I don’t want anyone to think I’m uppity or any such nonsense. It’s just that the Creator and I aren’t on the best of terms right now.”

A deep scowl made his displeasure known. “Well, how do you expect those terms to get any better if you won’t even attend a simple Sunday morning service?”

“A bit of a conundrum, isn’t it?” Rena asked, and then took a step toward the loft ladder. “You’d best hurry along, or you’ll be late. Doesn’t the service start in about fifteen minutes?”

Theo expelled a long-suffering sigh that seemed to have started somewhere near his toes as he blew it out in a long, frustrated huff. “Are you sure nothing I can say will convince you to go with me?”

“Absolutely certain.”

He picked up his hat and set it on his head. “I’ll explain to Josh and Gabi about lunch and take them another time.”

“No. You will keep your promise to them. I’ll be just fine by myself, Theo. I promise. There are a few things I want to take care of today before I start work at the mine tomorrow. I have a feeling if they let me work there, I won’t have much free time on my hands.”

“Fine, but I expect to continue this conversation later.”

“You can expect all you like, but I’m done discussing it.” Rena climbed up the ladder and cringed when Theo marched

out the door and slammed it hard enough the windows rattled. She hated to disappoint and anger him, but she refused to go to church. Not only did she feel as though God had abandoned her two years ago, but people would point and whisper and stare if she arrived for the service in her trousers, and she had no intention of wearing anything else. Back in Amarillo, she'd grown used to the looks cast her way, the whispers behind daintily gloved hands, the judgmental glowers, but she didn't want any of that aimed at Theo, or Josh and Gabi, since she was certain they and Theo sat together at church.

She intended to make the most of her day, starting with the laundry. Recollections best left buried in the past rose to the surface, bobbing through her mind as she boiled water and washed her clothes as well as Theo's, along with their bedding and the towels, leaving everything to dry on the lines strung outside.

With the chore completed, she returned inside and baked enough cookies, bread, and biscuits to see them through the week. She snagged two shortbread cookies, then went outside, where she spent half an hour shooting targets with her pistol and practicing a few tricks that made her wish she could ask Annie Oakley if she was doing them correctly. How dearly she wished she could have met Annie, just once, face to face. She imagined the woman would be as kind and gracious in person as she seemed in the stories Rena had read about her.

She brushed down Scout and gave him some extra attention, killed a chicken, and then prepared it to stew all afternoon. She planned to serve chicken and dumplings for dinner along with

a canned peach pie—two of Theo’s favorite things—as a peace offering to her cousin.

After eating slices of leftover roasted beef with a piece of bread and a glass of cold milk for lunch, Rena assembled the pie and slid it into the oven, then used the leftover crust to make cookies that she topped with cinnamon and sugar. She wrote Laura a long letter, thanking her for the trunk and the pink pistol. She skipped all mention of romance and the ludicrous notion that simply holding the weapon could help her find true love. Such a thing didn’t exist anyway. If it had, she wouldn’t have been so utterly and devastatingly alone the last two years.

She inquired about Laura’s work and the town of Caldwell, as well as her cousin’s friend Tessa and if she was adjusting to married life. Aware Laura would be interested to know about the area from a woman’s perspective, as well as information about her brother, Rena wrote at length about Theo’s place, the beauty of Holiday, and meeting Gabi.

Rena tucked the letter in an envelope and addressed it, wishing she’d written it earlier so she could have taken it into town the last time she went, but at least it was ready to mail whenever she did make it into Holiday again. Depending on what happened at the mine tomorrow, she might have plenty of time on her hands, or she might be kept as busy as Theo.

Admiration filled her for her cousin and all the hard work he managed to complete at his place even with working so many hours at the mine. Theo was determined to make a success of

the life he was building in Holiday. Rena thought he was well on the way there. He owned a quarter section of mountain land with a creek running through it. If money became sparse, he could always sell some of the trees to the lumber mill. She knew he planned to clear a few acres to plant crops next year. He'd already been talking about where he'd plant a garden once the danger of frost had passed, and he'd asked her opinion on what vegetables she thought would do well.

Rena intended to help him all she could. She wanted to see Theo's dreams of a prosperous farm succeed. She glanced out the door she'd left open to welcome in the fresh spring air and took in the sight of the barn, the chicken coop, and the other outbuildings. The cabin, while small, was snug and comfortable. Theo had a good start on his future here. From conversations she'd had with the few people she'd met when she was in town, he was well-liked and respected.

Truthfully, the people she'd encountered when she'd gone into Holiday had only given her the curious glances they'd offer any stranger. No one pointed at her trousers or gave her disparaging looks. She'd even met the doctor's wife and found her to be both kind and charming.

If the job at the mine fell through, perhaps she'd take Mrs. Holt up on her offer to come for a visit one afternoon. Rena grinned, picturing herself perched on a brocade chair cushion, sipping tea from a delicate china cup while brushing mule hair off her britches.

“I bet that would leave an impression on the ladies in town,” she muttered to herself, then set her hand to the task of ironing the clothes she brought in from the line.

When Theo returned right before supper time, she greeted him with a smile. He sniffed appreciatively of the air redolent with the aroma of the meal she’d prepared and nodded in gratitude.

Apparently, the afternoon apart had given them both time to cool their tempers.

The following morning, Rena quietly rode beside Theo as they approached a large mine. Daylight had yet to fill the sky, but dawn was fast approaching.

On the way up the mountain, Theo had described the operation in great detail, but Rena had been so nervous, she’d only listened to half of what he’d said.

Now, with the mine in sight, she wished she’d paid more attention.

“Come on, follow me,” Theo said, riding ahead to a large corral filled with horses. “We’ll leave Scout and Thomas here for the day.” He stepped off his horse, opened a gate, and led his horse inside. Rena rode Scout into the corral and swung off his back while Theo shut the gate. He removed Thomas’s bridle and saddle, leaving them on the top rail of the fence next to a few others.

Rena swung Scout’s saddle up next to Thomas’s, draped the bridle off the horn, then climbed over the fence and hurried to

catch up to Theo, who appeared to be heading for a building with an *Office* sign hanging out front.

Theo reached for the door, but before he turned the knob, the portal swung open, and a man with a weathered, tanned face looked from Theo to Rena. He stepped back and motioned them inside.

“Welcome to the Gilded Pine Mine. You must be the cousin Theo’s been telling me about.” He held his hand out toward her. “I’m Cade Andrews, owner of the mine.”

Rena took an instant liking to the mine owner. She’d expected him to be a stodgy type with a cigar clamped in his teeth and soft hands that looked like he’d never done a day of honest work.

Instead, Cade Andrews appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He wore the clothes of a miner, and his hands bore cuts on three knuckles. Soil was embedded beneath his fingernails. His face was handsome, in a craggy sort of way, but his eyes were kind and his smile genuine as he greeted her.

“Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be here, Mr. Andrews.” Rena shook his hand.

“Of course, and call me Cade.” He motioned to the two chairs placed in front of a hulking desk. “Let’s discuss specifics.”

Cade told her what her duties would entail as a blaster, the wage she would earn, and the hours he expected her to work.

“Don’t think because you’re a woman I’ll give you any special treatment or favors,” Cade cautioned as he had her fill out a form that listed her name, the position she intended to work, and next of kin in case of an emergency. She wrote Theo’s name, dated the form, and signed her name with a flourish.

“I wouldn’t expect any, sir, but I do expect to be treated fairly and with respect from all the men here.”

“I’d like to say no one will bother you, but they will. You have my permission to punch them in the nose, or somewhere more painful if you like if anyone says or does anything they shouldn’t. Mostly, the people working for me just want to do the work, receive the money they are due, and kick up their heels on Saturday night when they venture into town. Our cook is a woman, as is my bookkeeper. They also happen to be sisters and watch out for each other. They’ll likely watch over you. I’ll give you this week to try out the work and see if it suits you or not, and if you fit in at the Gilded Pine. If, by Friday, you want to leave or I feel it best you not return, I’ll pay you for the work done this week, and you’ll be free to seek employment elsewhere. Sound fair?”

Rena stood and held out her hand to her new employer. “Yes, sir. Thank you for giving me a chance.”

He rose from his seat and gave her hand a hearty shake. “Don’t thank me yet. It’s dirty, hard, nerve-wracking work you’ll be doing, but if you do it according to my standards, you’ll be adequately compensated for your labor. Truthfully,

Miss Burke, I don't rightly care if a man, woman, or baboon does the job as long as they do it well and use the sense the good Lord gave them while they work." The mine owner grinned at her. "Now, I'll let Theo show you around and introduce you to the fellows you'll be working with. If you have any questions or suggestions, you're always welcome to come talk to me."

"Thank you, sir." Rena started toward the door with Theo, but it opened, and an older man walked inside. He maintained a neutral expression as he eyed her from the cap on top of her head to the toes of her worn boots.

"This her?" he asked, glancing at Theo and then at Cade.

"If you can't tell she's a woman, Ike, you got bigger problems than any of us can help." Cade smirked at the man. "Miss Burke, meet my manager, Ike Hilson. He's a bit on the crotchety side, but don't let it bother you. He generally hates everybody just the same."

Rena met the man's cool glare with one of her own. He could have been thirty or sixty, based on the lines carved into his face and the hard look about him, but when she didn't cower or back away from him, he reached out a hand and smiled.

"Welcome, Miss Burke. Theo said you don't have any experience but are a fast learner. We'll see how fast you can catch onto what this job requires. There isn't room for error, so you best decide now if you even want to give it a go."

She took the offered hand and shook it. “I do, Mr. Hilson. I don’t have anything to lose by trying, and if I blow myself up, I just hope I don’t take anyone else along to Purgatory.”

Mr. Hilson looked to Cade. “I like this one. She’s got pluck.” He glanced back at Rena. “Call me Ike. Everyone else here does. Head over to the cookshack and pick up your lunches, then meet me over at the blaster’s building.”

Ike moved aside, and Rena stepped outside.

“Come on. Let’s go get our grub.” Theo led the way to a large building. He opened the door, and rows of men seated at tables eating breakfast seemed to turn as one to glare at her. Rena had taken care to wear her loosest pair of trousers and shirt, pulled on a vest and a canvas jacket, and had braided her hair and tucked it up inside a boy’s cap she’d purchased at the store in Holiday the other day. She didn’t want to ruin her father’s hat in the mine, and the cap would help keep her hair out of her way.

She wasn’t sure if the men stared because they realized she was a woman, or they thought she was a boy too young to do the work. Either way, she decided not to let any of them intimidate her.

Rena widened her stance, crossed her arms over her chest, and fixed her gaze on the back of the room where a doorway led into the kitchen. The scents of coffee and bacon floated in the air, making her glad she and Theo had taken time to eat breakfast before they left that morning. She’d filled a small tin

with cookies and tucked them into her saddlebag, which she hoped she'd be able to get to at some point during the day.

“This is our newest hire, Rena Burke,” Theo said, taking a step forward so he was standing between Rena and the room full of men. “Rena is going to work with me and Harry and the other powder monkeys. If anyone gives her any trouble, it will be the last thing on earth they ever do.”

A few men nodded in understanding, others turned away as though they didn't want any trouble, and the rest began murmuring about the owner losing his mind to hire a woman to do a man's job.

Theo had already told her they had a terrible time finding anyone willing to work as a blaster because it was such a dangerous job. If there were a man who wanted it, she was sure Cade wouldn't have hired her.

“Ignore them,” Theo whispered close to her ear, then guided her over to a table pushed against the wall, where lunch pails were stacked three high and a dozen rows deep. Theo picked up two, handed one to her, then stepped into the doorway of the kitchen.

“Mrs. Bailey, I want to introduce you to my cousin, Rena Burke. She's going to be working with me this week.” Theo removed his hat and tipped his head to a woman who couldn't have been much older than Rena. She wore a voluminous apron over her diminutive form and turned from where she stood at the stove, clutching a large spoon in her hand. Her features were plain, but she smiled warmly in greeting.

“It’s nice to meet you, Rena. I hope it’s okay to call you Rena. We’re pretty informal up here. I’m Susan Bailey. You’ll likely meet my sister, Sarah, later. If there is anything you need, you let one of us know. It’s hard being a woman in this world full of men, but I applaud you for giving it a try.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bailey. I appreciate your kind welcome and look forward to meeting your sister.”

“Did you have breakfast?” She waggled her spoon toward a long wooden counter. “I’ve got some flapjacks and bacon left.”

Theo smiled. “We ate before we rode up the mountain, but thank you for offering. I just wanted you to meet Rena and thank you for our lunches.”

“It’s my pleasure to make your lunch, Mr. Marshall. You two have a good day.” The woman turned back to the stove and began stirring something in a large pot.

Rena started to tease Theo about being sweet on Mrs. Bailey but held her tongue. She had no idea if the woman was married or a widow or if she treated all the miners with the same friendly attention.

Together, she and her cousin returned outside, then made their way to a small brick building set back from all the others.

“This is the blasting shack,” Theo said, waving his hand toward the building. “We keep all the blasting supplies here, and it’s where we make charges when needed. There’s a place

in Baker City that's been making dynamite for the area mines and where we get most of our blasting materials.”

The enormity of what she was about to do hit Rena all at once. She'd never touched anything more explosive than gunpowder. Could she really learn to set blasts and work at the mine? Was she endangering the lives of those who would work with her as well as the other miners by even trying to do the job?

Theo seemed to think she was capable of handling the work. She just hoped she didn't prove him wrong or kill them both in the process.

“Are you okay?” Theo asked, setting a hand on her shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. The feel of it encouraged her, and she inhaled a calming breath. The smell of the mine wasn't what she expected, but she supposed she'd grow accustomed to the odors, some of which were created by all the machinery used to process the gold they took out of the mountain.

She'd learned from Theo there were many successful mines in the area, but the largest was further up the mountain.

Rena glanced at her cousin, straightened her spine, and did her best to offer a reassuring smile. “I'm fine, Theo, but thanks for asking. How about you show me what's kept in the blasting shack?”

He gave her a tour of the building that was mostly packed with crates of explosives. By the time he finished, Ike arrived and went over his expectations of Rena for the day. It seemed

he wanted her to watch and observe before she attempted to do anything on her own. He discussed what areas he wanted blasted that day with Theo, then turned to Rena again.

“Harry is the best in the business, so learn all you can from him,” Ike said before he hustled off toward the mill where the ore was processed.

“We can start loading a cart,” Theo said, stepping outside with Rena right behind him.

He waved to a man who walked with a limp, wore a patch over one eye, and was missing two fingers when he held up a hand in greeting.

“I see you brought a new one for me to train, Theo. Is this your cousin?” the old man asked as he ambled up to them. He removed the hat he wore, and Rena tried not to laugh at the tufts of white hair that stood up in random spots on his otherwise bald head.

“Harry Vellman, meet Rena Burke.” Theo made the introduction. “And yes, she is my cousin. She’s already met Cade and Ike. Ike’s instructions were for her —”

“To watch and observe,” Harry interrupted and winked at Rena. “It’s what he tells everyone on their first day. Come on, girlie. I’ll teach you all you need to know about explosives while Theo loads the cart. Shame a female as pretty as you will be as filthy as a beggar’s foot by the time the day is through.”

Rena wished she'd brought a tablet and pencil to jot down notes as the old man gave her a brief history of mining and blasting, the types of explosive devices he'd used, and what this particular mine preferred. He showed her how to make a stick of dynamite, set off a few small charges that blew stumps out of the ground just so she could see how different types of explosives worked, and cautioned her to be careful or she'd wind up looking exactly like him.

“Heaven help us all if you do,” Theo whispered in passing, making Rena swallow a fit of giggles. She wasn't sure if her humor was from the nerves she tried so hard to suppress or the need to focus on something beyond the sheer terror flowing through her at the thought of making a mistake that could kill someone.

By the time she'd gone down into the mine with Theo, Harry, and two other blasters introduced to her as Kent and Walker, she was as jittery as a canary encircled by hungry felines. The mine was dark, dank, too warm, and nothing like she'd expected.

She leaned over Theo's shoulder, watching as he and Harry worked quickly, carefully, and efficiently. When the blast was set, Harry bellowed “fire in the hole” three times as they hurried from the tunnel where they were blasting. When the blast discharged, Rena was completely unprepared for the noise, the smells, and the feeling that the entire world was shaking around her.

“And that’s how it’s done, girlie.” Harry grinned at her, showing off a gap in his smile where two teeth were missing.

Nerves jangled, and feeling on edge, Rena couldn’t eat a bite of her lunch. While Theo ate her ham and biscuit and munched on ginger snaps, Rena went for a walk to try to clear her jumbled thoughts. She remained in view of Theo and Harry, who sat on stumps in the shade.

When Theo motioned for her to return, she drew in a bracing breath of air, which held a hint of Christmas from the fragrance of the evergreen trees all around her, and walked back down the hill to him.

The afternoon went relatively well, and Harry explained every step a second time when they returned to the mine and set a blast in a different tunnel than the one they’d been in earlier.

She clamped her hands over her ears and closed her eyes when the blast detonated, ready for the feel of the mountain rumbling beneath her feet.

At the end of the work day, Harry patted her shoulder and gave her an approving look. “You did good, girlie. I’ve had full-grown men who didn’t last a day, running off with their tails tucked between their legs. If you ain’t too scared to come back, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Rena merely nodded, exhausted even though she hadn’t technically done more than helped push a cart loaded with explosives into the mine and handed Theo some tools when he asked for them.

However, between the blasting and drilling, the stamp mill creating an unearthly racket, ore cars squeaking and squawking, and the noises made by both men and animals, she needed some peace and quiet.

She and Theo returned their lunch pails to the cookshack, saddled Thomas and Scout, then headed for home.

Theo seemed to sense her need for silence as they rode away from the mine. It wasn't until they were almost to the path that led to the cabin that Theo finally spoke.

“Well, how was your first day at the mine?”

Rena roused herself from her half-sleeping state and looked over at Theo. He was covered in dust and grime but still looked like he had plenty of energy to spare. “It was loud, smelly, and much bigger than I thought it would be, and I had no idea it was so warm inside the mine.”

“It does get warm down there, especially in the summer.” Theo grinned at her. “What did you think of Harry?”

Rena grinned in spite of her weary state. “Considering how many parts Harry is missing, it's a wonder he's still alive. Perhaps he's more like a Frankenstein experiment on a smaller, crustier scale,” Rena said, earning a shocked look, followed by a guffaw from Theo.

“Now that's funny, girlie,” Theo said, imitating Harry's manner of speech. When they reached the barn, he took Scout's reins from her. “Go on and get cleaned up down at the creek. It will make you feel better. I'll see to the animals.”

Rena's steps dragged as she made her way to the cabin to get clean clothes, a towel, and soap.

"Rena!" Theo called, halting her when she was nearly to the door.

She turned around and looked at him.

"You did good today."

She smiled, then hurried inside the cabin, suddenly not quite as weary.



“IF YOU WANT TO make a little girl cry, again, that’s entirely up to you,” Theo said in a casual tone as he poured a second cup of coffee for himself and filled Rena’s half-empty cup.

Her head snapped up, and she glared at him. “I didn’t make anyone cry unless it was that smart-mouthed miner who tried to tangle with me on Thursday.”

Theo raised an eyebrow, took a sip of coffee, and resumed his seat at the table.

Since it was Sunday, she looked forward to an entire day to do nothing but rest. Yesterday, she’d washed all their dirty laundry, baked enough bread, cookies, and biscuits to carry

them through to next Saturday, and cleaned the cabin. Theo had taken care of tasks outside that they'd not had time to attend to during the week.

Although she would have doubted the possibility after her first day of work, Rena had made it through a week at the mine. When she'd picked up her pay Friday evening, Cade had told her she'd done a good job and he'd see her on Monday.

Buoyed by his praise and the begrudging nod from Ike, a wave of satisfaction rolled through her at being able to competently handle a job many men couldn't or wouldn't.

Rena didn't like blasting and still cringed each time they set off a charge, but her hands no longer shook like a leaf caught in a tornado whenever she got near the crates of dynamite.

"You did set ol' Bickley on his ear with that verbal lambasting you gave him." Theo grinned as he helped himself to another slice of the cinnamon loaf Rena had baked for breakfast. They'd both slept in that morning, then Rena had made breakfast while Theo had seen to the chores.

"He deserved it after what that dimwit said to me." Rena felt like punching something as she recalled how angry and mortified she'd been when one of the miners had suggested she get a job at the Ruby Palace in town instead of taking work only a man should be doing. Bickley was lucky she hadn't popped him right in the nose.

"True, he did, but I wasn't referring to anyone at the mine. Last Sunday, which we never did get around to discussing, when I showed up at church without you, Gabi was distressed.

She cried when she found out you wouldn't be joining us for lunch. She thought it was terribly sad you were here all alone."

"Oh," Rena said, unaware Gabi had been upset. She didn't want to make the little one cry, but the child didn't realize all the extenuating circumstances of why Rena avoided attending church.

"If you want to make those big blue eyes of hers well up with tears again, that's up to you, but you could at least come to town for lunch. R.C. and Anne Milton invited us to join them at their house. Josh and Gabi will also be there. Gabi is quite fond of their son Mike."

"Which ones are the Miltons?" Rena asked, stalling for time as she tried to think up a good excuse to stay home.

"R.C. owns the livery and blacksmith shop. The family lives in that big house behind the livery on the other side of the pasture. If they keep having more kids, they might need to add on more rooms."

Rena gave Theo a curious look. "How many children do they have?"

"Five at last count, but I think they've only been married about nine years."

"Oh, my." Rena wondered what it would be like to have siblings. Theo and Laura were as close as she had to any, and she adored them both.

"If you wanted to come along, we could take that cherry cobbler you made for dessert tonight, and you'd get to meet

one of the nicest couples who live in Holiday.”

Rena felt her resistance wavering. Theo knew she cared for Gabi and wouldn't want to make the child upset. He also knew after spending all week surrounded by dirty, hardworking men, she would enjoy some female company. Although Mrs. Bailey and her sister had both been friendly and kind, Rena hadn't spent more than a few minutes talking to either of them since all three of them were busy working.

“Fine. I will go with you today. Nevertheless, if lightning shoots out of the sky and strikes the church, you have to acknowledge I gave you fair warning and the blame does not rest on me.”

Theo grinned, leaned over, and kissed her cheek. “Warning acknowledged, but I think you'll find everyone, including our Maker, quite pleased to see you there.”

Rena finished her breakfast and washed the dishes while Theo saddled Scout and Thomas. She packed the cherry cobbler she'd baked into a basket padded with dish towels, then hurried up to the loft to see what she could wear to church. She no longer owned a dress and had cut up her last petticoat to use for undergarments.

