

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black wide-brimmed hat and a black corset, is seen from behind, walking away from the viewer down a narrow, dark tunnel. The tunnel walls are rough and rocky, and the floor is covered in dirt and debris. A set of wooden stairs leads down the center of the tunnel, illuminated by a red light that casts a strong glow on the scene. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and suspenseful.

**Murder  
And The  
Hurdy Gurdy  
Girl**

**Kate McLachlan**

# ***Murder and the Hurdy Gurdy Girl***

**by**

**Kate McLachlan**

*Quest Books*

*by Regal Crest*

*Texas*

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### **Author's Note**

Many of the events that occur in this book are based on actual events, but I played with the dates to suit my story. There really was a mining war in the Idaho Silver Valley in the 1890's, but I've mixed things up a bit and condensed the best parts into a few weeks during the summer of 1897. There was a Great Recession in the 1890's, and a well-known millionaire did have to step in and rescue the country by depositing a huge load of gold in the Treasury. He wasn't the scoundrel Elias L. Noonan was, though, at least to my knowledge, and he didn't require killing. Grover Cleveland really did marry his twenty-one-year-old ward when he was President and forty-nine-years-old, but it didn't cause the scandal it would have today. Oh, and he wasn't even President anymore in 1897, but I preferred it that way.

Needles Eye is a fictional town, but it's based on the real town of Burke, Idaho. Pinkerton agents really did spy on miners and mine owners during that time, though if one of them was a woman, that fact hasn't been recorded in the history books. There were female Pinkerton agents, though. A mill was blown up, and you can still see remnants of it if you take a trip up the Silver Valley to visit Burke, which is now a ghost town. I took a trip up there last May, along with my wife, Tonie, and our buddy, Anita, and it snowed on us. You can see pictures of the remains of the mill and Burke on my Pinterest page.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Finally, thanks as always to Tonie, who enters into all my adventures with me, whether they are real or not.

**Dedication**

**For my sisters**

# Chapter One

**ELIAS L. NOONAN** lay in the bed of his mistress, his eyes closed, a look of peaceful satisfaction on his face.

The woman sat at the writing table near the foot of the bed, her back to Elias. Her expression was serene as she flipped through the pages of her gilt edged, leather address book until she found the desired direction. Propping the book open before her, she carefully filled her gold and pearl fountain pen, a gift from Elias, and pulled a clean sheet of cream white stationery toward her. She composed the letter without hesitation, signed her name at the bottom, and copied the address from the open book onto a matching envelope.

While she waited for the ink to dry, she opened the silver engraved jewelry box beside her. She sorted through the various necklaces, brooches, earrings, and hat pins before selecting a diamond bracelet. She returned the rest of the jewelry to the box and slipped the bracelet into her purse. She waved the letter, folded it, slid it into the envelope, and sealed it with a swipe of glue.

She rose from her chair and glanced at Elias, who hadn't stirred, then moved to the wardrobe. She removed her lace trimmed nightdress, another gift from Elias, and donned a traveling suit of gray wool with black braid trim. She was careful to fasten her corset loosely for comfortable travel, and she took the precaution of wearing a flannel petticoat for protection from uncertain weather. She took a brown leather travel bag from the wardrobe which she filled, quickly but neatly, with an assortment of clothing, both under and outerwear.

She carried the bag to the dressing table and set it on the floor. She brushed her hair and rolled it into a simple bun at the back of her head and pinned her velvet lined straw sailor hat to the front with a black jet pin. She slipped the silver backed brush into the travel bag, hesitated, and pulled it out again. She ran her thumb slowly over the initials engraved in the silver and set the brush back on the table with a look of regret.

After sweeping a few odds and ends into the bag, she snapped it shut. Though it was spring, she threw her heavy winter cape over her shoulders, fastened the fur lined collar, and pulled on her gloves. At the writing table she thrust the envelope into her purse and paused to look out the window.

It was still dark, but the edge of the eastern horizon was gray. It was time to go.

She turned her gaze to the still figure on the bed. The look of contentment on his face gave her comfort, for she knew she had put it there. She walked to the side of the bed, bent over, and kissed the cooling cheek.

“Goodbye, Elias,” she whispered.

She hooked her parasol over her arm, lifted the travel bag, and slipped out the door, mouthing a silent apology to Abby, her maid. For it would be her fate to discover the body.

**THE STENCH OF** sewage, both human and animal, forced Jo Erin to breathe through her mouth as she ventured into the haunts of her childhood. The economic depression had taken a heavy toll on the old neighborhood. Houses previously just shabby were now decrepit, if they stood at all. Many had fallen apart or been torn down. Those that remained were cast into shadowed trenches by six and eight story tenement houses that had been thrown up by greedy landlords. The new buildings, though poorly constructed, would hold ten times the number of immigrant families on the same small square of earth.

The sounds were familiar, the rhythmic clatter of hooves on cobblestone, the scraping rumble of iron wheels, and the shrill voices of the children. The accents had changed, though. Italian and