It wasn't as though she had many clothing options to choose from. When she'd left Texas, she'd brought only what she could carry with her. However, she did have one nice ivory shirtwaist with a pattern of coral rosebuds she'd loved too much to part with when she'd gotten rid of her dresses. She pulled out a pair of new trousers she'd been saving to wear to

... well, she hadn't decided where she'd wear them, but the dark brown fabric would look nice with the shirtwaist.

Rena hurried to heat an iron on the cookstove and pressed the wrinkles from the trousers and shirtwaist. After hurriedly polishing her boots, she rushed back up to the loft and changed. It took far longer than she liked to style her hair in a fashionable knot at the back of her head. She didn't have a proper hat to wear, not that one would look appropriate with her trousers anyway.

She just hoped Theo realized what he was likely getting them both into by dragging her along to the church service.

Rena slipped into a brown and ivory striped jacket that had once been part of a lovely outfit she'd been proud to wear, then tugged on her lone pair of dress gloves. Maybe if she took small steps and stayed close to Theo, no one would even notice she was wearing trousers.

People could gape and point at her all the livelong day, and she didn't care one whit, but it bothered her to think of any ill favor spilling over onto Theo.

On the verge of begging off due to a sick stomach since hers was roiling with nerves, she instead forced herself to return downstairs before she could change her mind. She'd just finished pulling on her boots when Theo returned inside. From his damp hair and the tiny dollop of shaving soap on his chin, it appeared he'd been readying for the trip into town as well.

She lifted the dish towel from the hook near the sink and wiped his chin. "Missed a spot."

“Thanks,” he said, grinning at her when he took a step back. “You look nice, Rena. Ma always used to comment about that jacket being a favorite of hers when you wore it.”

“It was too pretty to get rid of when ... when I packed up my things.”

“I’m glad you kept it. The color and style suit you. Shall we get going?” Theo lifted the basket with the cobbler, settled a hat on his head, and held the door as Rena stepped outside.

“Are you certain you want me to go? I don’t want to embarrass you.”

Theo grabbed her arm in his hand and pulled her to a stop. “Let’s get one thing clear right this instant, Rena. You would never, ever be an embarrassment to me, at least not for the reasons you’re thinking. Now, if you pushed the pastor out of the way, took over the pulpit, and reamed the ears of the congregation like you did poor Bickley the other day, well, that might make me slink out the back door of the church.”

Unable to stop it, a broad smile filled her face. She playfully swatted Theo’s arm. “I can promise that won’t happen, cousin. I don’t suppose you’d allow me to sit in the back pew by the door.”

“Nope. I know one little girl who will likely be glued to your side once she realizes you’re there, and we always sit in a pew about halfway up the aisle.”

Rena gave him a studying glance as she took Scout’s reins in her hand. “Did she really cry last week when I stayed

home?”

Theo nodded, swinging onto Thomas and hanging the basket from his saddle horn. “She sure did, Rena. Big, silent tears that nearly broke my heart.”

A sigh of resignation rolled out of Rena as she mounted Scout and headed with Theo into town.

They’d barely left the animals tied to the hitching rail when Rena turned around and found a pair of little arms encircling her waist. She glanced down at Gabi.

“Hi, Gabi. How does this day find you?” she asked with a smile, brushing curls away from the child’s face.

“Great, Rena! I’m so glad you came today.” Gabi squeezed her again, then turned her loose. “You look pretty.”

Rena smiled and tapped Gabi’s button nose. “So do you, sweet girl. Did your father help you with your hair?”

Gabi nodded and touched the lopsided pink bow that only partially subdued her springy curls. “He did.”

“That’s nice, Gabi.” Rena looked over to see Josh and Theo shaking hands as they moved toward the door, where a steady stream of people entered the church.

“Come on. Let’s go inside.” Gabi yanked on her hand and Rena reluctantly let the child lead her closer to what she was certain would be a disastrous experience.

Gabi led her to a pew halfway up on the left side of the church where Josh and Theo stood in conversation with a

handsome couple. The man held a little boy with dark hair. Two more boys, who looked enough like the youngest lad that it was easy to see they were brothers, stood on either side of a woman who had blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes.

“Jace and Cora Lee Coleman, this is my cousin, Rena Burke,” Theo said, placing a hand on Rena’s shoulder and nudging her forward as she and Gabi approached their group.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Coleman.” Rena offered them what she hoped would pass as a charming smile, then grinned at the youngest boy as he peeked at her from the safety of his father’s arms. “Your boys are adorable.”

Mrs. Coleman beamed with pride. “Thank you. When they aren’t running around like wild rascals, they can be undeniably cute, but that’s usually only when they’re asleep.” She winked at the oldest boy, and he grinned, showing off gaps in his smile where baby teeth had fallen out.

The sight of the pastor walking up to the pulpit sent everyone into a hushed hurry to be seated.

Mrs. Coleman squeezed the hand Gabi wasn’t holding and smiled. “I hope we’ll have a chance to visit more later. Enjoy the service.”

Rena nodded and let Gabi pull her into the pew, where Josh had already taken a seat. Gabi sat beside him, and Rena quietly sank onto the wooden bench with Theo on her other side on the aisle seat.

Five minutes after the opening hymn and prayer, Gabi had fallen asleep with her head resting on Rena's arm. Josh started to move his daughter, but Rena shook her head. She shifted so Gabi was cradled against her side, relishing the warmth of spirit the child brought to her.

Truthfully, the child's affections, unbridled and freely given, touched Rena's heart. She settled back with a feeling of contentment and listened to Pastor Ryan's sermon on grace.

Despite her intentions to ignore whatever wisdom came from the pulpit, Rena found herself intently listening. Pastor Ryan had a way of speaking that was engaging and heartfelt, and he shared what Rena thought of as simple truths.

By the time the service ended, she felt both convicted and encouraged and decided to sort out her tumultuous thoughts later. At least they'd made it through the service without lightning bolting from the sky and striking the building.

Gabi awakened when the congregation stood and conversation began to buzz around them. She held up her arms to Josh. He lifted her, and she rested her head on his shoulder with a sigh.

Rena patted her back, then turned to find Theo ready to introduce her to the Milton family, who had invited them for lunch. He hadn't spoken in jest when he said they had several children, all close in age. The four boys looked like stairsteps, but it was the beautiful baby girl held in Anne Milton's arms that captured Rena's full attention. She adored babies and had

to hold her fingers twined together to keep from reaching out to touch Emery Milton.

On the way to the door, Rena was introduced to more people than she could possibly hope to keep straight after only one meeting. She did shake hands with the pastor and thank him for the thought-provoking sermon, greeted his wife with a smile, then stepped outside, feeling like she'd escaped to freedom.

Rena tipped her head back to the bright spring sun and let it warm her face before she followed Theo over to the hitching rail where they'd left Scout and Thomas.

"Please, Papa? Can't I please go with Rena? Pretty please?" Gabi begged as she skipped along beside her father on their way to his buggy.

"No, baby. You'll ride with me."

Rena rode over to the buggy as Josh set Gabi on the seat and spoke quietly so the child couldn't hear what she said. "I don't mind if she rides with me if you trust me to take care of her."

Josh glanced from Rena to Gabi, shrugged once, then lifted his daughter and set her on the saddle in front of Rena.

Delight filled Gabi's expression as she looked over her shoulder up at Rena. "Hi!"

"Hello again, Gabi Jo. Do you know where we're going?"

"Oh, yes! To Mr. and Mrs. Milton's house. It's so pretty. They have a porch and a swing, and the boys have a pony!"

“A pony? What color is this pony? What’s his name?”

Rena grinned at Theo as they rode away from the church yard and turned onto Main Street while Gabi chattered excitedly.

Two hours later, Rena decided the people of Holiday were perhaps more tolerant of strange women who wore trousers and worked a man’s job than she’d originally assumed they’d be. Jace and Cora Lee Coleman were also at the Milton home for lunch, as were Doctor Holt and his family, and they’d all extended a welcome to her that left her feeling at home.

From what she’d observed, Anne Milton, Henley Holt, and Cora Lee Coleman were close friends, and their children seemed to be as well.

Gabi mostly played with Mike Milton and the oldest Holt child who was close to her age.

Henley extended an invitation to Rena to stop by anytime for a visit, and Cora Lee invited them all to come out to Elk Creek Ranch the following Sunday for a picnic lunch.

It was on the tip of Rena’s tongue to refuse the invitations, but she had no reason to do so. Not when these families had gone out of their way to make sure she felt a part of their group. No one had given a second glance at her trousers or raised an eyebrow over her job at the mine.

The only person who expressed any shock to discover she was working as a blaster at the Gilded Pine was Josh. When her occupation came up in the conversation over dinner, Josh

looked like he'd swallowed a bitter persimmon and was about to choke on it.

After the meal, as the men and children wandered outside, Rena had lingered in the house with the women talking about recipes and Anne's delicious tea.

Rena felt a kinship with these women she couldn't begin to explain, but it filled her heart with gratitude to be there. In spite of her misgivings, she was glad Theo had coerced her into coming.

"What's it really like, working at the mine?" Anne asked as she refilled their cups of tea and passed around a plate of Cora Lee's delicious honey cakes.

Rena took one of the small, golden cakes and leaned back in her seat next to Henley. The doctor's wife had surprised her by explaining she worked as a nurse when her husband required assistance.

"It's nothing like I anticipated it would be. The mine is so dark and warm inside, and it has a pungent, dank odor that just stays in my nose no matter how much clean air I breathe on the way home. I'm terrified each time I touch a stick of dynamite that I'm going to blow the whole place and everyone there to kingdom come, but for the most part, the men have been accepting of me. A few have made comments a lady would never repeat, but I noticed one of them had a black eye the next day. I'm not sure if Theo took exception to his remarks, or if it was the owner of the mine. Cade has been

kind, protective, and tolerant as I've done my best to learn my job this week."

"Cade, is it?" Cora Lee said with a sly grin. "Does Josh have some competition?"

"Josh? Competition? What are you talking about?" Rena asked, leaning forward and setting her cake plate on the table in front of her. Cora Lee's question left her so rattled, she was afraid of breaking the china.

"Anyone with eyes in their head can see Josh is taken with you. It's a wonderful thing. He's been so closed off in his grief, he hasn't even noticed any of the single girls in town who've done everything but stand on their heads and wave flags to garner his attention," Henley said with a cheeky smile.

Rena bit her tongue to keep from saying something derogatory about love that might upset her newly found friends. Perhaps there was something floating in the air that made them determined everyone should be in love.

"Surely, you've noticed how he can't seem to keep his eyes off you, Rena. And then there's Gabi. She absolutely adores you," Anne said.

"If Josh is watching me, it's likely because I'm an oddity, not for any other reason. As for Gabi, I think she just misses having a woman's attention and affection."

"That is a bunch of fiddle-faddle," Henley said, glancing down at Rena's trousers, then at her face. "You're a beautiful

woman, Rena. Any man who fails to notice you would have to be blind.”

“I agree,” Cora Lee said with a smile. “Not that we care at all, Rena, but is there a reason, other than your work, of course, that you choose to wear trousers?”

When Rena remained silent, Cora Lee reached across the table and clasped her hand. “I meant no offense; we are merely curious.”

“No offense taken. However, it’s not a pretty story.”

Henley patted Rena’s arm. “I’m married to a doctor and work as his nurse. I know plenty of horrible stories.”

“I have four boys, and Cora Lee has three. There is no end in sight for the nasty, horrid things those rascals drag home.” Anne offered Rena an encouraging look. “You don’t have to tell us a thing, Rena. We just want to be supportive as your friends.”

Rena hadn’t spoken about the accident to anyone. Theo and Laura heard the details from her aunt. The people in town who knew Rena and her family hadn’t asked questions, only gave her pitying looks which eventually turned into disapproving glares as months went by and she continued wearing trousers.

She supposed telling these women her story would either prove she’d truly made friends in Holiday or give her a reason to avoid attending church or social gatherings.

“If you’re sure you want to hear it, I’ll share my story with you.” Rena looked around as all three women nodded.

“We only want to hear it because we care about you, and there is just a sadness you carry, Rena,” Cora Lee said, squeezing her hand again. “Perhaps in the telling, it will lessen your burden.”

Rena took a deep breath, then started at the beginning of the nightmare that left her world forever altered. “Three years ago, my father went to help a neighbor who’d been sick and unable to get out and work on his farm. Several of the men in the community decided to have a work day, and together they went over to see what they could do to offer their assistance. My father fell through a hole in the haymow in the barn and broke his neck. The men who brought his body home said he died immediately, but it didn’t ease the pain of losing him.”

“Oh, Rena, that’s terrible.” Henley offered her a comforting hug, while Anne dabbed at her tears.

Rena considered stopping the story there, but it was only the beginning. “I’m an only child, and my parents had a farm. It was our livelihood, so my mother and I did the best we could, but it was hard without Dad. One of the neighbors rented the farm ground, which gave us some income. Mama and I started taking in laundry as a way to make enough money to survive. We set up a huge kettle outside, where we’d do the washing and then hang the laundry to dry. That first year was so hard. We were grieving my father and trying to keep from losing the farm. Then one breezy day, Mama went inside to make lunch while I continued working on the never-ending piles of laundry. She was slicing bacon to fry when the wind picked up and blew the hem of my skirt into the fire beneath the laundry

kettle. Only, I didn't notice it at first. It wasn't until I felt the heat searing up my legs that I realized I was on fire."

"Oh, mercy," Cora Lee whispered, slipping out of her chair and resting on her knees in front of Rena, holding onto her hand.

Rena swallowed down her emotion. Now that she'd started talking about the horrific event that had altered her life, she couldn't stop. "Mama ran out of the house, screaming at me to get over to the pump, but by then the entire back of my clothes was on fire. I had a wet shirt in my hand and tried beating at the flames. I think I must have already been in a state of shock and unable to think with any sense. Mama knocked me down and rolled me on the ground, using her hands to beat at the flames. But the bacon grease on her hands and the apron she'd wiped them on caught fire, and before I could do anything, Mama was engulfed in flames. I managed to grab several wet things out of the laundry kettle and wrap them around her, but it was too late. Friends and the pastor buried Mama next to my father. The boy I'd agreed to wed came the day of the funeral, took one look at my burned body, and left. I spent months, flat on my belly, unable to get out of bed, at the mercy of the women who took turns caring for me. My intended never said a word when he was there for the funeral or in the weeks and months after the accident, but when I was finally healed enough to go to town, I saw him with his pretty new wife strolling down the street."

"He is an idiot," Henley said, wrapping Rena in a tight hug while Anne and Cora Lee joined them. "It's a miracle you

survived such a thing, Rena. What a blessing that you're able to walk."

"I don't feel blessed. I feel like God turned his back on me that day. If anyone had to die, why did it have to be my mama instead of me? I was the one who caught my skirts on fire. I should have been more careful, paid more attention. My mama was the sweetest, kindest person. She didn't deserve to die like that." Rena had never told anyone, but visions of her mother burning to death had haunted her dreams nearly every night until she left Amarillo. Here in Holiday, especially after starting work at the mine, she was too exhausted at night to do more than sleep. Or maybe it was being far away from the terror of her past that allowed her to finally rest.

"No one deserves to die like that, Rena, but we're so glad you survived. How on earth did you recover from your wounds?" Cora Lee asked, settling on the floor at Rena's feet once again.

"Slowly. The doctor was caring and kind, and the women who stayed with me changed my bandages and moved my legs so they'd still work. My left leg was only burned a little, but my right leg and my lower back sustained the worst burns."

"It's no wonder you wear pants." Anne gently lifted Rena's hand between hers. It wasn't until she did that Rena realized how cold her hands had grown. "I would too."

"Thank you. You can't imagine how many people judge and condemn me without knowing why I do what I do. I just can't quite bear the notion of wearing a skirt again after what

happened, at least not yet. Every moment I spent in Amarillo was a reminder of all I lost, especially when I ran into George and Arabella. I sold the farm to a neighbor and decided to start over in Holiday. Here, no one gives me pitying glances, glowers at me for wearing trousers, or whispers behind gloved hands that I'm the reason my mother died. My fiancé's abrupt departure from my life confirmed that no man will ever want me, not in this damaged, scarred state. I've accepted the fact that I'll spend my life alone."

Cora Lee shook her head. "I don't accept that. You're lovely and kind, hardworking and intelligent, and beautiful. The right man won't care at all about your scars. He'll love you exactly as you are."

"Trousers and all," Anne said with a soft smile.

Henley nodded in agreement, then gave Rena an imploring look. "The boy who abandoned you. What's his name?"

"George Stafford. Why?"

Henley lifted her teacup. "May George Stafford suffer a thousand indignities. May he be plagued by cats, and chased by dogs. May he lose all his teeth along with his hair, and may his fortunes fail." She winked at Rena. "A gypsy woman I met on a train taught me that."

"My word!" Anne exclaimed, but she giggled as she lifted her cup and clinked it against Henley's.

They all laughed as they toasted the curse Henley had uttered over unsuspecting George Stafford.

The sound of a floorboard creaking drew their gazes to the doorway. The children raced inside, followed by the men, leaving the women rushing to dry the tears they'd shed.

Later that afternoon, when Theo declared it was time to leave, Rena handed baby Emery to Anne, then gave Cora Lee and Henley warm hugs.

"Thank you for today. I feel better than I have in a long time."

"Sharing a burden always lightens the load," Cora Lee said, kissing Rena's cheek. "I do so hope you'll come out to Elk Creek Ranch next Sunday. We'd love for you to see the ranch and to be able to spend more time together."

"I would like that very much." Rena squeezed her hand and went outside, unable to fully sort through her scattered thoughts and emotions. She was deeply grateful, however, that she'd made new friends.

"Did you enjoy your day?" Theo asked as they rode out of Holiday and headed toward his cabin.

"I did, Theo. Thank you for guiltng me into going today."

Theo smirked. "Whatever it takes, cousin. Whatever it takes."

Rena laughed, then glanced over at him. "How about you? Did you enjoy your time with the men and children?"

"I did. The youngsters engaged in a lively game of hide-and-seek. Gabi couldn't stop giggling and was the first found every time she hid."

Rena pictured the little girl, out amongst all the boys, skirts swishing and curls bouncing as she tried to keep quiet and failed.

“I wish I’d seen her.”

Theo gave her a thoughtful look. “What did you and the girls talk about this afternoon?”

Rena wasn’t quite ready to admit to her cousin that she’d bared her soul to her new friends.

Theo seemed to sense her hesitation. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Rena. I only asked because there’s something different about you this evening. You don’t seem quite as,” he paused, studying her, before he continued, “sad or lost or weighed down.”

“Thanks,” she said, quietly, shocked Theo had noticed and put into words exactly what she was feeling.

“Might I assume you’ll join me next week for church and lunch at Elk Creek Ranch?” he asked as they turned down the path to the cabin.

“That assumption is correct, Theo. I know it will only cause you to gloat, but I enjoyed Pastor Ryan’s sermon this morning. I’d like to look up the verses he mentioned.”

Theo tried to hide his surprise but failed. “You’re welcome to use my Bible.”

“I have Mama’s. It was one of my belongings I couldn’t bear to leave behind.”

Theo waited until they'd both dismounted to pull her into a hug. "I'm proud of you, Rena. You're pretty amazing, for a dumb girl cousin."

She slugged his arm without any force behind it. "You're not bad for a smelly, homely dunce of a boy cousin."

"Hey, there was an extra insult or two in there that was completely unnecessary."

Rena turned and backed toward the cabin. "Was it though? Unnecessary?"

With a laugh, she spun around and hurried into the cabin to put together something for their dinner. For the first time since she'd awakened from her injuries, she didn't feel like the darkness around her would consume her.

The faintest bud of hope had finally taken root in her heart.



JOSH NEARLY TRIPPED OVER his own feet at church Sunday morning as he watched Rena ride up with Theo. The previous week, when Theo had attended without her, his friend had shared his concerns for Rena as they'd partaken of lunch at the hotel. Although Theo hadn't given any reasons for Rena's actions, he had said she was mad at God and refused to even consider attending a church service.

Now, she was at church, looking far too fetching for Josh's liking. If only she hadn't been wearing those ridiculous trousers, she would have looked like any other pretty young woman enjoying a pleasant spring morning.

Of course, Gabi rushed over to Rena and hovered close to her like a bee buzzing around a honeycomb.

Part of him felt jealous as Gabi settled close to Rena on the church pew. They'd barely finished the opening hymn when Gabi leaned on Rena's arm and fell asleep. He reached for his daughter, but Rena shook her head, acting like it was the most natural thing in the world to hold Gabi close to her side. The tender way Rena cared for his little girl made his heart feel like melted butter.

Rena looked lovely with her hair in a fashionable style. Instead of the loose shirts he'd seen her wearing on past occasions, she had on a feminine floral shirtwaist and a tailored jacket that accented a womanly figure. That figure became prominently outlined after the service when Rena bent over to speak to Gabi and he got a full view of her from the back. His mind jumped off the track and started chugging away in a direction it had no business going before he even realized what was infiltrating his mind.

Shamed with himself, he yanked his thoughts in line and kept them there all the way to the Milton home on the outskirts of town.

Annoyed with himself and his inability to stop staring at Rena, he'd found it impossible to concentrate on anything at lunch except how Rena's face transformed from attractive to beautiful when she laughed at something one of the children said or smiled at a comment made by one of the other women.

When Jace asked her what she planned to do now that she'd settled in and she mentioned working with Theo at the mine, Josh nearly choked on the bite he'd just taken. He'd assumed, quite in error it seemed, she'd stay at Theo's cabin and shoot more holes into hearts she'd drawn on targets. The realization she was not only doing a man's job but a dangerous one, pushed him beyond reason.

As soon as the children and men went outside, Josh cornered Theo out by the barn, giving him a piece of his mind with fists clenched at his sides. If he'd held a club in his hands, he might have thumped Theo with it like an enraged cavedweller.

"Have you lost every last speck of your common sense?" he growled at his friend, not wanting anyone else to hear. It was a good thing the others were leaning against the corral fence on the other side of the barn, looking at a horse R.C. had recently acquired.

"Not last I checked." Theo turned from watching the children play and frowned at him. "What's tying a knot in your rope today, Josh? You've looked like you sucked on sour lemons since church let out. Didn't the pastor's sermon sit well with you this morning?"

Josh tensed. "The sermon was fine," he barked, then realized he hadn't listened to most of it with his attention centered on Rena and Gabi.

"Then what's eating at you?" Theo's frown deepened. "You act like I've gone out of my way to rile you."

“You haven’t ... it’s not ...” Josh paused to try to gather his erratic thoughts into some semblance of order. “I don’t like Rena working at the mine. It’s no place for a lady. And why on earth can’t that girl wear a skirt to church like a normal female?”

Theo’s eyebrows shot up so high, they both disappeared beneath the hat he’d settled on his head when they’d come outside.

“First off, Rena has her reasons—good reasons—for choosing to wear trousers. No one had better insult her by telling her otherwise, or they’ll answer to me. Secondly, I don’t see how Rena’s work is any concern of yours. She’s doing a good job and earning every penny they pay her, so why do you care?” Theo took a step closer to Josh, hands fisted, as though he prepared to defend Rena’s honor.

The realization that he had feelings for Rena and worried about her well-being, made Josh even more irate. “I don’t care!” he yelled, then lowered his voice when everyone looked in their direction. Even as the words came out of his mouth, he knew they were a lie. He cared. Far too much, and that was the problem. “I just—”

Before he said something he shouldn’t, he spun around and marched off. A brisk walk was what he needed to clear his head. He strode from one end of Holiday to the other and back, but he was still agitated when he returned to the Milton home.

Rather than join the men as they watched the children play games in the yard, Josh walked around to the back of the house and silently entered through the kitchen door. He poured a glass of lemonade and glugged it in a few swallows, then he heard the women's voices and couldn't stop himself from eavesdropping as Rena told her story.

He heard the raw pain in her voice as she spoke, the shared grief as the others assured her, and the sound of all of them crying as Rena finished the terrible tale of what had happened to her.

George Stafford was fortunate he was all the way in Texas, or Josh might have hunted him down and pummeled his face a few times. He sincerely hoped the curses Henley jokingly cast upon the spineless coward all came to pass. It would serve the mindless idiot right for leaving Rena when she most needed a friend.

What she'd survived was a tragedy, but he thought she'd likely come away from it a stronger person. It was absurd for her to think all men would be like the one who'd abandoned her and that God had all but forsaken her.

He longed to join the women as they offered words of encouragement to Rena, but he remained in the hallway, feeling like a lurking sneak.

Before anyone caught him, he turned to head back to the kitchen and outside when a floorboard creaked beneath his feet. He froze in place, fearing one of the women would hop up and see him lingering in the hall.

Then the children poured inside, followed by the men, saving him from a wealth of embarrassment if one of the women had peeked around the doorway and spied him. He blended into the group with no one knowing he'd heard a story not intended for his ears.

Any joy the day might have held dissipated the moment he heard Rena explaining why she wore trousers.

Josh had wanted to go to Rena, to speak from his heart, but he wouldn't. Not only would she realize he'd been listening when he shouldn't have been, but he wasn't prepared to make any declarations to her beyond being her friend.

Distraught, he took Gabi home and tried to act as though everything was normal, but nothing was.

Three days later, he was still brooding as he stood over a piece of leather on his worktable. He'd been trying for an hour to concentrate enough to cut out the pieces for a new saddle the marshal had ordered, but so far, he hadn't accomplished more than picking up his tracing pencil.

"What is he thinking?" Josh asked the question aloud, although he was alone in his shop. "Surely Theo has more sense than to let Rena continue to work at the mine."

He stood and blew out his breath.

Rena.

She seemed to be the lone occupant of his thoughts this morning. It shouldn't have surprised him. He'd thought of little else since her arrival in Holiday.

She'd left behind everything she'd ever known and traveled all the way to Oregon by herself just to escape the nightmarish memories of her past. He admired her for her strength and courage.

Truthfully, he admired so much about the woman.

Her kindness and gentleness. Her sense of humor. Her wit and intelligence. Her beauty. Her willingness to turn her hand to whatever hard work was given to her.

She might think she was too scarred for any man to want her, but she was wrong. He'd seen the glances tossed her way after the church service Sunday by several of the single men in the congregation, and that had further aggravated him.

It seemed everything aggravated, annoyed, and irritated him lately.

But especially thoughts of Rena.

A woman who shunned the good Lord, worked at a mine in a dangerous job that would likely end with her dead, and proclaimed to detest love and romance was one he should actively avoid.

Even if Rena didn't wear trousers, or have secrets she thought no man wanted to know, she was nothing like the woman Josh was convinced he needed in his life. A feminine woman—one content to stay in the house cooking, sewing, and cleaning while guiding Gabi into becoming a proper young lady—was the type of female he should pursue. A woman who focused on her family's comforts and had no

ambition beyond being a loving wife and mother was exactly the example his daughter needed.

Wasn't it?

Or would his life, and that of his daughter's, be enriched by someone who was so ... unexpected, extraordinary, and remarkable?

Gabi was already thoroughly fascinated with Rena and spoke about her constantly. The wise thing to do would be to nip the relationship before it could go from a tender bud to a full bloom.

It wasn't that Josh didn't like Rena. He did. Far too much.

But Rena was as wild as the wind, and nothing he could say or do would ever tame her.

Josh felt about as wild as a deeply rooted oak tree. He owned a successful business, had a daughter that needed her days filled with routine and steadfast guidance, and still grieved a wife he'd buried years ago.

He knew Maxine wouldn't want him to remain alone, but Rena was as different from her as night was from day. How could he be falling in love with a woman like Rena? If ever there were a free soul, Rena possessed it.

Even if he were willing to overlook her current employment situation and her anger at God, he couldn't get past the notion that Rena would never be content to sit at home stitching pillow covers or crocheting lacy things. Try as he might, he

couldn't envision her meekly submitting to his every command.

She was full of fire and spirit, sass and spunk. The man who wed Rena Burke would have more than he could handle.

Josh already had his hands full with his busy life.

The wise and prudent thing to do would be to set all thoughts of Rena, of her freckled nose and amber eyes, and that glorious abundance of sun-kissed brown hair right out of his mind.

Aware he was in no mood to work on the saddle, Josh opened the back door and strode over to a pile of firewood that needed to be chopped.

Swinging the axe and burying it in a chunk of wood didn't alleviate the tension coiling in him as he'd hoped it would. He'd chopped and stacked a cord of wood before he gave up and returned inside, guzzling water to slake his thirst. He needed to get out of his own head, and he knew that would never happen if he remained in the shop.

He left a note on the door that he'd be back in a few hours, went home and saddled Hawkins, then took off down the road toward Baker City so he wouldn't be tempted to ride over to Theo's cabin on the off chance he might find Rena there. What would he say to her if he did seek her out? In his current frame of mind, he was sure whatever came out of his mouth would likely insult or infuriate her.

“You are pathetic,” Josh admonished himself as he urged Hawkins into a gallop down the road. It felt good to have the fresh spring air in his face and nothing pressing upon him except the weight of his thoughts. If he could turn them off and chase Rena from his mind, maybe life would once again return to normal.



“**T**HAT’S THE LAST ONE,” Theo said as he and Rena finished drilling the final hole at the end of a tunnel.

“Thank goodness,” Rena said, mopping the sweat from her brow onto her shirt sleeve before she carefully packed dynamite into the hole, then checked the fuses while Theo prepared to set off the blast.

“Ready?” he asked, waiting for her further back in the tunnel.

“Almost,” she said, giving the dynamite one last look before she hurried toward him.

“Fire in the hole!” he bellowed three times before the two of them sought safety around a corner, then the blast rocked the mountain, shaking rocks and dirt loose around them.

When the noise and dust settled, no one was harmed, and the tunnel was ready for the miners to get to work clearing away the debris.

“Hey, Ike wants to see both of you,” a young man named Billy said as he hurried toward them.

“Wonder what that’s about?” Theo asked as they made their way to the elevator cage that would take them back up to the surface.

Rena closed her eyes and held her breath as the cage carried them up through the mine. She hated the weightless feeling it created in her stomach almost as much as she detested being deep in the mine. The lack of fresh air, the heat, and stillness, not to mention the consuming darkness, left her jittery every time they went into it.

Despite how much she detested it, she kept her hands steady and did her job flawlessly. Her life, Theo’s life, and the lives of so many others depended on her ability to execute each task with precision, not panic.

Once they reached the top and stepped outside, Rena stopped and inhaled a deep breath, letting the sun rest on her face for a moment before she followed Theo to the mine’s office.

The camp had an assay office, a medical building, a company store, the cookshack, the building where they kept dynamite and blasting equipment, a large barn and four corrals, a wagon shed, and a warehouse building where machinery and supplies were kept. Cade's cabin, Ike's cabin, and a long bunkhouse, where the miners who lived at the Gilded Pine slept, rounded out the rest of the buildings. About a quarter mile down the hill from the mine, the two sisters who worked there had their own place that looked more like a cottage from a fairy tale.

As Rena and Theo walked past the hulking building where the ore was processed and the gold refined from it, the noise was deafening. The boilers that powered the mill belched steam into the blue sky, adding to the discordant cacophony around them.

Grateful when they reached the office and the noise lessened, Rena walked inside and waited as Theo joined her.

Ike looked up from a stack of papers he was going through at his desk and stood. "Good. I'm glad Billy found you. There's a load of dynamite ready to be picked up in Baker City. I want the two of you on the afternoon train. I already arranged for your tickets and to have the wagon and team transported. It will save two days that way. As you know, time is money. Today is Wednesday. If you make good time, you should be back late Friday afternoon, otherwise, we'll see you on Saturday. Don't blow yourselves up. The boss said you get double pay for hauling it up here. There's a five-dollar bonus for each of you if you make it back before noon on Friday."

Rena's mind latched onto the words "double pay" and "bonus." A grin stretched her cheeks. "We'll do our best, sir, to return in one piece."

"Good. I don't like the thought of gathering up pieces of you two, the wagon, or the team. The train tickets will be at the depot in Holiday. Just ask for Mr. Masters. See you Friday."

With that, Ike returned to his paperwork.

Rena strode outside and glanced at her cousin as he fell into step beside her. "Will we have time to clean up before we board the train?"

"If we hurry. I'll hitch the team while you get Scout and Thomas. No need to leave them up here eating company feed while we're gone. If you want to ride ahead and ask Mr. Findley to milk the cow and feed the chickens, that would be a big help."

"Sure, Theo. I'll do that." Rena saddled Scout and Thomas, then took the mule's reins in her hands and swung onto the horse's back. She waved at Theo as he hitched a team of four horses to one of the hulking wagons, then she rode out of camp down the hill.

She stopped at the nearest neighbor's place and asked the older man if he could take care of the livestock for the next two days. He promised to have his son see to the chores, and wished her well when he learned the reason for the trip was to haul back a load of dynamite.

Rena nudged Thomas into a trot and was soon at the cabin. She made sure he and Scout were settled in their stalls with plenty of feed and water before she raced into the cabin and got what she needed to take a quick bath in the creek.

As filthy as she was from being in the mine, she took time to wash her hair before she climbed out and dressed in her best clothes. She tucked a change of work clothes for each of them into a bag, along with her hairbrush, toothbrush, and a jar of toothpowder.

“I’m going to get a bath,” Theo called as he dashed into the cabin and grabbed soap, a towel, and the clothes she’d left out for him on his bed.

Before she could answer, he’d returned outside to the creek. Rena was thankful they didn’t have to haul water for bathing every night. They each took turns at the end of the day at the creek cleaning up and washing away the grime and sweat accumulated at the mine.

Rena styled her hair, spending a few extra moments to arrange loose tendrils into finger curls, then pulled on the jacket that had belonged to her in a happier time. She might not look like a lady in her trousers, but no one could deem her attire improper.

She took several coins from the leather purse she’d hidden in the toe of an old sock in her dresser and stuffed them deep in her trouser pocket; then she pinned the pocket shut for good measure. The last thing she needed was a pickpocket stealing her hard-earned money from her.

When she'd sold the farm where she'd been raised and many of the belongings she couldn't keep, she'd known that money would have to last her a good while. She'd been frugal with it. The only extravagance had been the train fare from Denver to Baker City. Now that she was making good money at the mine, she had a short list of a few luxuries she intended to purchase if they had time once they reached Baker City.

Rena grabbed her father's old hat and stuffed it into the bag she'd packed, then hastened to make a lunch she and Theo could eat on the short drive into Holiday.

"Now I feel like I'm fit company for my fellow passengers on the train," Theo said as he hurried inside with his dirty clothes rolled into a bundle. He tossed them in a large basket Rena kept by the door for laundry, then combed his hair and gathered a few things.

"Extra clothes?" he asked, pointing to the bag she held.

"Yes, a change of work clothes for each of us, and I made a lunch we could eat on the way to the depot."

"Great. I think we have plenty of time to catch the train, but I don't want to miss it. Let's be on our way." Theo looked around the cabin, as though he needed to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything important, then followed Rena outside. She tossed the travel bag in the back of the wagon, then climbed up to the high seat with the basket of food draped over her arm.

"Did you talk to Mr. Findley?" Theo asked as he released the brake and snapped the lines that set the horses and heavy wagon into motion.

“I did. He said he’d send his son over to do the chores. I didn’t mention it, but I think we should pay Timothy for helping out.”

“If the animals are alive and the cow’s bag isn’t about to explode when we get home, that’s a fine plan.” Theo grinned at her, then pointed to the basket. “I’m starving. Did you make sandwiches with the leftover biscuits and bacon?”

“I did. I even rounded up enough cookies I’m hoping I might get one or two before you devour them all.”

Theo shrugged as he took the biscuit she held out to him. “I can’t help it if you’re a good cook, Rena. Aunt Bess taught you well.”

Rena generally avoided any mention of her mother, but it no longer held the sting it once had. Something about telling her story to her friends had opened a door she’d nailed firmly shut. Light and love had started to flow through that crack. Perhaps, with time, she’d be able to shove the door wide open.

“Mama was a wonderful cook, but so is your mother. I’d say our grandmother taught them well.”

Theo chuckled and shook his head. “According to Ma, their mother was a danger in the kitchen, and most of what she made was inedible. She said she and Aunt Bess learned to cook out of self-preservation.”

Rena laughed, pleased Theo had shared the story with her. It was one she hadn’t heard or known since their grandparents had passed before they were born.

“Tell me more about our grandparents, Theo. Do you have more stories?”

While they ate their lunch, Theo kept her entertained with funny things his mother had shared over the years. Rena’s mom had always been the quiet and reserved one of the two sisters, but Rena wished she had stories from her she could share with her cousin.

They reached the depot with plenty of time to spare. Inside, the stationmaster, Mr. Masters, gave them their tickets, then sent one of his helpers outside to see to the team and wagon.

“Hope should be right on time,” the man said, glancing at the large clock on the wall. “You have about an hour before she arrives. We’ll load the team and horses as soon as we unload the freight coming in. Just be here no later than two or you’ll miss the train.”

“We’ll be here,” Theo said, tucking the tickets into his pocket, then motioning for Rena to precede him out the door he held open. “Well, cousin, how would you like to spend an hour? We could go sit in the hotel lobby and act like we’re from the upper crust of society. We could browse through things we don’t need at the mercantile. We’d have time for a quick visit with Josh.”

At the mention of Josh, Rena felt her senses jump with awareness. Try as she might, she had trouble getting the handsome saddlemaker out of her head. He always smelled decadent, like leather and sunshine. The combination was

proving hard to resist, especially when she didn't particularly want to.

Since last Sunday, when Henley, Cora Lee, and Anne had given her hope that she could have a future that included romantic love, Rena hadn't been able to stop thinking about Josh.

She knew it was too soon, too sudden, but she cared for him, and for Gabi. In fact, that little girl had wound her tiny fingers firmly around Rena's heart, and she was sure nothing would ever remove the affection she felt for the child.

At night, right before sleep claimed her, Rena imagined what it would be like to be Josh's wife and Gabi's mother. Would she be able to give up the freedom she felt being on her own in trade for a loving family?

No doubt existed in her mind that Josh was a good man and would be a wonderful husband. She could easily see he was an amazing father.

The two questions she couldn't help pondering were if she could submit to domestic life as a wife and mother and if Josh would ever want her. She wasn't like most women and came with scars that were visible on her burned body as well as those that were burned into her heart.

A visit with him certainly wouldn't help her already muddled thoughts get any clearer, and she felt the need to take control of them as much as possible until they made it back to the mine with the dynamite. Daydreaming on her part could have disastrous, deadly results.

“Why don’t we go for a stroll? You can show me more of Holiday.” Rena looped her arm around Theo’s, and they went for a walk in the bright spring sunshine. He showed her where Josh and Gabi lived in a white farmhouse on the eastern edge of town. They walked by Evan and Henley Holt’s stately home and meandered past the church before turning along Main Street. They stopped in the mercantile long enough to buy a peppermint stick for each of them to enjoy and continued their jaunt among the businesses and homes in Holiday, with Theo talking about who lived or worked in each place before they heard the train whistle and headed to the depot.

The train chugged to a halt when they reached the platform. Rena stood near the depot office, watching with interest as people left the train. Some looked like miners. Others were dressed in fine clothes. There were cowboys and farmers along with businessmen and a few women.

When it was time to board, Theo escorted her into the passenger car, and they took a seat near the front. Rena settled by the window, excited for another adventure, but dreading the trip back in the wagon.

Theo went to check on the team and wagon, ensuring they were loaded, then returned just in time to take his seat before the conductor made a final boarding call.

The train chugged forward, and they were soon making their way out of the mountain and into Baker City.

“How did you like riding Hope?” Theo asked with a teasing grin as they disembarked from the train. “Hope isn’t such a

bad thing, you know.”

“I am aware, cousin. Thank you.” Rena cast him a dark glower at the unnecessary reminder, then followed him to where the team and wagon were unloaded. She accepted his hand as she climbed up on the high seat.

“Let’s go see Mr. Samuelson.”

Rena looked around with interest as Theo guided the team away from the train depot and headed down a side street. “Is that the dynamite man?”

“Yep. Robert Samuelson has been making dynamite for the past handful of years using glycerin oil, nitric acid, and sawdust. He is excellent at what he does, and he supplies most of the mines in the area. Because of his experience, it’s safer to use dynamite he makes than rely on making our own at the mine. In the long run, I think it’s more cost effective too.”

Rena remained silent as Theo stopped the wagon in front of a red brick building with a sign out front that advertised *Samuelson’s Explosives*.

“Want to come in or wait here?”

“If you don’t mind and think we have time, I’d like to visit a friend I made when I was passing through.”

Theo nodded. “Sure. I figure it will take at least an hour to load the crates and complete the paperwork. Meet me back here at four.”

“I’ll be here. I’m going to the dressmaker’s shop and then the mercantile. I may stop by the bakery before we leave and

buy a few cinnamon buns if they have any left.” Rena jumped off the wagon seat and straightened her jacket, then poked a few loose pins in her hair. “Have you ever tried them?”

“I haven’t, but I’d be happy to sample one. Have fun, Rena.”

“Thanks, Theo.” She waited for a wagon to pass, then crossed the street and tried to remember where Maggie MacGregor’s dress shop was located. She turned down a side street, strode around the corner, and felt a spurt of anticipation when she saw a display of dresses in a shop window across the street.

A bell jangled when she pushed open the door and walked into the shop. Rena hadn’t set foot inside a dress shop in years. Although she and her mother had made their own clothes, on occasion, they’d gone inside one just to admire the latest fashions.

Today, though, Rena fully intended to purchase a few things from Maggie.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to ...” Maggie’s greeting turned into a squeal of delight as she hurried from the back of her store and gave Rena a welcoming hug. “Rena! I didn’t expect to see you back so soon. I’m so happy you’re here. What brings you to Baker City?”

“My cousin helped me get a job at the Gilded Pine Mine. We came on the afternoon train to pick up a load of dynamite and haul it back up the mountain. Theo said I had an hour to

do whatever I liked before we need to leave, so I came straight here.”

Maggie was obviously working to keep her jaw from dropping open in shock. “You are a blaster at a mine?” She spoke so slowly, as though the words had a foul taste to them, that it almost made Rena giggle.

“I am. It’s not as terrible as it sounds, and the pay is good, which is why I want to buy a few things. I’d like to purchase a new shirtwaist or two and a decent hat. Something I can wear now through the summer season. Do you have anything in stock?”

“Of course, Rena. Let’s see what we can find that you like.”

Maggie took her measurements, and in less than ten minutes, Rena found herself in a dressing room, trying on half a dozen shirtwaists. She chose one in a pale shade of yellow with a sailor collar accented with navy blue piping, and another that was the color of ripe peaches with a high lace collar and lacy cuffs. The hat she selected was of fine quality. The base was straw, but Maggie showed her how to change the bows and flowers to make it look like a different hat. She also purchased a pair of lace gloves and a pair of white silk stockings, although heaven only knew why she felt the need to have them, but she did.

“I think that’s enough splurging for one day,” she said, then fingered a belt she could wear with any number of things and added it to her purchases.

“I’m so pleased I had some things you liked,” Maggie said as she folded tissue paper around each item.

Rena laughed as she paid Maggie. “I like far too many things in your wonderful shop, but this will do for today.”

“If you ever decide you’d like to wear a skirt, I have one that matches the sailor shirtwaist you chose.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Maggie. Thank you.”

Rena didn’t feel a need to explain why she wore trousers, and Maggie didn’t seem compelled to ask. That was one of the reasons Rena considered her a true friend.

With a glance at the clock on the wall, Rena gathered the parcel Maggie had wrapped for her, then hugged the woman. “Thank you for everything.”

“Thank you for coming in, Rena. I hope to see you again. Promise you’ll be careful on the trip to the mine.”

“I will.”

Maggie scribbled something on a piece of paper and pressed it into Rena’s hand. “That’s my address. If you think of it, I’d appreciate a note letting me know you made it back to Holiday unharmed.”

“I’ll do that, Maggie. With the train service running as quickly as it does between here and there, expect a note to arrive soon.”

Maggie waved as Rena rushed from the store and made her way to Mr. Miller’s mercantile. He was busy helping a

customer but smiled in recognition when she stepped inside.

Rena didn't tarry long, seeking out the items she wanted. She was on her way to the cash register when a display of quilts caught her eye. Especially one made from pink and white fabric. Gabi would love it, and it would be a perfect birthday gift for the little girl. She added it to her purchases, then greeted Mr. Miller with a smile.

"Miss Burke, isn't it?" he asked as he rang up her items.

"Yes. How are you, Mr. Miller?"

"Doing well and enjoying the arrival of spring. How are things in Holiday? Didn't you say you'd be staying with a cousin?"

"Yes. We came to Baker City on business today, so I wanted to pick up a few things that aren't available in the mercantile there." Rena patted the quilt. "Are the quilts made locally?"

"Indeed, they are. Mrs. Palmer creates them. Her husband owns the saddle shop in town."

The mention of a saddle shop owner brought Josh to the forefront of Rena's mind. She was starting to think nothing short of banging her head against a wall would dislodge thoughts of the man.

Rather than let her aggravation at herself ruin what had turned into an unexpectedly delightful day, she shoved it aside and smiled at Mr. Miller. "She does superb work, based on the quilts you have here in the store."

"That she does. Is this quilt for you?"

“No. A little girl I met in Holiday. Her favorite color is pink, and she’ll be celebrating her fifth birthday soon.”

“I’m sure she’ll love this,” Mr. Miller said, carefully folding the quilt. “Would you like me to wrap it for you?”

“I’d appreciate that, Mr. Miller. Thank you.” Rena chose a length of pink ribbon to wrap around the package and planned to add it later so it wouldn’t get dirty in the wagon.

Mr. Miller tucked the quilt into a box, then wrapped it in white paper and tied it with twine. The paper, to Rena, looked similar to what was used for printing newspapers. Regardless of where it originated, the white box would be perfect for what she planned.

“I appreciate your help today, Mr. Miller,” she said as he gave her the total, then accepted her payment.

“I’m glad you came back, Miss Burke. I hope you have a safe return trip to Holiday and that you’ll stop by the next time you’re in town.”

“I’ll do that, sir.” Rena gathered her things, then hurried out the door, nearly colliding with Theo.

“There you are. Are you ready to go?” he asked as he took the box holding Gabi’s gift from her while she balanced the other packages in her hands.

“I haven’t yet ventured to the bakery. Are you hungry?” Rena followed Theo as he walked around the corner and headed back toward the dynamite shop.

“Do you even need to ask that question? When am I not hungry?” Theo tossed a teasing glance at her. “Let’s stow your purchases in the wagon then go to the bakery. In fact, why don’t you go to the bakery and I’ll see about rounding up some grub for our supper? Just meet me back here when you’re finished.”

Rena nodded in agreement and headed toward the bakery, while Theo jogged off down a side street with the basket that had held their lunch.

After purchasing cinnamon buns, half a dozen cookies, and two fruit-filled pastries they could eat for breakfast, she returned to the wagon. Theo hadn’t yet arrived, so she left the baked goods beneath the seat with her other purchases, took the bag with her clothes, and returned to the train depot, where she knew they had a lavatory. Rena changed into her work clothes, removed the pins from her hair, and braided it, then tugged on her father’s old hat. After fastening her gun belt around her hips, she hurried back to the wagon to find Theo just arriving with a lard pail in one hand and the basket in his other.

“Something smells wonderful,” Rena said, sniffing appreciatively.

“There’s fried chicken and biscuits with wild berry jam in the basket. The pail has boiled eggs and pickles in it. Looks like you bought enough for dessert and breakfast.”

Rena took the pail and handed him the traveling bag. “If you want to change, I’ll watch the food.”

“No snitching,” he warned in a serious tone, then winked before he hustled back inside Mr. Samuelson’s shop.

Theo was only gone a few minutes before he emerged wearing his work clothes. “Let’s head out while we still have some daylight.”

Rena swung up to the wagon seat. She and Theo waited until they were a few miles out of town to dig into their supper.

“That chicken is the best I think I’ve ever eaten,” Rena said, licking her fingers, then wiping them on a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. She was surprised to find a jar of lemonade tucked in among the chicken and biscuits. She and Theo took turns sipping from it. They had a full water canteen, but the lemonade tasted sweet, tart, and refreshing.

The sun was almost set when she got out one of the cinnamon buns and shared it with Theo. When he grew weary, Rena offered to take over driving the wagon. She’d never controlled four horses at once, but Theo gave her detailed instructions before he leaned back in the seat and dozed.

Every shadow that danced in the silvery light from the moon that popped out from behind the clouds made Rena edgy, but she did her best to remain calm so the horses wouldn’t sense her fear. The animals spooking and bolting with a wagon full of explosives would end in tragedy.

When Theo awoke an hour later, he dug into the cookies she’d purchased at the bakery and gave her one, then ate two.

“Want to stop for the night?” he asked, brushing crumbs from his hands.

Rena cast a quick glimpse at him before turning her attention back to the road and the team. “I don’t mind traveling in the dark, as long as you think it’s safe. I was just worrying, though, if the team spooks, they’ll blow us up before I can even haul back on the reins.”

“Possibly, but I think as long as we stay on the road, we’ll be fine.” Theo squinted his eyes, as though he was trying to look into the distance through the inky darkness that surrounded them.

“I think there’s a town about an hour ahead. Let’s stop there and get an early start in the morning.”

“Okay,” Rena said, continuing to drive the team until Theo pointed to her left.

“There’s a meadow there with trees surrounding it, and the river isn’t far. It’s a good place to rest.”

Rena guided the wagon beneath a canopy of trees on the outskirts of a tiny town she’d passed through when she had ridden Scout to Holiday.

Now that they were on their way home, with all the dynamite packed into crates behind them, Rena just wanted the trip to be over. The responsibility of getting the explosives safely to the mine pressed on her until she felt like her back might break beneath the weight of it.

“You sleep awhile. I’ll keep watch,” Theo said, shifting more comfortably on the seat once she’d stopped the wagon.

Rena slid down beneath the seat, used the wrapped parcel from Maggie’s shop as a pillow, and went to sleep the moment she closed her eyes.

When she awakened, it was still dark out, but the moon had moved across the sky. She rolled out from beneath the seat and looked up to find Theo glancing down at her.

“Sorry I woke you. I about fell off the seat.”

She laughed softly. “Sorry I missed seeing that. You ready to go?” she asked, sliding out of her makeshift bed and standing.

“Sure. Since we’re both awake, we might as well head out. At this rate, we might even make it to the mine by this evening.”

“If we do, I sure won’t complain to have this trip behind us.” Rena hopped off the wagon. “Just give me a minute.”

Without waiting for Theo’s reply, Rena headed further into the trees to answer nature’s call and was on her way back to the wagon when she felt like she was being watched. She heard something breathing and had no idea if it was man or beast. Frightened it was something that would startle the horses, she wanted to put distance between them and whatever it was.

Rena took off running toward the wagon, pouring on every ounce of speed she could muster. Her leg screamed in protest,

but she ignored it, sprinting back to the wagon and swinging up to the seat.

“Go! Go! Something is chasing me! I don’t want it to spook the horses.”

Theo snapped the lines, and the team started forward. Fearful of letting them go too fast, Rena pulled her pistol and turned on the seat, facing backward, watching for something to leap out of the darkness with claws or fangs bared.

She blew out a relieved breath when a hound dog wandered into the meadow and plopped down in a beam of moonlight, watching them leave like he’d missed the opportunity to tag along with a friend.

“It was a dog. An old hound dog,” she said, holstering the gun and looking at Theo.

He started to chuckle, and she giggled, then they both were laughing as they passed through a sleepy town and continued toward Holiday.

Dawn was just breaking when Rena took out the rest of the treats from the bakery. They shared the last cinnamon bun, then ate the pastries. Rena took over driving to give Theo a rest as they passed through another small town. A few hours later, she needed a break just to stretch the tension from her shoulders and ease the knot in her leg.

She pulled off the road and stopped, then raised her arms over her head in a long stretch.

“Go ahead and take a little walk while I stay with the team, then it will be my turn.”

“Let’s water the horses first. I can hear water.” Rena took the bucket that was stowed beneath the wagon and followed the sound of water to a river. She stood on the edge of the bank to fill the bucket and carried it back to the wagon. While she stayed with the horse, Theo refilled it and carried it back two more times.

“While they nibble some grass, you go do whatever you need to,” Theo tipped his head toward the trees that separated them from the river. “Just don’t fall in the water.”

Rena rolled her eyes at him, then walked out of sight. She tended to her personal needs, washed her hands in the cold river water, and froze when she watched an elk drinking on the other side. It was one of the most majestic things she’d ever seen.

She eased back from the water and returned to find Theo walking around and swinging his arms, apparently trying to get the blood flowing through his limbs.

“There’s an elk at the river,” she whispered to him.

He strode off toward the water on silent feet. She was glad they had nowhere to haul the meat because she was certain if there’d been room in the wagon, he would have shot the animal and taken it home with them.

Rena didn’t mind eating wild game, but she hated the thought of such a proud animal dying to fill her stewpot.

Theo returned a short time later with a smile on his face.

“That was a big ol’ boy, wasn’t it?” he commented as he gave Rena a hand up to the wagon.

“He was quite large. I’m glad he lived to see another day.”

Theo nodded in understanding. “Me too, although a thick elk steak sounds pretty good right now.”

She glared at her cousin. “You just had to mention food, didn’t you? Isn’t there a town coming up soon?”

“A few more hours, I think. We’ll stop there and get something to eat and let the horses rest.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Theo set the team in motion and gave her a long, studying glance. “Are you doing okay, Rena? I’m sure riding like this bothers your leg. I noticed you’re limping more today.”

It was the first time since she’d come to Holiday that he’d mentioned her leg and the limp that plagued her. Instead of taking offense, as she might have done a week ago, she appreciated his concern.

“It’s bothering me a little, but not bad. I think racing from that old hound dog caused most of the ache I can’t seem to shake.”

Theo grinned. “When you were running for your life, you didn’t know it was from being slobbered to death.”

She giggled. “No, I did not.”

It was nearly midnight when Theo drove the wagon up to the dynamite shack at the mine and parked. Thanks to the light of the moon, they'd been able to travel after dark. Because they'd kept the pace steady and slow, the horses didn't seem worn out in the least, but Rena was nearly dead on her feet. They'd stopped on the way up the mountain just long enough to leave their belongings at the cabin and saddle Thomas and Scout. Rena rode Scout and led Thomas the rest of the way to the Gilded Pine Mine.

The night watchman had recognized Theo and waved him in when they approached the mine. Theo had barely stepped out of the wagon when Cade appeared in the doorway of his cabin, his hair standing up on one side, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Marshall? That you?" he asked in a loud whisper as he shuffled toward them, slipping his suspender straps over his shoulders.

"We made it back, sir," Theo said, unlocking the door to the dynamite shack.

"You two made good time. Any trouble along the way?" Cade asked, picking up a crate of dynamite and carrying it inside.

"Nope. Not unless you want to count an old hound out for blood." Theo smirked at Rena, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

Cade gave them both odd looks, then returned to unloading the crates in silence.

When they finished, Cade went to the office, while Theo backed the wagon beneath the wagon shed, then he and Rena saw to the team. They were just about ready to head out when Cade emerged from the office and handed each of them an envelope.

“There’s your pay for this week and the bonus I promised. As a thank you for getting back so quickly without pushing the team, I’m giving you tomorrow off with pay. Be back here Monday morning ready to blast some rock.”

“Yes, sir!” Rena gratefully accepted her envelope. Theo took his, then enthusiastically shook Cade’s hand.

“Get out of here and get some rest.” Cade waved a dismissive hand, then headed back toward his cabin.

“How about that,” Theo mused, once they’d mounted and were riding toward home. “A whole day off with pay. What will you do tomorrow?”

“Sleep in. Don’t you dare wake me up before six.”

“I won’t be able to do that, since I plan to sleep in a while myself.” Theo grinned at her in the moonlight. “Maybe you could ask Josh to take you on a picnic or something.”

“That is not going to happen, cousin, so get that thought right out of your head.”

“You never know what can happen now that you’ve ridden Hope.”

Rena would have thumped Theo, but she lacked the energy required to lift her arm and swing it at him. “A silly train

engine doesn't mean anything has changed, Theo. I don't know why everyone is determined to better my life. Maybe I like it just the way it is."

"Sure, you do."

She could feel Theo's knowing look even if she couldn't see it in the dark. "Just hush. I'm too tired to argue with you."

"Me too. I'll go back to annoying you tomorrow after we've had sleep and food."

"I'm so glad you just offered to make breakfast. I'd like a ..."

Theo playfully swatted at her with his hat. She ducked and giggled, relieved they'd survived the trip and earned their bonus.



“**W**HAT DO YOU NEED? What can I do to help?”

Josh hovered in the doorway of Gabi’s bedroom, distracting Rena from her work. She’d come to help paint his daughter’s bedroom as a surprise for her birthday tomorrow. Together, they’d moved out the furniture and taken the curtains down from the windows. Rena had rolled up the rug on the floor while he’d carried in the supplies they’d need.

It had taken a bit of scheming on his part, but Theo and Rena had arrived before dawn to help execute their plans. Theo had promised to take Gabi on an adventure, which entailed a ride on Thomas up to his cabin, where they’d eat breakfast.

If Josh knew his daughter at all, which he did, Theo would be talked into playing several games with Gabi before taking her to Anne Milton's house to spend the rest of the day playing with the Milton boys.

The hope was that by the time he retrieved Gabi that evening, she'd be too tired to notice her bedroom had been painted.

The day had started well, with Gabi not offering even one complaint about being roused out of bed earlier than normal. Nor had she fussed about wearing the boy's overalls Josh had set out for her. He figured since she was riding in the saddle with Theo, then playing with boys all day, a frilly dress would only get in her way.

Oddly, the more time he spent with Rena, the more practical his thoughts grew when it came to skirts and dresses. He could see how much more ease of movement Rena enjoyed while wearing her trousers than she would have in a skirt. Now that he knew she wore them out of fear of catching her skirt on fire again, he could understand what drove her choices.

Nevertheless, he still held out hope of one day seeing her in a soft dress. Maybe one the color of summer peaches that would set off her hair and eyes, or perhaps a buttery yellow gown.

About to fall into the fantasies that had no business being in his head, he shifted his focus back to helping Rena with the task at hand. Last Saturday, she'd helped him select an Alabastine tint in a pastel pink hue that Gabi would love. He'd

already read the instructions three times and mixed the tinted powder with water to create a liquid substance that was more like plaster than paint.

He could slap paint on a wall but waited for Rena's instruction on how to proceed with the Alabastine.

"I've never used anything like this, but it can't be that hard to apply to a wall. If you truly want to help, pick up a paintbrush and get to work. The walls will have to dry before I can get to the fun part." Rena wagged a paintbrush at him, then dipped hers into the tint.

He watched as she stroked the delicate pink tint on the wall. The shrieks of joy that would spill out of Gabi when she discovered her bedroom was pink made him smile as he started on the wall opposite Rena. In an hour, they'd painted all four walls.

"Well, that wasn't too hard," he said, standing back and surveying their work. As light spilled into the room, he could picture his daughter spending many happy hours in her pretty room. Rena had suggested he hang new curtains since the pale green ones on the windows were sun streaked and faded. She'd helped him choose material for curtains which he'd then hired one of the women in town to sew. The white curtains with a flounce that looked almost like a woman's petticoat sweeping from beneath her skirts were perfect.

Thoughts of petticoats, or the lack thereof, drew his gaze over to Rena. He might not like her trousers, but they made it easier for him to admire her long legs. Today, though, she'd

worn a pair of paint-splattered overalls with what he was sure had to be one of Theo's old shirts. She'd belted her waist and rolled up the sleeves and the hem of the overalls, but the clothes still looked far too big on her.

She stood with one hip cocked and her hands at her waist, head tilted to the side, studying the wall where Gabi's bed would go. The white iron bedstead would match their plans for the room.

When Rena had told him she'd purchased a quilt for Gabi's bed as a birthday gift, he'd offered to pay her for it, but she'd looked insulted. "It's *my* gift for her," she'd said and marched off to look at fabric in the mercantile.

"What next?" Josh asked as he picked up the remainder of the tint and the brushes they'd used.

"Pour that tint in a jar to save in case you need to touch up anything later. We'll have to let this dry before I can paint the rest." Rena wiped her hands on a rag. "I'm starving. Do you have anything for breakfast in the house?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Josh had gone to the hotel yesterday and had Edith fill a box with breakfast food along with three lunches. He'd stored the food in the icebox in the kitchen, and it had been a challenge to keep Gabi out of everything, but he was glad he'd managed.

While he stuck the food into the oven to warm, he poured what was left of the pink tint into a quart jar and tightly screwed on the lid, then cleaned the brushes.

By the time he washed his hands, Rena had already set the table and made a pot of coffee.

It should have bothered him she felt so at home in his kitchen, but for some reason, it made him happy to see her bustling around. She filled two cups with coffee and then handed him one.

“I think the food should be warm by now,” she said, setting her cup on the table. From the oven, she lifted out a coffee cake as well as a small pan filled with what Edith had called a breakfast bake.

“I don’t know what this is, but it smells fantastic,” Rena said, placing the bake on the table.

“It’s sliced potatoes with ham and eggs, and it’s all baked together.” Josh pulled out a chair for Rena, and she took a seat without hesitating.

“Thank you,” she said, draping a napkin over her lap.

Josh hated washing and ironing them, but Maxine would rise from the grave and haunt him if he let Gabi wipe her mouth on her sleeve. He’d heard rumors of someone planning to open a laundry service in town. If they did, he intended to be the first customer in line.

Without asking, he took Rena’s hand in his, bowed his head, and offered a brief, heartfelt prayer, giving thanks for the provision of the meal and a new day.

Rena added her amen to his, then helped herself to a serving of the coffee cake that filled the kitchen with the scent of

spices. She cut a serving for him and placed it on his plate before accepting a serving of the egg and ham dish from him.

They remained quiet as they ate, but when their plates were clean, Rena leaned back in her chair and looked around his sunny kitchen. “Your house is so nice, Josh. I like the layout and all the windows. In the winter, especially, the light must be so nice.”

“It is nice, although I feel like we probably go through twice as much wood for the fire and coal for the furnace than we would if we only had a window or two.”

“I think it’s worth it to have all this glorious natural light.” Rena waved her hand around for emphasis. “The house where I grew up was rather dark. I think it belonged to my father’s parents before they passed.”

“Do you have other relatives beyond Theo and Laura?” Josh was fairly certain she didn’t, but he wanted to make sure he hadn’t misunderstood anything.

“No. Just them. We spent so much time together when we were youngsters, they always seemed more like my siblings than anything else. What about you? I haven’t heard you mention any relatives.”

Josh toyed with his nearly empty coffee cup. Rena rose and retrieved the coffee pot, refilling his cup, then adding more to her own.

When she resumed her seat, he cleared his throat. “My parents and older sister died the winter I was fifteen. Many

people took sick and never got well that year. My younger brother ran off the following year when he couldn't take being at the ranch any longer. My father's only brother took over our ranch, claiming we were too young to run things as he squandered our inheritance. He was a terrible person and was especially hard on Zach, my brother. My uncle got into a fight in a saloon over a har ... well, the particulars aren't important, but he died of a gunshot wound to the chest when I was eighteen. There were no other relatives, but I wanted a fresh start. Like you, I sold the land where I was raised and headed out. I ended up working with an old man who had a saddle shop in Olathe, Kansas. I never planned to settle there, but I was fond of him, so I stayed a while to learn everything he could teach me. When he decided his hands were too arthritic to keep his shop open, he sold me his tools at a bargain price, and I headed further west. I was in Baker City trying to decide if I wanted to stay there or go on to Pendleton when a fellow rushed off the Holiday Express line and asked if I wanted to buy a store in Holiday that he hadn't yet opened. The price he named was too good to pass up. I was half afraid when I got here it would be a hoax, but he gave me a key and a letter to give to Henley Holt."

"Henley? How does she come into the story?" Rena asked, leaning toward him, clearly wanting to hear more.

Josh grinned. "I see in all the gossiping you women do on Sunday afternoons, no one has gotten around to sharing the fact that Henley came to Holiday as a mail-order bride. The man who sent for her was the same one who sold me the shop.

He was planning to open a hardware store but struck gold and lit out of town before anyone could rob him. It all worked out for the best because Henley and Doc Evan met on the train bound for Oregon and were in love by the time they got here, or so I've been told."

"Really. Are there other mail-order brides in town?"

A snort escaped before Josh could hold it in. "Oh, let's see. Cora Lee Coleman, Anne Milton, and the banker's wife, to name a few."

Rena's eyes widened. "Now, why haven't the girls told me that?"

"You'll have to ask them that question. From what I know, Cora Lee and Anne were on the same train. It's quite a story, them getting held up at gunpoint by Cora Lee's betrothed; only she didn't know it was him."

"It's a good thing I'll be seeing them tomorrow. They can tell me the whole story."

Josh grinned and finished his coffee. Before he could rise, Rena placed a hand over his. "I'm sorry you lost your parents so young, Josh. I know how hard it is."

His other hand settled on top of hers, and he patted it gently. "I know you do."

Rena looked like she wanted to ask him something, but seemed hesitant.

"Something else you want to know?" he questioned.

“I was just wondering ...” She paused and raised her gaze to his. He saw pain mingling with the questions in her eyes before she continued. “How did you meet your wife?”

Josh moved his hands to his lap and sat back. It didn't seem right to discuss Maxine while holding hands with the woman who'd so recently beguiled him. “Maxine was from a wealthy family. I'd gone back to Kansas when the old fellow I mentioned with the saddle shop passed away. It seemed only right to pay my respects to him. Her family was on what she called a jaunt, taking in the sights from their home in Boston to their destination in San Francisco. Her father had business there, and Maxine and her mother had tagged along. She was an only child. Indulged. Spoiled. Pampered. But I took one look at her and fell in love. She must have felt the same way because we wed the next day. Her father disowned her, told her to never get in touch with them again, and she didn't.”

A sigh worked its way free, and he scrubbed a hand over his face before he spoke again. “I tried to talk her into writing them a letter when Gabi was born, but Maxine refused. She didn't want them to be part of her life just because she'd produced a grandchild. Her reasoning was if they didn't love her enough to accept her and her choices, which included me, then they had no right to be around our daughter. When Maxine passed, I sat down a dozen times to write them a letter, but I just couldn't do it. Maxine wouldn't have wanted me to. It's sad, but Gabi has a set of grandparents she'll likely never know. I'm afraid if they did find out about her, about Maxine

being gone, they'd use their wealth and influence to take her away from me."

"That's a reasonable fear, Josh. If they are the kind of people who could turn their backs on their only child, it's feasible to think they might do something like steal their granddaughter. I think it's wise to protect Gabi. When she's older and able to choose for herself, you might share the information with her, but for now, I would say she's enjoying a happy childhood, and that's far more than many youngsters have."

Josh offered Rena a nod of gratitude. "Thank you for saying that. I try, but it's hard being her only parent, especially now that she asks so many questions and she needs more guidance and direction. It was so much easier when all I had to worry about was keeping her from getting too close to the fireplace or stove and not letting her run out of the yard."

"Just wait until she notices boys are more than playmates."

Josh groaned in mock dismay, and Rena laughed. "I'd love to see the rest of your home if you'd like to show it to me."

"Sure. I'll set the dishes in the sink, then give you the grand tour."

Josh wasn't sure how she managed it, but Rena had a pan full of hot, soapy water in the sink, and began washing the breakfast dishes before he figured out what was happening. He dried while she rinsed, then he led her through his home. It wasn't large, but it was comfortable. Maxine had wanted a formal parlor where she could have tea with her friends. He'd

kept that room much as it had been the day Maxine had taken sick. He'd put away the scarf she'd been knitting and some of the other things that were too painful to see each day, but the parlor always made him think of Maxine, and he largely avoided the room. He and Gabi spent their evenings in the room Maxine had referred to as the library. It had comfortable leather-covered furniture, a fireplace flanked by shelves full of books, and a padded rocking chair near a lamp, where Josh had spent more hours than he could recall holding Gabi.

“Oh, I like this room. It feels homey and inviting.” Rena ran her hand over the top of an oak table and smiled at a photograph of him and Gabi he'd arranged to have taken last summer.

“You've already seen the kitchen.” Josh led the way past the dining room down a short hallway to the bedroom he'd shared with Maxine. He'd stripped off the wallpaper, sold the furniture, and packed up everything that had reminded him of his wife. Gabi would want her mother's things someday, but Josh couldn't abide seeing her clothes in the dresser drawers, or her hairbrush and jewelry box on the vanity. He'd stuffed everything into the trunks in which they'd arrived and hauled them up to the attic.

He'd been married to Maxine about two months when the stationmaster William Masters had sent an errand boy to fetch Josh to retrieve freight that had arrived for him on the afternoon train. He'd gone to the depot, uncertain what had arrived, to find a pile of trunks that had been sent from Boston. Although there was no letter included, he was sure the person

who'd sent Maxine's things had been her mother. In the bottom of the jewelry box, Maxine had found a thousand dollars in gold coins.

They'd used some of that money to buy land and build their home. It was a short walk into Holiday but far enough away that they didn't feel like their neighbors were watching their every move. In fact, the closest neighbor was more than half a mile away.

Josh had been grateful to whoever had sent Maxine's things to her. It had meant so much to his wife to have her books and photographs and her special childhood treasures, many of which now belonged to Gabi.

The bedroom that had once been a haven he'd shared with Maxine now looked rather stark. He'd painted the walls white and purchased a simple oak bed with a matching dresser and wardrobe. There weren't curtains on the windows, rugs on the floor, or paintings on the wall. He figured someday he'd feel like adding touches to the room, but inspiration had yet to strike.

Rena didn't say anything as she glanced at the large bed covered in a plain blue wool blanket. She turned and wandered back down the hall.

Upstairs, he showed her the three empty bedrooms.

Rena stepped into Gabi's room to see if the walls were dry. "Not quite," she said, lifting a finger that had a dollop of pink tint on the end.

“Would you like to go for a ride? We wouldn’t have to go far. Or I could take you into town and show you the shop.”

Rena wiped her finger on her overalls and smiled at him. “I’d love to ride.”

Josh grinned as she preceded him down the stairs. “I’ll saddle two of my horses. That plodding ol’ mule of yours shouldn’t be subjected to more work than necessary.”

Rena opened her mouth, then snapped it shut.

“Can’t argue with logic, can you?” he teased.

She scowled at him but followed on his heels as he headed out to the corral by the barn.

“Hawkins, come on boy,” he called to his horse, then whistled loudly.

“Why did you call him Hawkins?” Rena asked as she stood on the bottom pole and rested her arms on the top.

“My favorite book is *Treasure Island*. Have you read it?”

At Rena’s nod, he continued. “I liked Jim Hawkins’ character. The boy was full of pluck and courage. I owned the mare that birthed this fellow. When he was born, I knew he was going to be full of courage and determination, so I named him Hawkins. He’s turned out to be the best mount I’ve ever had.”

“He is a nice horse,” Rena said, patting Hawkins on the neck. “Now, tell me the names of the others.”

Josh introduced her to the three horses he kept in addition to Hawkins and let her choose which one to ride. He had no doubt about her ability to handle any of them. She retrieved her saddle from the barn, where she'd left it after settling Scout in a stall for the day. Josh used one of his bridles, fearful Rena's worn-out old thing might fall apart and leave her in a precarious position.

He started to give her a hand into the saddle, but one cool glare from her and he stepped back and enjoyed the pure pleasure of watching her move as she swung a long leg over the back of Mari, a high-spirited horse he'd considered selling to someone who wanted to race her.

"Shall we?" he asked after settling into his saddle and turning the horse along a worn path that eventually came out at his neighbor's place.

Josh didn't feel the need to talk as they rode. He enjoyed the companionable, comfortable silence that descended between them.

By the time they returned an hour and a half later, Rena appeared both joyful and relaxed when she swung out of the saddle. She took a step and winced. He was at her side instantly, but she turned away.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, forgetting, for a moment, about her limp. Sometimes she didn't limp at all. Other days, he could tell she worked to hide it.

Her injuries, whether he was supposed to know about them or not, were another reason he detested the fact that she

worked at the mine. How she not only endured the work but seemed to be thriving in it was a baffling matter that made his head ache. Then again, attempts to unravel the mystery that was Rena Burke tended to leave him tied in knots.

Which was why he wanted to do nothing more today than enjoy her company.

“I should go see if the walls are ready to paint,” she said, taking a halting step, then another toward the house.

“Rena, let me help you,” Josh said, offering her his arm.

For a moment, her stubborn chin tilted upward slightly, then she sighed and placed her hand on his arm for support. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, swallowing back a comment about it not being so terrible to accept, or ask for, help. As she limped toward the door, he glanced down at her. “Does it hurt often?”

“Not usually.” She sighed and met his gaze. “I suppose Theo told you everything.”

“No. He only mentioned you’d had an injury but didn’t go into any detail. I don’t need to know more, Rena, but if you want to talk about it, I’m happy to listen.” A voice in the back of his mind shouted *liar*, but he ignored it. No one, especially Rena, would ever know he’d been eavesdropping that day at the Milton’s home.

“I’ll give you the abbreviated version. I was doing laundry outside on a breezy day. My mother and I did that as a source

of income. We used a big kettle over an open fire to boil the water. The wind caught my skirt and blew it into the flames. My dress burned so fast, I wasn't even aware of what had happened until I felt the heat on my leg. My mother tried to save me but ended up burned so badly that she died that night. My right leg and my lower back bear most of the scars."

Without saying a word, Josh wrapped his arms around Rena and gave her a hug. When he pulled back, tears glistened in her eyes. It was the closest he'd seen her to losing control of her emotions, and it encouraged him that perhaps the fortress she'd erected around her heart wasn't completely impenetrable.

"I don't even know words to convey how sorry I am, Rena, that you had to suffer like that. The pain must have been beyond bearing."

She shrugged. "It wasn't something I'd ever want to repeat. I wasn't able to see my injuries for a few months, so I have no idea if they looked as terrible as they felt, but I assume they did. The boy I planned to wed came to see me once, then never returned. He married a girl who was much better suited to him, anyway."

Josh bit his tongue to keep from saying something about George Stafford and his hopes that Henley's gypsy curse had already begun to plague him.

"I think it was fortunate he left when he did. It left you open to new and better possibilities."

Rena eyed him and pushed against his chest, stepping out of his embrace. “And I suppose those possibilities might include a certain saddle shop owner?”

Josh wagged his eyebrows at her and grinned. “There are a few of the female persuasion in town who might even say he’s handsome.”

Rena went up the steps to the back porch, then tossed him a saucy smile over her shoulder. “Gabi and old Mrs. Walters don’t count.”

Josh growled. “That old crone doesn’t have a single tooth left in her head. Why, I ...”

Rena’s laughter rang around him as he followed her inside the house.

Theo stopped by and ate lunch with them after leaving Gabi with Anne Milton. He and Josh went to the cabin, where they planned to work on tearing down the old corral while Rena stayed at the house and painted. She’d tried to explain what she wanted to paint on the wall that would be behind Gabi’s bed, but he couldn’t quite understand what she had planned.

When he and Theo returned later that afternoon, Rena was in the kitchen, cleaning paintbrushes.

“Did you finish?” he asked as he stepped inside.

“Yes. Want to take a look?”

Josh grinned, unable to hide his interest in seeing her handiwork. Theo had said Rena used to paint often when they

were children but had given it up when she'd gotten busy with other pursuits.

"Let's see what you did, cousin," Theo said, following as Rena led the way upstairs to Gabi's room.

She stepped back and swept a hand toward the door with all the theatrics of a circus performer.

Josh walked inside with Theo right behind them. Theo emitted a long, low whistle as they marveled at the scene Rena had painted on the wall.

A border about six inches wide of the pink tint framed the scene. Trees with pink buds seemed to grow out of the corners and spread wispy branches across the top of the wall. Three plump robins rested on the branches. The bottom half of the wall was a mixture of grass and daisies with two rabbits hiding beneath a dark pink and white speckled mushroom. Blue sky with fluffy clouds floating over it completed the picture that was beyond anything Josh could have ever imagined.

Gabi would positively adore every square inch of it.

"Thank you seems inadequate, Rena. This is ..." Josh searched for the right word.

"Stupendous," Theo supplied, resting his hand on Rena's shoulder. "You did good, cousin."



"What would you charge to do something like this at my house?" Anne Milton asked the following afternoon as she, Henley, and Cora Lee studied the painting in Gabi's bedroom.

Rena looked at her friend. “Nothing. You all have been so kind and welcoming to me, I’d be happy to do a painting for you as my thanks for your friendship.”

“Your friendship is a gift to all of us, Rena. I wouldn’t feel right asking you to do something like this and not paying you.” Anne looked to Henley and Cora Lee for agreement.

They both nodded their heads.

“Maybe we could figure out a trade,” Rena suggested.

“A trade? Like what?” Cora Lee asked as she studied the robins perched on the branches above Gabi’s bed.

“Baked goods, or maybe some flower seeds or plants. Theo’s cabin could use some sprucing up around the outside of it, and you all have such lovely yards.” Rena smiled at her friends. “Truthfully, I enjoyed every minute of painting this so it wouldn’t be a hardship on my part to do more projects like it.”

“Let’s discuss it further later,” Henley said, looping her arm around Rena’s. “We should get back to the party.”

“We don’t want to miss any of the fun,” Anne said, leading the way down the stairs.

Rena had been surprised Josh had invited his friends for lunch to celebrate Gabi’s birthday after the church service. Cora Lee had brought a cake and four dozen sugar cookies. Henley had contributed fruity punch and a delicious salad. Anne had made cheesy potatoes. Rena had baked dinner rolls and brought freshly churned butter and a jar of berry

preserves. Theo had helped Josh roast meat in a pit they'd dug on Saturday. The pork, which had cooked all night, was so tender it all but melted on her tongue.

According to Josh, Gabi's shrieks of excitement could probably be heard all the way to Baker City when she awoke that morning and noticed her pink bedroom with the scene on the wall.

Gabi had raced to Rena when she and Theo had arrived at church, thanking her over and over again for making her room beautiful. The little girl had insisted everyone who came for lunch go up to her room and see the "wonderful fairyland" Rena had painted on her wall.

Rena decided then that she'd return another day and paint a little fairy perched on a bud in the tree. It would be fun to add surprises to the painting for Gabi to find now and again.

That evening, after all the other guests had gone, Theo and Rena remained to help Josh clean up. Rena's leg was aching, so she took a seat to rest for a moment in the rocking chair in the library. She'd barely settled back in the chair when Gabi had raced into the room, climbed into her lap, kissed her cheek, and fell asleep.

Content to hold the little one, Rena set the chair in motion and closed her eyes, wishing Gabi and her father belonged to her.



“PAPA, MAY I GO outside to play?” Gabi asked, using her sweetest voice as she skipped into the back room at the saddle shop where her father worked.

She knew he worked hard and people talked about how good he could make saddles and bridles and things out of leather. But sometimes, she just wanted him to close the shop so they could do something fun, like take a picnic or ride Hawkins, or go visit Uncle Theo and Rena.

Gabi gave her father an imploring look. “Please? I’m tired of staying inside.”

She watched as her father straightened from creating a fancy design in the leather that would be used in Marshal Durant’s

new saddle. Papa had been working on it for a while, and it was almost finished.

Her father gave her a long look, one that made her want to squirm, but she tried her best to hold still.

“You may go outside to play as long as you stay close. Don’t go into the street, and don’t run off. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Papa!” Gabi gave him a tight squeeze when he bent over to hug her, then she opened the back door of the shop and raced outside.

She liked the feel of the sunshine on her face and tipped her head back like she’d seen Rena do when they’d gone for walks in the woods by Uncle Theo’s cabin.

Gabi found a stick and practiced writing her letters in the dirt behind her father’s shop. As she wrote her name, she thought about how much she liked Rena. She was kind and funny, and she baked delicious cookies, and she was smart and strong. She could paint beautiful pictures, like the fairyland on her bedroom wall, or even the picture of butterflies and bunnies she’d painted on Gabi’s birthday gift box.

Rena was always patient with Gabi, never rushing her when she wanted to tell a story or look for fairies hiding in the trees.

Tired of writing letters, Gabi tossed aside the stick and wandered around to the front of the saddle shop. She sat on the bench by the door and watched people come and go. She waved to Mrs. Piedmont when she swept the porch outside the

hotel. Gabi thought she was a nice lady, just not quite as nice as Rena.

Then again, Gabi didn't think anyone was as special as Rena.

Although he didn't know she did it, Gabi liked to watch her father when they spent time with Rena. His eyes got bright, and he seemed happier than he was any other time.

Gabi sighed and slid off the bench, walked over to one of the posts that held up the roof of the store's overhang, and wrapped her arms around it. Slowly, she swung back and forth. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember her mother. Her father talked about her sometimes, and Gabi had a picture of her in her bedroom, but the woman with a wide smile and pretty curls in her hair was a stranger to her.

It made Gabi sad she didn't have a mama. She used to wish Mrs. Milton, Mrs. Holt, or Mrs. Coleman could be her mother, but then she wouldn't have her papa. Gabi wouldn't trade him for anyone.

Now that Rena was in Holiday, though, Gabi had decided she liked her best of all the women in town. She knew Rena was different than most mothers. She worked at the mine with Uncle Theo. And she wore trousers instead of skirts. But Gabi didn't care.

All that mattered to her was that Rena always made her feel important and loved, and that was the best thing a mama could do, at least in Gabi's opinion.

Gabi glanced back at the saddle shop. Would her father notice if she went to the cabin to see Uncle Theo and Rena? She could run all the way there and be back before he missed her.

Maybe she should write a note for him to find, just in case he came looking for her, but she didn't have any paper, and she didn't know how to spell all the words she wanted to use.

She went out back and picked up her stick, used the toe of her boot to smooth the dirt, then spelled out Rena. Pleased with her handiwork, she was excited she remembered how to spell her friend's name.

Gabi knew if she followed the road toward the mine, she'd be able to get to the cabin, but she promised Papa to stay out of the street. She ran down the alley and past the park, then kept going until she got to the road to the mine.

"Stay out of the street," she whispered to herself, then she scampered into the trees.

It was a grand thing to go on an adventure, especially one that would take her to Rena.

Gabi walked and walked and was sure she'd come to the stump that looked like a chair that meant Uncle Theo's cabin was nearby, but the trees grew thicker and she couldn't hear the babble of the creek anymore. She changed direction, trying to see the sun through the trees, but she couldn't find it.

Frightened, Gabi turned around and decided an adventure on her own wasn't such a good idea after all. She'd run

straight back to Papa.

Only, when she ran, all she could see were more trees. A shadow moved, and a branch snapped, drawing out Gabi's terrified scream. Maybe all those stories her father told her about goblins and gnomes and trolls and sprites were true. What if they were coming to get her? What if she never saw her papa or Rena again?

Tears streamed down her face as she blindly ran through the woods, desperate to find her way home.



“GABI?” JOSH CALLED AS he stepped out the back door, expecting to see his daughter playing on the step. All was quiet in the alley, so he walked through his shop and opened the front door. “Gabi Jo?” he called, looking up and down the street, even across at the bank, but she was nowhere to be seen.

He closed the shop door behind him and jogged over to the hotel. Sometimes, Gabi liked to sit in the hotel lobby and pretend she was a guest. Edith never seemed to mind.

Josh strode to the front desk, where Edith appeared to be sorting mail. “Afternoon, Mrs. Piedmont. Have you seen Gabi?”

The woman looked up and nodded. “About twenty minutes ago, she was sitting on the bench out front. Don’t tell me you’ve misplaced her again, Joshua.”

It had been a joke between him and the hotel owners for a while that he “misplaced” his daughter. The first time Gabi had wandered into the hotel, Josh had been frantic to find her. He’d dropped to his knees in relief when he’d discovered her sitting in the lobby looking at a child’s picture book Edith had given to her. Rather than make a fuss, Edith had said he must have misplaced her. Anytime Gabi showed up in the hotel and Josh came looking for her, Edith always teased him about misplacing his child.

Today, something seemed off, though. He had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that something terrible had happened to Gabi.

“Twenty minutes ago?” he asked as he edged toward the door. A lifetime of changes could happen in that short amount of time.

“Do you need help looking for her, Josh?” Edith stepped from behind the desk and hurried over to him.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, already opening the door and holding it as Edith sailed outside.

“Go look through your shop again and in the alley. I’ll walk to the end of the street and back. If we don’t find her soon, I think we should enlist more help to search for her. It’s not like Gabi to run off.”

“No, it isn’t, and that’s what has me worried.” Josh crossed the side street to the saddle shop, yanked open the door, and looked in all the spots Gabi normally played or hid. “Gabrielle Joy, if you are playing hide and seek, it’s time to come out!”

When the shop remained silent, he raised his voice again. “Gabi! Come out if you are here.”

He strained to listen for a giggle or any hint of movement that would assure him his daughter was there. Nothing. No sound at all except the frenzied pounding of his heart that was now roaring in his ears. If anything happened to his daughter, he didn’t know how he’d survive. She was precious to him beyond words, and it wasn’t just because she was his last tie to Maxine. Gabi Jo was his joy and the light of his heart.

Grief had nearly crippled him when he’d lost Maxine, but to lose Gabi? He couldn’t even bear to consider it.

“Gabi!” he bellowed, storming through the shop to the back room. He moved aside boxes, upended a crate, then opened the back door and yelled her name again. Edith hurried toward him from the end of the alley.

“Did you find her?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“No one has seen her,” Edith said as she reached him, panting from the exertion of racing up and down the street. “I think you should let Marshal Durant know. If you want help searching for her, I can ask Henley and some of the others to lend a hand.”

“Ask them, please, and thank you, Edith.”

Josh took off at a run for the marshal's office. The door was locked, and no one was there, so he stepped into the stage office across the street and asked them to pass on a message to the marshal if they saw him that Gabi was missing.

Josh had only taken a few steps when he ran into Doctor Holt.

"What's wrong, Josh? You look like something tragic has happened," the doctor said, placing a hand on Josh's shoulder.

"It has. I can't find Gabi. She asked if she could go outside to play. I got busy working, and when I went to check on her, she was gone. Just gone." Josh forked a hand through his hair. "I never thought she'd run off. You don't think someone ..."
He swallowed hard. "You don't think anyone would take her, do you?"

"Let's not jump to any hasty conclusions. You know she loves to play with the Milton boys and my youngsters. Check with Anne while I see if Henley has seen her. I'll meet you back at your shop."

"Okay, Doc. Thanks." Josh ran through town to the Miltons' home, pounded on the door, and impatiently waited for someone to answer it.

Anne opened it with the baby screaming in one arm and Andy clinging to her skirts, sniffing as tears clung to his eyelashes.

"Josh, what's wrong?" she asked and backed up as he took a step inside, looking behind her, expecting—hoping—Gabi

would appear.

“Gabi. Is she here?”

“No. I haven’t seen her today. She wouldn’t come over here by herself anyway. Is she missing?”

Josh was already on his way back outside. “Yes. I can’t find her anywhere. Doc is checking at his home. Edith searched up and down the street. She’s not in the shop.”

“Would she walk home by herself?” Anne asked, bouncing the baby and patting Andy on the head.

“She never has before, but I’ll check there next. I need to find my little girl.”

“I’ll ask R.C. to help you look.” Anne was already shoving Andy inside the house and shutting the door behind her as she picked up her skirts and raced off in the direction of the livery.

Josh felt like he couldn’t breathe as he sprinted to his house, shoved open the door and called his daughter’s name. “Gabi? Answer me if you’re here!”

He took the stairs three at a time, but Gabi wasn’t in her room or anywhere in the house.

Before he lost any more time, Josh saddled Hawkins, strapped on his gun belt, and rode back to his shop.

After barreling through it again, he stepped out back and noticed Gabi’s scratches in the dirt. With his and Edith’s footprints marring the word, he could just make out that she’d spelled Rena.

Surely, the child wouldn't think she could walk out to the cabin. It was only a few miles there, but Gabi had never gone alone, and she'd never walked that far before. Could she even find it?

"She's not at our house, and Henley hasn't seen her," the doctor said as he rounded the corner of the building.

"I think I know where she might have headed." Josh pointed to the letters in the dirt.

"Want me to go with you?" the doctor asked.

"Unless you have a horse saddled and ready to ride, I'm not waiting a minute longer to go find her."

"Go on. I'll get my bag and horse, and then head toward Theo's cabin."

Josh didn't respond. He ran down the side of his building, mounted Hawkins, and tore out of town. As he rode like his life depended on his speed, he prayed nothing had happened to his precious daughter.



“**R**ENA? RENA!” THEO TUGGED on her arm and said something, but Rena couldn’t hear him. The ringing in her ears made it impossible to hear anything else, and her leg ached so badly she was fearful she wouldn’t be able to stand.

One of the other men they worked with had been lured away to a large mining operation in Baker City, so she and Theo were given the arduous task of training a brainless boy to be a powder monkey. The new hire, a cocksure lunkhead named Claude, whom Rena personally referred to as Clod, was going to get them all killed before the day was through.

Harry had spent three days trying to teach the dunce what he needed to know and had finally sent him to observe how she and Theo drilled the holes, set the charges, and checked the fuses. Theo had attempted to explain to Claude for the twentieth time why it was important to give a warning and make sure no one was in the area before detonating explosives. Instead of heeding Theo's advice, the dunce had set off the blast, catching not only her and Theo by surprise but also several miners who weren't completely clear of the blast area.

Rena had been closest to the explosion and had been knocked off her feet. Her head throbbed from where she'd hit it on a rock.

Claude, who was Cade's nephew, stood in the swirling dust and debris, laughing, as though he'd pulled off some hilarious prank rather than nearly killed a dozen people.

Anger surged through her. If she got her hands on that halfwit, he'd rue the day he'd set foot at the Gilded Pine Mine. Rena didn't care if he was related to the owner, he had no right to act like people's lives were expendable.

"Rena?" Theo shouted as he helped her to stand.

She thought he asked if she could walk, and she put weight on both feet. Pain clawed up her leg to her back, but she ignored it and nodded her head, leaning on Theo for support.

Claude disappeared from view, which was for the best. By the time they made it outside the mine, Cade, Ike, and Harry were there, along with half the mining camp. Thankfully, the

ringing in her ears was receding, and she could hear most of the conversations buzzing around her.

Cade strode over to them wearing a scowl. “What happened?” He looked from Theo to Rena, and she could see in his gaze he thought she’d done something wrong.

Theo looked around and tipped his head toward Claude as he sat on a stump a few feet away, picking his fingernails with the blade of a knife.

“He nearly got us all killed!” Theo pointed to Claude, then to Rena. “I told him to wait to detonate the charge, but he did it anyway. Rena got the worst of it, but there were several men who barely made it clear.”

Cade looked at Rena, then at his nephew. “Claude, would you care to explain your actions?”

“Aw, Uncle Cade, what’s it matter? They’re just a bunch of dumb ol’ miners. Nobody cares if they get blown to bits, especially her. She don’t belong at the mine anyway. Women like that should have a job at the Ruby Palace in town. I’d pay a day’s wages to take her upstairs and —”

Rena didn’t know what came over her. Whether it was the stress of handling the dynamite, nearly being blown to pieces by the idiot on the stump or Claude’s blatant disregard for everyone, but she closed the distance between them in two long strides, drew back her fist, and hit Claude so hard, he somersaulted off the back of the stump.

The miners around them cheered, although Theo looked disappointed that she was the one to knock Claude off his pedestal instead of him.

She turned to Cade and fisted her hands on her hips. "I'm not one bit sorry for doing that, sir, and if you want to fire me, go right ahead. I refuse to work with a spoiled, arrogant child who is endangering the lives of everyone here."

"Well, Burke, to tell you the truth, if you hadn't punched him in his pie hole, I might have done the job myself," Cade said, striding over to his nephew and yanking him to his feet by the back of his collar. "Go home to your mama, Claude. If I ever see you around here again, I'll shoot first and ask questions later."

"But Uncle Cade, Daddy said if I didn't stay up here a month, he'd cut off my allowance and kick me out of the house." Claude pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his bloody nose.

"Well, I guess you better figure out where you're going to live on your way home. If you hurry, you can catch the afternoon train back to Baker City."

"But, Uncle Cade," Claude whined.

Cade pulled back his fist and gave his nephew a threatening glare. "Go now, or you'll have a black eye to go with that bloody nose and cut lip."

Claude took off running for the corrals.

“Somebody saddle a horse for that fool, or he’ll fall off before he ever makes it out of the camp.” Cade turned from watching his nephew’s departure to Rena. “Are you hurt, Burke?”

“I don’t think so, sir, but I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“Marshall, take Burke home. I’ll see you both tomorrow.” Cade looked around and waved a hand toward the mine. “The rest of you, get back to work!”

“Thank you, sir,” Rena said, giving her employer an appreciative nod before turning toward the corral. Her leg ached too much to disguise her limp, so she didn’t try. Suddenly exhausted, all she wanted to do was go home, take a bath in the creek, and go to sleep.

“Sit here while I get Scout and Thomas,” Theo said, gently pushing her down on the stump where Claude had so recently sat.

“I can help,” she said but didn’t make an effort to move.

“Sit. Stay.” Theo grinned at her. “But if you start barking like a dog, you are on your own.”

Rena rolled her eyes at his teasing, realizing her eyeballs might be the only thing that didn’t currently ache. “Just hurry it up, please. I’d like to go home.”

She watched Theo jog to the corral, then felt someone beside her. She glanced up at Harry as he studied her. “You are one of a kind, Rena Burke. I’m right proud to know you. If I was thirty years younger, I’d sweep you right off your feet.”

Rena laughed. "If I were forty years older, I might just let you."

Harry grinned and patted her on the back, then ambled off in the direction of the dynamite shack.

Theo led Scout over to the stump and gave her a measured look. "Do you need help getting on him?"

Rena surprised both of them when she said yes.

Theo helped her to stand on the stump, then positioned Scout so she could step into the saddle without putting any pressure on her right leg.

"Let's go home," she said, turning Scout and heading out of the camp. They weren't even a mile down the mountain when they passed Claude. He was doing his best to stay on the back of the orneriest horse they had at the mine. Rena had watched the beast buck off any number of experienced riders. She figured before five minutes passed, Claude would be on the ground and forced to make the rest of the trip to Holiday on foot.

She and Theo were almost to the path that led to the cabin when a rider raced toward them. She recognized Josh and tossed Theo a concerned look. It wasn't like him to be riding up the mountain like he was being chased by a pride of blood-thirsty lions. Something had to be amiss for him to ride at a breakneck speed, especially in the middle of the afternoon.

"What's wrong?" Theo hollered as Josh approached them.

“Gabi’s missing,” Josh blurted, sounding out of breath. “Is she at the cabin?”

“Let’s go see. We were just heading there.”

Theo and Josh rode ahead. Rena got to the cabin in time to see Theo run out the door and head toward the creek, calling Gabi’s name. Josh raced out of the barn and then seemed to stop, immobilized by fear.

Rena swung off Scout and limped over to him. “What happened? Why did you think Gabi would be here?”

“She went out to play, then I couldn’t find her. People are searching all over town. She’d scratched your name in the dirt, and I rode out here in hopes of finding my baby girl. Rena, I can’t lose her. I just can’t.”

Josh took a shuddering breath, then looked at Rena, noticing her disheveled state. The furrow across his brow deepened. “What happened to you? Are you hurt?”

Touched by his concern in the midst of his desperation to find Gabi, she stared at him, awed by this caring man.

Josh took her arms in his hands and moved a step closer. “Are you hurt, Rena? You’re bleeding.” He brushed a finger along her temple where she hadn’t even realized she’d sustained a cut.

“I’m okay. We had a problem at the mine with an explosion, but no one was injured. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.” Josh cupped her cheek. “Why don’t you stay here in case Gabi somehow finds her way to the

cabin?”

“I couldn’t sit still knowing our precious girl is lost. Give me a minute to change out of these filthy clothes, and I’ll help look for her.” Rena turned toward the cabin and made her way inside. She washed her hands and face, then pulled on a clean shirt and pair of trousers. She buckled her gun belt on, filled a tin with food and a canteen with water, grabbed her saddlebags and a jacket, then headed back outside. Josh was riding away from the cabin into the woods, while Theo strode toward her.

“I told him to wait, but he’s beyond listening to reason. I think one of us should ride back to Holiday on the road, and the other two can travel through the woods.” Theo took the saddlebags from her and settled them on the back of Scout, then steadied her as she swung up into the saddle with a groan. “You should really stay here and rest.”

“I can’t rest while Gabi is lost. Thomas is far faster than Scout. Why don’t you ride on the road? If you don’t see Gabi, you can let those searching in town know we need more help out here.”

“Are you sure you won’t get lost in the woods?” Theo asked as he mounted his horse.

“I know the creek runs right by the road just before you get to Holiday. If I get lost, I’ll follow it. Besides, it isn’t more than three miles from here to town, less through the woods.”

“True, but it might as well be a hundred for a little girl lost in the trees.”

Rena nodded, then turned Scout to follow in the direction Josh had gone.

“Be safe, Rena!” Theo called as he set out toward the road.

She guided the mule forward, trying not to follow the exact direction Josh had ridden. Every few feet she called Gabi’s name, hoping the child could hear one of them. With her ears still ringing, she feared Gabi could yell in response and she’d miss her. Maybe she should have been the one to ride into town.

Feeling helpless, Rena decided things were not hopeless. In the past few weeks, she’d moved past her anger at God and realized He’d never left her side. She’d been the one who’d strayed from Him. Now that she’d embraced her faith and renewed her hope, she never intended to let anything separate her from her loving Father again.

As Scout made his way through the trees, Rena prayed. She prayed for Gabi to stay safe, and for one of them to find her before any harm befell the child. She prayed for Josh to have strength for whatever the hours ahead might bring. She prayed for wisdom and direction, pleading with God to lead them to Gabi.

Rena stopped to let Scout drink from the creek and looked around. A splash of color on a bush caught her eye. She rode over to where a piece of pink cloth dangled from a branch. It looked like fabric from one of Gabi’s dresses.

“Gabi! Please, sweetheart? If you can hear me, answer. Gabi!” Rena stood in the stirrups, ignoring the pain searing up

her leg, and looked around, straining to hear any sound. She searched for footprints but didn't see any.

Rena drew in a calming breath and tried to think like a five-year-old lost in the woods. Gabi was smart. But what if she got turned around? Which direction would she head? If she couldn't see the sun, and she couldn't hear the gurgle of the creek, what would she do?

She turned Scout to the east and rode away from the water. She'd gone about a hundred yards when she found another piece of fabric caught on a thorny bush. Either Gabi was leaving a trail on purpose, or the little girl was too distraught to know she was leaving behind pieces of torn fabric.

"Gabi!" Rena yelled into the stillness around her.

She rode several yards, stopped and called for the child, looked for more fabric, then rode on again. After an hour of not finding more fabric or clues, Rena turned and headed back toward the creek. Evening was approaching. Once the sun set, they'd have to either get lanterns and torches or wait until morning.

Rena couldn't imagine the terror of being Gabi—so little and alone—in the dark woods at night. She tried to recall if it was trolls or sprites Josh had convinced Gabi lived in the woods, just waiting to eat lost children.

"Stupid man," she muttered to herself, then sighed. Josh had only been trying to protect his daughter. He wasn't stupid, just cautious. Caring. Wonderful.

Rena had arrived at several conclusions in the past few hours. One was that she would finish out the week at the mine, but she was through working there. Her nerves couldn't take it any longer. She didn't care if she had to wash dishes at the hotel restaurant, anything would be better than going deep into the mine with the ever-present fear some nincompoop might blast her to smithereens, whether intentionally or on accident.

The second thing she'd concluded was that she loved Josh. In the moment when the blast had detonated and she'd feared she might die, she realized she'd regret never telling him how she felt about him. She loved him with her whole heart, and whether that love was returned or not, she needed to share her heart with him. Josh was not just her friend, but also the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

It had been so easy for her to pretend she and Josh and Gabi were a family on any number of occasions but especially when they'd been at Josh's home. Rena loved the sun-drenched house and the beautiful views and the fact that two of the four people she loved most in the world lived there.

She'd also concluded she loved Gabi like the child were her own. If anything happened to her, Rena didn't know how she'd go on. Gabi was bright and sweet and full of life. It amazed Rena to watch her learn and grow. The thought of never again seeing the little girl who brought so much joy and light into Rena's life made her want to sob, but instead, she renewed her prayers for Gabi's safekeeping.

“Where are you, Gabi Jo?” Rena asked aloud as she and Scout rode around a bend. Another scrap of pink fabric caught on a small pine tree caught her gaze. Rena looked around. “Gabi! Gabi Jo? Where are you? Gabi!” she screamed as loud as she could.

Scout’s ears twitched and he turned his head to the south. Rena clucked her tongue and urged him forward. “Gabi?” she yelled again and again.

“Rena!” a little voice finally called from a distance.

“Keep yelling, Gabi. I’m coming!” Rena wanted to force Scout into a gallop, but the mule tripping over a tree root and breaking a leg or her neck certainly wouldn’t help Gabi. “Where are you, Gabi?”

“I’m here! I’m here!” Gabi screamed. Rena rode around a boulder and saw Gabi running toward her from the woods to the east.

“Oh, my darling girl,” Rena stepped out of the saddle, dropped to her knees, and pulled Gabi to her, showering the child’s face with kisses as she held her tight. “Oh, Gabi. We were so, so worried about you. Are you hurt?”

“I fell down twice and tore my dress,” Gabi sobbed. “Will Papa be mad I tore it, Rena?”

“This one time, I don’t think he’ll care, sweetheart. Let’s get you back to town. Your papa is frantic to find you.” Rena kissed Gabi’s cheek one more time, then stood and mounted Scout, swallowing down the groan of pain when she leaned

over and lifted Gabi to sit in front of her in the saddle. “Why did you run away?”

“I didn’t run away. I was bored at the shop and went outside to play, then I thought how nice it would be to see you, Rena. I like to be with you. I wish you could be my mommy and we’d always be together. I left Papa a note in the dirt. I wrote your name all by myself. Papa told me not to play in the street, so I walked in the trees, and then I got lost, and I was scared, Rena. I fell in the creek and got wet. I’m cold and hungry. I just want to go home to my house and my pretty room, and go to sleep, and never, ever leave my papa again.”

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s okay. I’ll get you home, and you can have a warm bath and a hot meal, and everything will be just fine. I promise.”

Gabi sniffled, wiped her nose on her dirty skirt, then leaned back against Rena with a sigh. “I knew you’d find me, Rena. I just knew it. I prayed and prayed for you to come, and then I heard you call for me. I’m glad you found me.”

“I’m glad I found you too, Gabi, but you have to promise you’ll never go off on your own like that again. Your poor papa is worried sick about you. We all were. He thought something terrible had happened to you.”

“I was afraid a troll would come eat me. Do you think we’ll get back to town before one finds us?” Gabi turned her little face upward and gave Rena a wary look.

“We’ll make it before the trolls come out.” Rena bent down and kissed Gabi’s dirty nose, then urged Scout onward.

Dusk had settled when they rode out of the woods and reached the road. They'd just made it to the outskirts of town when a group of riders headed toward them.

"I found her!" Rena yelled and heard a whoop go up from several of the men.

One rider raced ahead of the others. Rena pulled back on the reins as Josh jumped off Hawkins before the horse came to a full stop. He reached up for Gabi and hauled her into his arms, holding her close as Gabi burst into tears and wrapped her arms around his neck, sobbing about trolls and sprites and her ruined dress and how much she hated the woods.

Rena was shocked when Josh shifted Gabi to one arm and used the other to encircle her waist and lift her off Scout. He kissed her cheeks before he hugged her. "Both of my girls are safe," he whispered in her ear, then leaned back. "Thank you for bringing Gabi home to me."

"You're welcome. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to her."

"I would die if anything happened to either of you," Josh said, then offered the group of riders a look of relief as they reached them.

"Gabi is safe," he announced, smiling at their friends.

"Then let's get you home, little miss," Theo said, taking Gabi from Josh and settling her in front of him on the saddle before he turned Thomas around and headed into town.

Josh waited until the other riders joined Theo before hugging Rena again. “Thank you, Rena.”

She nodded, overcome with weariness beyond anything she’d ever experienced. Although she tried to keep them open, her eyes slid shut, and she felt herself falling.

When she opened them, nothing looked familiar, until she recognized the floral wallpaper in one of the spare bedrooms at Josh’s house. She started to sit up, but a hand on her shoulder held her in place.

She looked up to see Josh sitting beside the bed.

“Hi, sleepyhead.”

“Hi,” she whispered. Her mouth felt like she’d been chewing cotton, and her ears were still ringing.

Josh held a glass of cool water to her lips. After taking several sips, she rested back against the pillows. “How did I get here?”

“Well, when you fainted in my arms, I hollered at Doc to meet us here at the house. He thinks you need to rest for a few days. I happen to agree. Theo thinks you are completely and utterly exhausted, which is the diagnosis Henley, Anne, and Cora Lee have all shared.”

“How’s Gabi? Is she unharmed?” Rena started to sit up again but felt too tired to do more than look toward the doorway.

“Other than a scraped knee and a few stickers in her hands, and her ruined dress, which is what she talks about most, she’s

well. I swear, between the two of you, you took ten years off my life yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Rena glared up at Josh. “How long have I been here?”

“Getting close to twenty-four hours. Doc said to let you sleep as long as you would. Like I said, Henley, Cora Lee, and Anne have all been by to check on you. You’ve been asleep since I carried you in here. Henley cleaned you up, and Anne brought over the nightgown you’re wearing.” Josh brushed a lock of hair away from her face. “Gabi slept like a log last night after she had a bath and some soup Edith delivered for supper. She was up and going this morning like nothing had happened. She’s been asking about you, though, Rena. If you don’t mind, I’ll bring her in to see that you’re awake.”

“I’d like that, Josh.” Rena fought to keep her eyes open. They felt so heavy, now that she knew she could rest. “I truly would have done anything to bring her home.”

Moisture filled his gorgeous blue eyes, and he lifted Rena’s hand in his, tenderly kissing the bruises on her knuckles from where she’d slugged Claude. Instead of letting her hand go, he held it to his cheek and leaned closer to her. “That’s one of the many reasons I love you, Renatta Burke. When you feel strong enough to get out of this bed, I have a few questions for you.”

Rena smiled. “I might have a few answers to those questions, Josh. Now, go get our girl so I can give her a kiss and hug before I fall asleep again.”



JOSH MADE HIS WAY upstairs on silent feet. Theo was sitting at the kitchen table, drawing pictures with Gabi. Cora Lee had sent in food with Jace, who was standing in the parlor talking to R.C. Milton.

It seemed the good folks of Holiday were ensuring he and Rena had adequate chaperones while she was under his roof. For the past three days, it seemed like a never-ending stream of visitors had been in and out of his home. Earlier that morning, the owner of the Gilded Pine Mine had even stopped in and left a bouquet of wildflowers for Rena along with her last week of pay.

Theo had taken Cade up to speak to Rena. Josh didn't know what was said, but Theo had later informed him Rena would no longer be working at the mine.

That tidbit of news had made Josh quite pleased. He'd accepted the fact that if he wanted Rena in his life, then he had to take her exactly as she was, and that included her work at the mine if that's what she wanted to do.

The day Gabi had disappeared, he'd spent that night sitting up, alternating between Gabi's room and the room where he'd carried Rena when she'd fainted in his arms. He'd been terrified she was hurt, but Doc had checked her over and said he thought she'd pushed her body beyond endurance.

Rena was one who would always push limits, do the unexpected, and keep her spirit free.

Josh had realized in the midnight hours as he'd sat beside her bed, watching her sleep, that it wasn't up to him—to anyone—to change Rena or to try to tame her. She was as wild as the wind, and that was just one of the multitude of reasons he loved her.

When Theo explained what had transpired at the mine the day Gabi had disappeared, Josh had to sit down before his legs collapsed beneath him. Not only had he come close to losing his daughter, but he'd also nearly lost Rena. The thought of either tragedy was more than he could bear.

He loved them both fiercely and completely and needed them in his life.

Rena had taught him so much about acceptance, forgiveness, hope, and love. They were lessons he'd never forget, not as long as they lived.

And he hoped they'd live many, many happy years together.

All he needed to do was convince Rena to marry him.

He stopped at the open bedroom door, pleased to see her up and dressed in the clothes Theo had retrieved for her from the cabin yesterday. She stood by the window, looking out at the beautiful June day, with that glorious mass of hair spilling over her shoulders and down her back. Rena might not be like any other woman he'd ever met, but he loved her all the more for it.

"It's good to see you out of bed, Rena," he said, leaning against the wall just inside the door.

She glanced at him over her shoulder and smiled. "It's good to be out of bed. I believe you said when I was strong enough to get out of bed, you had some questions for me."

"I did say that, didn't I?" Josh pushed away from the wall and walked across the room. When he reached Rena, he took both of her hands in his, then kissed her cheek. "You are so beautiful, Rena."

She blushed and tried to look away, but he caught her chin in his hand and gently turned her face until her gaze met his. "My first question is do you love Gabi?"

She gaped at him. "How can you even ask that? Of course, I love Gabi. I couldn't love her more if she were my own

daughter. She's an amazing little girl, and I'm grateful she holds a measure of affection for me."

Josh grinned. "Oh, it's not just affection, Rena. She loves you—deeply. Almost as much as I do. Love you, I mean."

At Rena's look of surprise, Josh continued. "That brings me to my second question. Do you love me?"

"Josh, I ..." Rena drew in a deep breath and her shoulders straightened, as though she steeled herself for his reaction. "I do love you, Josh Gatlin, with all my heart. I have from the first moment I met you, when you came rushing at me like you'd rip me apart until you figured out Gabi was safe in my presence. You are such a good father, and it is one of the many reasons I love you."

"That's good, Rena, because I love you, and I don't want to waste another day apart. Unless you put me out of my misery, my house is going to overflow with nosy, bossy people who seem to feel it is their duty to give me detailed instruction in how to properly court you while serving as unwanted and unnecessary chaperones."

Mirth sparkled in her eyes, and Josh relaxed. "If you want a long courtship, I'll do it. But if you hold any interest in marrying me sooner, I wouldn't complain a bit."

"Tell me more about the marrying you sooner plans." Rena took a step closer to him and his heart kicked into a double rhythm.

“I love you, Renatta Liliana Burke, with all my heart. You are a breath of fresh air, a sunbeam on a cloudy day, and the happiness in my smile. You make me laugh and challenge me, and sometimes you’re thoroughly exasperating, but I love each facet that makes you so uniquely you. I know life together won’t always be easy, but I’ll do my best to make it fun and full of joy, to give you security but also freedom. I don’t want to change you, Rena. Not at all. I just want to love you. Whatever it is you want to pursue in life, I won’t object, even if that means you continue to work at a mine. You’re an amazing, intelligent, caring, capable, courageous, and passionate woman. It would be my great honor and pleasure to be your husband if you think you could tolerate being married to me. My last question of the day is this: will you marry me, Rena? Will you be my bride?”

“Yes, Josh. I’ll marry you, but only if you are absolutely certain this is what you want.” She swept a hand down the length of her. “I’m likely to continue wearing trousers most of the time, and I can’t promise that I won’t be opinionated, stubborn, and downright argumentative when I think I’m right. I’m not a woman you’ll find perched in the parlor embroidering linens if I can be outside doing something, but I will love you until my last breath and do everything in my power to make you and Gabi happy.”

“That’s all I could hope for Rena. You are an unexpected blessing, and I will give thanks every single day for the privilege of spending my life with you.”

“Just as I’m thankful for you and Gabi, Josh. I came here so broken by my past. Your love has helped me to heal and look forward to the future. I still have a ways to go, but I’d sure like it if I could finish this journey with you.”

He smirked as he settled his hands at her waist and lowered his head toward hers. “Does this mean you’ll give up shooting holes in your love targets?”

“I’d say love was right on target when it came to meeting you.” Her hands slid up his arms, and he felt her fingers brush along the back of his neck. Goose bumps broke out on his skin, and he looked forward to Rena becoming his wife. Whether she realized it or not, she was a very desirable woman.

“I think this is the part where you kiss me senseless,” she whispered, raising up on her toes so her lips almost touched his.

Their breath mingled along with their hearts as Josh wrapped her in his arms and his love.

“I reckon it is.”



“RENA! A BOX CAME for you today,” Theo hollered as he opened the cabin door and stepped inside.

She peeked over the edge of the loft as Theo set a large box on the table.

“How did you get it? Weren’t you at the mine all day?”

Theo removed his hat and hung it on a peg by the door. “We finished up early this afternoon. Cade asked me to drop some letters off at the post office. Mr. Masters caught me and said this box for you arrived on the afternoon train.”

Rena hurried down the ladder and over to the table. “Who do you think sent it?”

Theo held out his pocket knife to her. “Cut the string and find out.”

Rena would have normally saved the string, but she was too excited to pluck at the knot. She sliced it in two, then worked the lid off the box. An envelope with her name written across it rested on layers of tissue paper. She opened the flap and took out a sheet of thick parchment.

“It’s from Maggie,” she said, glancing at Theo, then reading aloud the note from her friend.

Dear Rena,

We were thrilled to hear of your upcoming nuptials to Mr. Gatlin and thank you for the wedding invitation. We do plan to be there Saturday for the ceremony. I wanted to send this ahead in hopes you might find it useful for your wedding. If you already have a dress, don’t feel obligated to wear this one.

Before you worry about paying for it, it’s a gown I had on display last year. Due to sun damage, I can’t in good faith sell it, but I think you’ll find it suits you. If it needs any alterations, I can make a few on Saturday when we arrive. Again, don’t feel like you need to wear it if you already have something planned.

Also, please consider the other garments a wedding gift from your Baker City friends.

Much love and many congratulations!

Sincerely,

Maggie

“Since you were planning to borrow a dress from Cora Lee for the wedding, let’s see what Maggie sent.” Theo leaned over Rena’s shoulder as she lifted out the layers of tissue to reveal a beautiful ivory silk dress. Trimmed in exquisite lace along the bustline and below the elbow-length full sleeves, the gown was stunning. She lifted it from the box and held it up, to better examine the lovely creation.

Theo whistled softly. “Now I’m gonna wish I were the one walking you down the aisle instead of standing next to Josh so I could get a better view when his eyeballs pop right out of his head.”

Rena laughed. “He won’t be that shocked to see me in a dress, will he?”

“He might be.” Theo pointed to the box. “What else is in there?”

Rena carefully set the wedding gown on the tissue she’d taken from the box, then lifted out the skirt that matched the sailor-style shirtwaist she’d purchased from Maggie as well as a plain brown skirt that would go well with her other shirtwaists. She had a feeling she would soon be adding more skirts and dresses to her wardrobe.

She turned her attention back to the box. Beneath the skirts were petticoats and a few lacy undergarments, which Theo didn’t need to see. She set the skirts back in the box, then

picked up the wedding dress again. She held it to her and swayed to make the skirt swish.

Theo grinned. “Now, you and Gabi can be princesses together.”

“Yes, we can. Only, I get to marry my prince on Saturday.”

Theo pointed to the gown. “Does this mean you’re giving up your trousers?”

“No, but I will start wearing dresses again, at least on Sundays and when I go to tea with Henley, Anne, and Cora Lee.”

“I think it’s nice you’ve made good friends here in Holiday.” Theo waited until she returned the dress to the box to give her a hug. “I’m happy for you, Rena, but the cabin is going to seem so quiet without you here.”

“You’ll be fine, just like you were before I barged into your life.” She patted his shoulder, then moved a step back. “Besides, you know you are welcome at Josh’s house, I mean our house, anytime.”

“I do know that and appreciate the invitation. I’ll be sure to drop by at the most inopportune time, like right before dinner, or Gabi’s bedtime. Maybe I can bring some of your miner friends to visit. Poor old Harry moped around all last week when he found out you won’t be returning to the mine.”

Rena smiled at her cousin’s teasing. “I’m sure he’ll get over it. I’m just glad Cade understood why I couldn’t go back to the mine and has been so kind about everything.”

“He did understand. He’s also quite proud that he owns and operates the only mine in the region to have hired a female powder monkey who also punched a fellow so hard in the nose, he flipped backward right off his seat. By the time that story makes it through all the mining camps, you’ll be seven feet tall and will have fought an invading army with one hand tied behind your back.”

Laughter spilled out of her as Theo pretended to punch an unseen foe.

“I’m going to miss your unique sense of humor, cousin.” Rena kissed Theo’s cheek.

“And I’m going to miss your strange ways, cousin, but I really am so happy you and Josh are getting married. I think you bring out the best in each other.”

“We do,” Rena agreed.



Saturday morning, Rena walked down the aisle of the church on the arm of Cade. He’d offered to escort her, and she’d gratefully accepted, pleased to remain friends with the man who’d given her a chance at work when she’d had few options open to her.

As she strolled toward Josh in the glorious gown Maggie had given her, Rena didn’t think Theo was that far off in his assessment of her husband-to-be’s reaction.

Shock at seeing her in not just a dress, but a finely crafted wedding gown, with her hair fashioned into a profusion of curls and flowers pinned above her right ear, Josh's blue eyes widened to the size of saucers. When he recovered himself a moment later, a huge grin creased his face as he watched her float down the aisle.

Gabi raced ahead of Rena and Cade with more enthusiasm than decorum, tossing flower petals all along the aisle and on anyone too close to her flinging aim.

Theo took Gabi's hand and held it as she stood between him and Josh. Rena smiled at her cousin who had given her a place to call home when she'd most needed it, then she handed her bouquet to Laura with a kiss on her cheek.

There was no one else she wanted to stand with her as she married Josh, and Laura had eagerly agreed to make the trip to Oregon. Laura planned to stay a week in Holiday, spending precious time with her brother and getting to know Gabi before heading back to Texas. She and Theo had offered to keep an eye on Gabi while Josh whisked Rena away to Baker City for a few days at the luxurious hotel located there before they returned to Holiday to begin their life together.

"You are so very beautiful, Rena," Josh whispered in her ear as he took her hand when Cade presented her to him.

"Thank you. You're quite handsome, sir," she said in a hushed tone, although she meant each word, then had to swallow a laugh when Cade offered Josh a menacing scowl.

“Treat her like a queen, or you’ll answer to me,” Cade threatened in a low tone that somehow carried throughout the stillness of the congregation.

Josh merely nodded to the man, but Gabi leaned forward and tugged on Cade’s hand. “I’m going to be a princess. If my new mama is a queen, then is my papa the king?”

Cade winked at her and took his seat beside Ike, Harry, and a few of the other miners who’d been invited to the wedding.

Pastor Ryan performed the ceremony. It seemed to happen all too quickly, and before Rena quite realized it, the time had come for Josh to kiss her.

Gabi wedged her way between Josh and Rena and stared up at her father. “You have to kiss her right on the lips, Papa,” she instructed. “Just like the princess in my storybook.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Gabi Jo.” Josh gently nudged his daughter aside, then gave Rena a kiss that made her knees quiver and her heart flutter in her chest. When she felt breathless and nearly dizzy from the exchange, Josh pulled back and offered her a teasing wink.

Together, they turned and faced the church full of their friends. As they walked down the aisle, Rena thought of the pistol Laura had sent to her. At the time, it had made her hopping mad.

Now, not even a full two months later, as her husband held her hand in his and their daughter skipped along behind them,

Rena knew true love had found its mark. Her heart had been its target all along.

At the reception held in the yard at R.C. and Anne's home, Rena stepped beside Laura and settled a hand around her cousin's waist. "Thank you again for being here, Laura. It means the world to me."

"I wouldn't have missed your wedding for anything." Laura stood on her tiptoes and pretended to search the crowd. "Do you think there's a girl here for Theo?"

Rena laughed. "Are you going to give up your current profession and turn into a matchmaker?"

"No, but it's fun to tease." Laura kissed her cheek. "I'm so pleased for you and Josh. He's a wonderful man, and so handsome too. You are getting a bonus with his little girl. Gabi is a pure delight."

"She is a sweetheart, and I'm so very blessed to have both Gabi and Josh to love." Rena felt tears well in her eyes but did her best to blink them away. "I'm grateful you didn't give up on me, Laura, and for every prayer you uttered on my behalf."

"Of course, Rena. I only wanted you to be happy and to realize your scars wouldn't keep true love from finding you." Laura hugged her close, then pulled back with a grin. "Did you get a chance to shoot the pistol I sent to you?"

"I did. It felt like Annie was right there shooting it with me. Don't you want to keep the pistol?"

“No. Like I told Tessa, I’ll find my fella the old-fashioned way. However, I’m pleased to transport it back to Texas for you. Are you certain your friend Mrs. Dinwiddie knows to make arrangements to get it from me?”

“Yes. I sent a letter this morning to her with the details. She was one of the few people who were kind to me after the accident and didn’t pass judgment on my choice of attire. I think she’ll know exactly who to give the pistol to next.”

“That’s wonderful. It’s important you pass on the good fortune the pistol could bring to another.” Laura leaned closer. “I’m glad you let me read the note you added to the letter in the case.”

“I think Tessa began a tradition. It will be wonderful if all the brides who have possession of the gun and find love will add to it.” Rena thought of the words she’d penned that morning before she packed the gun case into a box, ready for Laura to take back to Texas.

Rena Burke wed Josh Gatlin on June 2, 1894, in Holiday, Oregon – When my trousers and target practice didn’t send him running, I knew true love had hit the perfect target for me.

“What are you girls doing?” Josh asked as he walked up behind them. Laura sucked in a startled gasp, while Rena slipped her arm around Josh’s waist and smiled up at him. The love in his eyes reflected what Rena was sure shone in hers.

“Laura and I were discussing Annie Oakley’s pink-handled pistol and the note I added to the letter in the gun case.”

Josh grinned. “Did you mention drawing hearts on targets to keep love at bay? Or maybe you stated that I ran as fast as I could to avoid romance, but you stampeded ol’ Scout right over my heart and I couldn’t get away.”

“Scout couldn’t run anywhere if his life depended on it, and you know it. However, I do thank you for the beautiful new bridle you made for me as a wedding gift and the promise of a new saddle to use on Mari. Scout won’t complain at all to be able to retire from being ridden all the time,” Rena said, leaning against her husband.

Husband.

She was really and truly married to a handsome, gentle, kind man who’d already brought more joy into her life than she’d imagined possible. Rena looked up at him and sighed contentedly, anticipating the blissful years that would fill their future together. “Is it time for us to go?”

“Only if you want to catch the train this afternoon.”

Laura gave Rena a nudge forward. “Go say your goodbyes. I’ll let Maggie and Ian know you’re ready to leave since they’ll be traveling with you.”

Rena and Josh found Gabi trying to talk the Milton brothers into holding a mock wedding ceremony. Mike refused to be the groom, and Gabi insisted Andy was too young for such a big responsibility.

“We’re leaving, Gabi Jo. You behave yourself while we’re gone.” Josh lifted his daughter and kissed her cheek, then gave her a tight hug before passing her over to Rena.

Gabi wrapped her arms tightly around Rena’s neck and whispered in her ear. “I’m so glad you’re my mama now. I love you.”

Rena again blinked back tears. Gabi had called her mama a few times, and each instance had made her heart feel as though it would overflow with love. She knew it wouldn’t be easy, but she greatly looked forward to being Gabi’s mother. “I love you, sweetheart. Be good for Uncle Theo and Aunt Laura while we’re gone.”

“I will!” Gabi noisily smacked Rena’s cheek, then wiggled down and ran off to find the Milton brothers, who had taken advantage of the goodbyes to disappear.

After shaking hands with nearly everyone there and thanking R.C. and Anne for hosting the reception, Josh and Rena climbed into the large carriage R.C. had provided from the livery. Maggie and Ian, who were also heading back to Baker City, joined them. Theo drove the two couples to the depot and gave Rena a parting hug that nearly squeezed the air from her lungs.

“Happiness always, to you both,” Theo said in a whisper before he let her go. He pumped Josh’s hand, tipped his hat to Maggie and Ian, then left.

“I can’t thank you enough for this fabulous gown, Maggie,” Rena said as they waited to board the train.

“It was meant to be yours, Rena. The fact that it fit so perfectly without a single alteration makes me think I made it with you in mind, even though we had yet to meet.” Maggie smiled at her. “You make the dress look beautiful, Rena, not the other way around.”

“I heartily agree,” Josh said, tucking Rena against his side and then kissing her temple.

Rena brushed her hand down the smooth silk along the front of the skirt. It felt both strange and wonderful to be wearing a dress once again. To feel feminine and pretty, instead of feeling like she was just one more of the hardworking miners trying to eke out a living.

Josh brushed his lips near her ear and whispered. “You look stunning, Rena. I look forward to undoing all of those teensy buttons running up the back of that remarkable gown later.”

A delighted shiver flowed over her as Josh guided her up the steps and into the passenger car.

When they were seated, with Maggie and Ian across the aisle, Josh took her hand in his and kissed her fingers.

“I meant what I said earlier, Rena.”

Emotions both foreign and familiar flooded through her, so she chose to lighten the moment with humor. “Which thing? That Scout ran you down and forced your surrender to love? Or was it the nonsense about love on targets?”

Josh grinned. “I was referring to saying you were beautiful. You are, you know, Rena, so incredibly beautiful and sweet

and kind. I'm so very blessed you agreed to be my wife. You caught me off guard, again, walking down the aisle in that spectacular gown. I take it Maggie made it."

"It's a gift from her. I hoped it would be a surprise for you, Josh, to see me in a dress on our wedding day. I couldn't very well march down the aisle in a pair of trousers and my work boots."

He shrugged. "You could have, and it wouldn't have mattered. I didn't wed you for the clothes you wear or those you don't," he wagged his eyebrows at her. "I married you because I love you, Rena, and want to spend every day beside you, turning our dreams into cherished memories."

Rena leaned her head on his shoulder. "Despite everything and how adamantly I denied it, I dreamed I'd one day find someone who would love me for me, scars and all. I just didn't know it would take moving all the way to Oregon to make my dreams come true."

"I'm so glad you came to Holiday, and will do my best every day to help your dreams continue to come true because I do love you, Rena. With all my heart, and all the rest of my days."



Continue reading for an excerpt from the next Pink Pistol
Sisterhood sweet romance,

Love Under Fire.

Also, enjoy an excerpt from Jace and Cora Lee's story in

Holiday Hope!

RECIPE

***I**N THE STORY, RENA bakes when she can. I thought it would be fun to share her recipe for shortbread, which is a little off the beaten path because of the glaze (which you can leave off if you choose!). I used to make this all the time in my younger days and they were always gobbled up by my family. Enjoy!*

Shortbread

INGREDIENTS

For Shortbread:

1 cup butter, softened

½ cup granulated sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 cups all-purpose flour

For Glaze:

½ cup brown sugar

¼ cup confectioner's sugar

4 tablespoons butter

3 tablespoons milk

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

For Shortbread:

Beat butter until creamy, then add sugar and vanilla, mixing for about two minutes. Add in flour, careful not to overwork the dough, mixing just until it comes together. Spoon dough onto a long piece of plastic wrap and shape into a log about two and a half inches in diameter. Wrap tightly in plastic wrap and chill for at least two hours.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Remove dough from wrap, slice log into cookies that are about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick, and arrange on two baking sheets lined with parchment paper.

Bake for 15-20 minutes, until cookies are set and just starting to brown on the edges. Remove from oven and cool completely. If desired, top with glaze.

For Glaze:

Over medium heat, melt the butter in a saucepan. Add the milk and sugars. Whisk together until combined and bubbling, about five minutes. Stir in the vanilla extract. Continue cooking for an additional minute or two, until the glaze has thickened. Remove from the heat and allow to cool.

You can pour the glaze over the shortbread or dip them into it, coating half the cookie.

Yield: about 24 cookies

THANK YOU

THANK YOU FOR READING *Love on Target*. Now that you've finished, will you please consider reviewing it? It means so much when a reader leaves a review, and I'm truly so grateful.



Also, please subscribe to my newsletter. You'll receive a free book or two, and what I call *The Welcome Letters* with exclusive content and some fun stuff! My newsletters are sent when I have new releases, sales, or news of freebies to share. Each month, you can enter a contest, get a new recipe to try, and discover details about upcoming events. Don't wait. Sign up today!

Shanna's Newsletter

If newsletters aren't your thing, please follow me on *BookBub*. You'll receive notifications on pre-orders, new releases, and sale books!

If you enjoyed reading about the town of Holiday and the characters there, be sure to read *Holiday Hope*. This sweet historical romance is where the town really begins. Also, be sure to read *Henley* if you'd like to know more about Doctor Evan and Henley Holt.

Keep reading for an excerpt from the next Pink Pistol Sisterhood story, and one from *Holiday Hope*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

YEARS AGO, I INQUIRED about being a guest author on the Petticoats & Pistols blog. They were so gracious and welcomed me with kindness. I so admired the women who were part of their group and wished I could be one of their “Fillies” too.

Sometimes wishes do come true! In 2017, I was invited to join them as a regular contributing author, and I’ve loved being one of the Fillies in their corral of western authors.

So, when Pam Crooks and Karen Witemeyer brought up the idea of doing a legacy project for Petticoats & Pistols, something we could all participate in, I was excited at the prospect. Then the decision was made to tie the stories in our series to Annie Oakley, which made it even better.

Captain Cavedweller happened to be in an antique shop and found a book about Annie Oakley that he knew I needed to have. Written in 1981 by Isabelle S. Sayers, *Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill's Wild West* from Dover Publications featured more than a hundred photos, illustrations, posters, and advertisements. Being able to see so many visuals of Annie

really helped clarify in my mind not only the hero she would be to Rena, but also how her influence would help shape Rena's character.

When I was thinking about my story in this series and the characters, I knew I wanted it to be set in the town of Holiday, a place that exists only in my imagination, but it's at the heart of several of my books, both historical and contemporary. (You can read Cora Lee and Jace Coleman's story in *Holiday Hope*. It truly is the beginning point for Holiday.)

Josh Gatlin was a character who had a brief mention in my book *Henley*. I thought he'd be wonderful for the hero in this story. Since nine years had passed from then, though, I wanted him to have experienced love and loss, and it provided a perfect way to include Gabi's character.

As for Rena, before Christmas, Captain Cavedweller and I went to see the movie *I Heard the Bells*, based on the true story of how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow came to write the poem that became a beloved Christmas carol. The movie covered how his wife died so tragically when her dress caught fire in their home. That thought stayed with me, and it inspired the horrible accident that happened to Rena and set her life on a different course.

Rena is strong and courageous, but she's also softhearted, and whether she admitted it or not, she really, really just wanted someone to accept and love her for who she was, scars and all.

Which is why I'm so pleased to be able to give her and Josh their happily ever after.

When I started to write about Rena painting a bullseye on her heart target, it made me wonder when bullseyes were first used. According to the information I found online, hitting the bull's eye was a term used in archery when bull skulls were set as the target. One who could shoot through the eye socket had executed a tricky shot. Around the 1830s, the term bullseye was used to refer to the center of a target. I even found images of a few antique shooting targets that had rings with a clear bullseye in the center.

The scene where Rena and Josh are painting Gabi's room pink sent me in search of paint colors of the day. I discovered there was a company called that really did provide a tint that was mixed with water and applied more like plaster, but they had some lovely colors, including the shade of pink I envisioned Rena choosing for Gabi's room. Alabastine's advertisements proclaimed, "Alabastine Your Walls and Combine Healthfulness With Beauty."

The Alabastine company's story began in New York in 1879, under the management of Melvin B. Church. Church was an inventor who tinkered with gypsum and formulated a new type of wall coating. Alabastine was produced from calcined gypsum and took its name from a large gypsum quarry located near Alabaster, Michigan. Unlike regular paint, Alabastine provided a durable surface the company claimed was easy to maintain as well as "sanitary" since the product came from a "pure, natural rock." Among the selling points

was the tint could be modeled into relief shapes or designs, was easy to add new coats to touch up marred areas, and could even be used to create tiles that could then be painted with enamel and varnish and used in kitchens and bathrooms. It proclaimed the superior finish would resist the problems associated with contagious diseases like scarlet fever or typhoid because germs and insects wouldn't have damp interior walls to light on if one used Alabastine.

The company was in business from 1879 until the late 1940s when it reportedly failed due to mismanagement.

If you've never set foot in a saddle shop, I hope you'll add that to your "someday" bucket list. The scents found there, predominantly of leather, are just incredible. When I was a little girl, one of my favorite places to visit when we went into town was the saddle shop. Not only was the owner a lot of fun, but I loved the smell of the shop.

I hope you've enjoyed this journey with Rena and Josh and Gabi! May your aim be true and all your "love targets" bring you joy.

Special thanks to Pam, Karen, and all the Fillies who worked so hard on this series, and for welcoming me into your sisterhood so warmly and kindly.

Also, my heartfelt thanks to Katrina, Allison, Linda, Alice, and all the Hopeless Romantics who helped make this book the best it can be.

Thank you, dear reader, for taking a trip to Holiday with me. Here's to more fun reading adventures!

Shanna

STAY IN TOUCH

Y*OU* are just a tap away from:

- *Free Books
- *The Welcome Letters
- *VIP notice of sales and freebies
- *Complimentary bonus content
- *Exclusive giveaways
- *Recipes
- *Author happenings
- *Sneak peeks at new titles

Join Shanna's newsletter today.



Tap here to see all of Shanna's sweet romances.

Come join in the fun in Shanna's Hopeless Romantics group on Facebook.

LOVE UNDER FIRE

L OVE UNDER FIRE



Beautiful Krissy Donovan, a student of Annie Oakley, is asked to put on a sharpshooting benefit for an orphanage. The trouble is, it's half a continent away. Her father has promised her services, and she finds herself virtually alone in perilous Indian Territory. Krissy's father realizes he has made a terrible mistake, but a cavalry scout, familiar with the savage land, is the only one who can protect Krissy now.

Rough-and-tumble cavalry captain Johnny Houston resents being asked to take on this last assignment of playing nursemaid to an eastern debutante before he musters out of the army. Johnny understands his duty as a soldier, so turning the order down is out of the question. With a killer stalking them, Johnny has to keep his mind on Krissy's safety, but an attraction to his stubborn charge could end up compromising his heart.

Memories of his own harsh childhood at the same orphanage haunt him. He has no choice but to make a stand for the children, or some of them won't survive. Krissy dares to hope she can help in some way, even though it means giving up the lavish future that has been planned for her since birth.

How far will Johnny go with his dangerous rescue plan? Where does Krissy fit into his life? The strange arrival of a beautiful pink pistol with the legacy of its creation may help them survive the deadly odds against them in LOVE UNDER FIRE.

Keep reading for an excerpt from the story!

EXCERPT

KRISSY DONOVAN HAD AGREED to do this charity work Miz Oakley requested for the orphanage, but she did not have to like it. This certainly went above and beyond anything she'd expected her father to ask of her. She reached to adjust the maroon velvet hat she wore and forced her features into a more pleasant expression. She shifted in the plush seat of the Butterfield stage, trying to find even the tiniest bit of comfort, but it eluded her. Maybe because she'd spent so much time on a train, and then a stage, the farther west she'd traveled, she felt she'd left a permanent indentation on every seat she'd sat in so far.

This seemingly endless journey from North Carolina to the faraway barricades of savagery could have been so much more pleasurable if she'd had a good traveling companion—her best friend, Emmie, or her cousin, Tallie, or her younger sister, Brooklyn—but of course, that would never have been proper. They'd be stuck with the stuffy chaperone, Mrs. Dinwiddie, as well. The elderly woman sat across from Krissy with the perpetual expression of confusion she wore creasing her plump face.

Krissy closed her eyes, replaying the conversation with her father that had set this debacle in motion. She hated even thinking about it for the hundredth time, but maybe Mrs. Dinwiddie would stop staring a hole through her if she pretended to be asleep.

Kristalee, I have something to discuss with you. Please, step into my office.

That was how this fiasco had all begun. When her father spoke those words in that tone, it meant one thing. Krissy had known that whatever it was her father had to “discuss” with her was already decided and was going to interrupt whatever plans she might have been hoping for over the summer.

And she had been right, of course.

Delano Douglas Donovan always got what he wanted—and what he wanted was for his oldest daughter to perform a shooting exhibition for charity, at the request of his old friend, Miss Annie Oakley Butler. It was quite an important favor she had asked of the Donovan family. This shooting exhibition would require Krissy to travel halfway across the country, in the dust and heat, riding in this jostling, bouncing stagecoach for—well, for what seemed like forever. And the arduous journey wasn't at an end yet. Krissy let go a long, low sigh.

Of course, there was no arguing with Papa. He'd been dealing with difficult people—banking clients—all his adult life. Though Krissy considered herself stubborn, she had to admit she was no competition for her father.

As much as anything else, she had wanted to please him. And he'd already promised Miz Annie Krissy would "lend a hand", as he always put it—a favorite expression of his.

But she had mere months of...freedom...left, before the wedding. Maybe Papa had thought this journey west would be somehow entertaining—an adventure—for her before she settled down. But there were so many other things she would rather have done than travel all this way to put on a shooting exhibition—even if it was for a good cause—and at the request of her father's old friend and Krissy's mentor, Miz Annie Oakley herself.

If Mrs. Dinwiddie wasn't still staring at her, Krissy might have let herself cry. But there were three other occupants in the coach's hot, wind-whipped interior, as well as herself and Mrs. Dinwiddie, so crying—for any reason, especially self-pity, was out of the question.

She cracked her eyes open, her head tilted back against the plush cushioning. If that infernal Mrs. Dinwiddie didn't find something to do besides stare at her—

Just then, a shout sounded from outside and the wagon gave an odd lurch. Krissy felt the surge of power as the horses took off at a gallop, and the driver yelled something else.

Mrs. Dinwiddie met Krissy's eyes, and for a split second, Krissy read the terrible regret and fear in the older woman's face. But there was nothing to be done as they raced along, helplessly watching the tall, dry grass of the plains speed by the open window flaps.

“Indians, do you suppose?” one of the men, Mr. Russell, asked, trying to mask the question as idle curiosity.

Mrs. Dinwiddie gasped in horror, and Krissy shot the man a hot glare. Even though she’d spent most of the trip wishing she could be rid of the older woman, a long-time friend of the family, Krissy suddenly felt a genuine protectiveness toward her at the man’s thoughtless comment.

The wife of the other male traveler, Mrs. Streetman, gave a huff. “Of course not. Those days are well over...at least, around here!” But she glanced out the flapping window canvas, as if she wondered if she might see Indians attacking, despite her declaration.

Mr. Streetman remained tight-lipped and silent.

Krissy jumped up from her seat, steadying herself as best she could in the swaying conveyance. She tried to stand upright long enough to see outside, bracing her feet against the bumping of the speeding coach.

She caught a glimpse of the scrub brush and tall grass that had been their monotonous view for the past few days. It was racing past at breakneck speed and Krissy was hard put to keep her footing. The driver...where was the driver? Normally she could look out the window and see a foot resting on the floor of the driver’s box, or an arm or hand laid casually on the side...but there was no sign of the driver.

Worse, the horses seemed to have been given their head and were running full speed down the familiar path, headed for the next stage stop.

“Sit down, young woman!” Mrs. Streetman ordered.

Though the imperious command caused Krissy to automatically begin to sit, she caught herself, and remained defiantly standing in her precarious position.

It had been a long time since anyone had ordered her to do something—much less someone she barely knew. She was in a mutinous frame of mind already—hot, uncomfortable in too many ways to count, and feeling put out for having given in to her father’s demand to come on this journey in the first place—even for an old friend and a very good cause.

Kristalee Juliana Donovan dug in her heels and made no move to comply with Mrs. Streetman’s order.

“I said—” Mrs. Streetman said, leaning toward Krissy as if she believed Krissy hadn’t heard her.

Just then, the coach hit something that Krissy couldn’t see from her vantage point. There was a screaming of rending wood, and one side of the stagecoach seemed to drop low to the ground. Even as the forward momentum seemed to almost pause, then slow, the coach was listing to the side. In one terrible moment, the stage rolled to the side, then flipped over. Krissy’s feet flew over her head, and she was thrown backward, hitting her head, first on the wall of the coach, then the floor.

The stage rolled a second time amid a cacophony of shrieking, cracking wood, and neighing horses. Then, all was silent except for the pounding hooves as the horses broke completely free and ran, the dust settling slowly behind them.

Order your copy of LOVE UNDER FIRE today!

Pink Pistol Sisterhood Series Book 3 by Cheryl Pierson

Copyright © 2023 Cheryl Pierson

EXCERPT HOLIDAY HOPE

1884

A BUMP IN THE track jostled Cora Lee Schuster from a restless slumber. Weary from days of travel across the great expanse of the United States, she hesitated to open her eyes and begin the day.

She'd climbed into the upper berth of the train car more than ready to rest last night, but sleep had proven elusive through the long midnight hours.

Plagued by thoughts of what her immediate future might hold when she arrived in Holiday, a newly constructed town in the wilds of Eastern Oregon, she found it impossible to relax and fully surrender to her dreams.

Had she been completely crazy to travel all the way from Cincinnati to marry a rancher? She supposed the answer to that question would become clear soon enough. By noon, the train would arrive in Holiday and she'd meet her intended, Jude Coleman. Would he be a man as gritty and tough as the images his name conjured in her mind? Or someone kind? Someone she could come to love?

Cora Lee drew in a deep breath, needing to clear her thoughts. Instead of a cleansing lungful of air, she inhaled a stale, sour odor that put her in mind of rancid cabbage. Nose wrinkled in disgust, she started to rise, only to find the braid she'd fashioned last night pinned down, prohibiting any movement.

Curious, she reached up and felt around the top of her pillow until her fingers encountered something both bony and hairy. A scream clawed upward in her throat as she envisioned a wild animal curled around her head. When the offending weight shifted, she squelched the urge to shriek and quickly sat up. She glanced over her shoulder to see two incredibly large, hairy feet resting in her berth.

Cora Lee rolled her eyes, then glanced down at a noise from the berth below her. Anne Charles, her newly acquainted friend, pressed a hand over her mouth to keep from bursting into laughter. When Cora Lee made a silly face, the two women could no longer hold back their humor. Cora Lee buried her face into the mattress while Anne held a pillow over her face.

Once their amusement subsided, Anne rolled to the edge of her berth and shook her head. "What a way to begin your day," she whispered.

"I thought something had crawled by my head and died," Cora Lee spoke in a hushed tone. "Maybe the fellow has passed on to glory and that's why his feet stink so much."

“Shh! He might hear you. At least, I hope that those gigantic things belong to a man. I’d hate to think of a woman having such enormous feet or hairy legs!”

Just then, the feet twitched, and the owner pulled them back inside his berth, causing the two women to laugh again.

“We might as well get ready for the day,” Anne said, reaching beneath her berth and handing Cora Lee her satchel.

“Agreed. If we hurry, we might even beat the line to the lavatory,” Cora Lee said, hurrying to dress in the cramped quarters. Hastily changing from her nightgown into a traveling dress that would forever be embedded with soot from the coal that powered the train down the track, she sat cross-legged on the bed, combing her hair, her mouth full of hairpins. The train lurched around a curve, throwing her off balance. She spewed the hairpins onto her lap, lest she swallow them. Grasping onto the berth brace kept her from shooting right off the bed, but her traveling companion didn’t fare as well.

Anne squealed as she was thrown out of her berth into the center aisle, landing on her backside with her dress slipping down one shoulder.

Cora Lee shoved the pins into her hair, hopped off the berth, and stepped between Anne and two interested-appearing men dressed in western garb as they moved closer. She held a hand out to Anne, helped her to her feet, then pushed her back behind the curtain surrounding their berth. With a curt nod to the men, she followed Anne into the bit of privacy afforded by the curtain and helped to right the woman’s rumpled clothing.

“Well, that’s one way to get the blood flowing first thing,” Cora Lee said with a smile.

“I am mortified!” Anne hissed. Her entire face was a bright shade of pink as she smoothed her dress, then nervously fussed with her hair.

“Don’t be. At least you didn’t have smelly feet next to your face.”

Anne’s tense shoulders relaxed slightly. “True. I only fell into the midst of the car with men ogling me from every direction,” she said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Oh, it wasn’t nearly that dramatic.” Cora Lee took the brush from Anne and gave the woman’s luxuriant brown hair several strokes before fashioning it into the high pompadour her friend favored. “There. All ready.”

“Perhaps those who were awake returned to sleep,” Anne said as they pulled back the curtains and stepped into the aisle.

“Or it could be everyone was awakened by our jolting ride,” Cora Lee said, leading the way to the lavatory. At least they were fortunate to be traveling in a car that had a lavatory for ladies and another for gentlemen. In fact, Cora Lee had been both surprised and amazed by how nice her accommodations had been the entire trip. She’d half-anticipated traveling in the immigrant car, but for the most part, she’d been comfortable and well-fed.

As she and Anne waited for a turn in the lavatory, she glanced at the woman with whom she’d felt an immediate

kinship. They'd met in Omaha while they were waiting to board the train that would carry them west. Anne was a proper Englishwoman. She'd arrived in America a year ago with her maidenly aunt. The woman had passed not long after they'd settled into a small home in New York City. It had taken Anne months to sort through the paperwork, only to discover the woman who was also her guardian had left her penniless. Unable to find suitable work, Anne had decided to take a chance on the unknown and become a mail-order bride.

Cora Lee could well relate to Anne and her story of being forced to make a choice between poverty, working in a deplorable job, or accepting an offer of marriage from a complete stranger. The idea of marriage seemed far more palatable than the other options, so here she was on her way to Holiday.

The discovery that Holiday was also Anne's destination nearly made her weep with joy. Anne had agreed to wed the owner of the local livery and blacksmith shop. Cora Lee could hardly envision the petite, elegant Anne married to some hulking brute who smelled of sweat, iron, and horses, but she hoped her friend would find happiness in the unconventional union.

Cora Lee contemplated her own impending marriage to a man she didn't know. The last letter she'd received from Jude had said he'd give her time to get acclimated to ranch life before they wed. At least she wouldn't be immediately pressed into the role of a wife.

She knew from Jude's letters that he resided on Elk Creek Ranch, just north of town. He, along with his father and brother, raised beef cattle and also trained horses they sold to the military. Jude had also mentioned their property included timber, so she assumed the town had to be in the mountains or close to them.

She'd never heard of Holiday before she'd answered Jude's advertisement for a wife. She'd even attempted to locate the town on a map, but it had only been founded six years prior when a large gold strike drew men to the area. Now that money poured into town from the mine, respectable businesses had been established and many men actively sought wives.

Cora Lee had spent her entire life residing in a busy city. Her family had never even owned a horse, or a dog, living in an apartment above her father's shoe store. Oh, they'd been happy, the three of them. Her father had provided well for his family by making and repairing shoes, and her mother had created a wonderful, loving home for them all to enjoy.

Now her parents were gone, and Cora Lee had been left without many options for her future.

The closer she got to Holiday, the more she questioned if she'd chosen the right path. What if her intended was a horrible man, one who'd written lies to her? She'd heard about mail-order brides being deceived. There hadn't been time to exchange photographs with Jude, even if she'd had a recent one to send, which she did not.

No, the last photo that had been taken of her was carefully packed in her trunks with other keepsakes that would remind her of her parents and her heritage.

“I shall greatly look forward to our arrival in Holiday, if for no other reason than to conclude our time being tossed about on a rocking, rumbling train,” Anne said as they finished in the lavatory and returned to their seats. The porter had folded up the berths, pushed aside the curtains, and made the area ready for the day.

Cora Lee nodded. “It will be nice to have this long journey behind us.” She stowed her satchel beneath the seat, pinned on her hat, and settled back as the train continued chugging down the tracks.

Anne and Cora Lee purchased breakfast when the train stopped at a small town just across the Idaho border in Oregon. A farmer and his wife boarded, selling fresh milk, hot doughnuts, and boiled eggs. The two women gladly parted with a few coins for the food and enjoyed every bite as the train pulled away from the station.

Two hours later, the porter walked through the passenger car. “Baker City, folks. Baker City coming right up.”

“Pardon me, sir,” Anne said, smiling up at the man. “Might you be able to confirm the travel arrangements for the remainder of our journey?” She handed him her ticket.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a friendly smile. “You’ll switch trains in Baker City. The Holiday Express line will take you right into Holiday. You can’t miss it. That train is a beaut,

shiny like a new penny.” He tipped his cap to them, returned the ticket to Anne, and continued on his way through the car and on to the next one.

“I wish we had time to explore Baker City,” Anne said, looking out the window as the train rolled past a sea of cattle. Cowboys rode along a fence, and one of them lifted his hat, offering a jaunty wave.

“I wonder if all the men here are like that,” Cora Lee asked as she gazed out the window, fighting down the urge to return the welcoming greeting.

She’d expected the landscape to be different, but nothing had prepared her for the rolling hills covered in what she’d learned was called sagebrush. It seemed almost barren, desolate, to her, although not quite as lonesome as the prairies they’d traveled across. Would Holiday be surrounded by scrubby brush, dirt, and not much else? She hoped not.

Although it was just the first day of November, she’d expected to see snow on the ground, but it appeared none had yet fallen. That, at least, made traveling easier for everyone.

She and Anne were both watching out the window as the train rolled into the station at Baker City. True to what they’d heard about the mining town, it was bustling with activity.

“Welcome to Baker City,” the porter said as he took a position at the steps leading out of the car to help the women as they departed the train.

“Perhaps another time, we can travel back here to investigate what appears to be a thriving town,” Anne said as they made their way over to where a train, as shiny and new as the porter said, was loading passengers. It didn’t hold any sleeping cars, but the passenger car they stepped into was nicely appointed, with upholstered seats all facing forward.

“How lovely,” Anne said, smoothing her gloved hand over the back of a seat. “Would you like to sit by the window or the aisle?”

“The aisle’s fine with me,” Cora Lee said, settling beside her friend. They slid their satchels beneath the seats, sank back against the soft cushions, and anxiously awaited the beginning of the last leg of their journey. Cora Lee took in the mahogany paneling, the stained glass framing the windows, the extraordinary details of the passenger car that made her feel like she’d entered a luxurious world she’d only dreamed of one day experiencing.

They didn’t have long to wait before the train began to move and chugged away from the station. From what Cora Lee could tell, they were heading due east, but she knew from Jude’s letters that Holiday was located north of Baker City.

Curious, but not concerned, she and Anne stared out the window at the hills of sagebrush.

“This must seem even stranger to you than it does to me,” she said to her seatmate.

Anne turned to smile at her. “Oh, I think it is probably quite different than either of us anticipated, but perhaps there is

beauty to be found in the ruggedness of this place.”

“It is rather rugged,” Cora Lee said, patting Anne’s hand as they returned to watching out the window.

“Did you notice the name painted on the engine of the train?”

“Hope.” Cora Lee thought the name of the train quite fitting. Earnestly, she hoped she’d done the right thing in agreeing to come to Holiday to marry a stranger. “I can’t think of a better name for the conveyance carrying us to the end of our journey. Hope is what I have for our future, and hope is what we’ll have to lean on as we begin a new life in Holiday.”

“Exactly. We shall cling to hope and friendship and faith.” Anne playfully bumped her arm. “And perhaps our handsome husbands.”

Cora Lee laughed. “I *hope* it will be so.”

As the train chugged down the tracks, it changed directions, traveling north. With each passing mile, Cora Lee grew more nervous until she felt like she might explode. What if this trip had been a huge mistake? What if Jude was a horrid man? What if she spent the rest of her life in misery?

Unable to sit still, she rose from her seat.

“Where are you going?” Anne asked, glancing from the window to Cora Lee. “Is something wrong?”

“I just need to stretch my legs a bit.”

Anne nodded in commiseration. “I can hardly wait to go for a stroll through Holiday. It will be nice to walk after sitting for so many days on end.” The woman rose slightly and glanced toward the back of the car. “Perhaps no one would mind if you walk from one end of the car to the other a few times.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Cora Lee said, taking a few steps to the front of the car. She turned, then headed toward the back. She’d nearly reached the door when the train jerked, brakes squealing, and a few passengers shouted in surprise as they ground to an unexpected, bone-jarring halt.

She cast a questioning look over her shoulder toward Anne. What on earth was happening?

Available now at Amazon



BOOKS IN THE PINK PISTOL
SISTERHOOD SERIES

***In Her Sights* by Karen Witemeyer**

Book 1 ~*~ March 30

***Love on Target* by Shanna Hatfield**

Book 2 ~*~ April 10

***Love Under Fire* by Cheryl Pierson**

Book 3 ~*~ April 20

***Bullet Proof Bride* by Kit Morgan**

Book 4 ~*~ April 30

***Bullseye Bride* by Kari Trumbo**

Book 5 ~*~ May 10

***Disarming His Heart* by Winnie Griggs**

Book 6 ~*~ May 20

***One Shot at Love* by Linda Broday**

Book 7 ~*~ May 30

***Armed & Marvelous* by Pam Crooks**

Book 8 ~*~ June 10

***Lucky Shot* by Jeannie Watt**

Book 9 ~*~ June 20

***Aiming for His Heart* by Julie Benson**

Book 10 ~*~ June 30

***Pistol Perfect* by Jessie Gussman**

Book 11 ~*~ July 10

See all the Pink Pistol Sisterhood Books on the Amazon

Series Page or our website

BOOKS BY SHANNA HATFIELD

FICTION

HISTORICAL

The Dove

Baker City Brides

Tad's Treasure

Crumpets and Cowpies

Thimbles and Thistles

Corsets and Cuffs

Bobbins and Boots

Lightning and Lawmen

Dumplings and Dynamite

Grass Valley Brides

Daisy

Birdie

Cara

Pendleton Petticoats

Dacey

Aundy

Caterina

Ilsa

Marnie

Lacy

Bertie

Millie

Dally

Quinn

Evie

Pendleton Promises

Sadie

Romance at Rinehart's Crossing

Austen

Claire

Kendall

Hearts of the War

Garden of Her Heart

Home of Her Heart

Dream of Her Heart

Hardman Holidays

The Christmas Bargain

The Christmas Token

The Christmas Calamity

The Christmas Vow

The Christmas Quandary

The Christmas Confection

The Christmas Melody

The Christmas Ring

The Christmas Wish

The Christmas Kiss

Holiday Dreams

Henley

Love on Target

Gifts of Christmas

Gift of Grace

Gift of Hope

Gift of Faith

CONTEMPORARY

Friendly Beasts of Faraday

Scent of Cedar

Tidings of Joy

Boughs of Holly

Wings of an Angel

Grass Valley Cowboys

The Cowboy's Christmas Plan

The Cowboy's Spring Romance

The Cowboy's Summer Love

The Cowboy's Autumn Fall

The Cowboy's New Heart

The Cowboy's Last Goodbye

Holiday Brides

Valentine Bride

Summer Bride

Easter Bride

Lilac Bride

Lake Bride

Love on the Beach

Moonlight Cove

Rodeo Romance

The Christmas Cowboy

Wrestling Christmas

Capturing Christmas

Barreling Through Christmas

Chasing Christmas

Racing Christmas

Keeping Christmas

Roping Christmas

Remembering Christmas

Savoring Christmas

Taming Christmas

Romance by Chance

Taste of Tara

Saving Mistletoe

Silverton Sweethearts

The Coffee Girl

The Christmas Crusade

Untangling Christmas

Summer Creek

Catching the Cowboy

Rescuing the Rancher

Protecting the Princess

Distracting the Deputy

Guiding the Grouch

Welcome to Romance

Blown Into Romance

Sleigh Bells Ring in Romance

Winter Wishes

The Snowman's Sweetheart

Sleigh Bell Serenade

The Women of Tenacity

Heart of Clay

Heart of Hope

Heart of Love

Stand Alone Romances

Between Christmas and Romance

Capturing the Cavedweller's Heart

Learning The Ropes

Love at the 20-Yard Line

QR Code Killer

Rose

Spring into Romance

GENERATIONAL SERIES

Holiday Express

Holiday Hope

Holiday Heart

Holiday Home

Holiday Love

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Christmas Keepsake

Steve the Mule

NONFICTION

A Cowboy Christmas

Farm Girl

Fifty Dates with Captain Cavedweller

Recipes of Love

Savvy Entertaining

Savvy Autumn Entertaining

Savvy Holiday Entertaining

Savvy Spring Entertaining

Savvy Summer Entertaining

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author Shanna Hatfield is a farm girl who loves to write. Her sweet historical and contemporary romances are filled with sarcasm, humor, hope, and hunky heroes.

When Shanna isn't dreaming up unforgettable characters, twisting plots, or covertly seeking dark, decadent chocolate, she hangs out with her beloved husband, Captain Cavedweller, at their home in the Pacific Northwest.

Shanna loves to hear from readers.

Connect with her online:

Website: shannahatfield.com

Facebook: [Shanna Hatfield's Page](#)

[Shanna Hatfield's Hopeless Romantics Group](#)

Pinterest: [Shanna Hatfield](#)

Email: shanna@shannahatfield.com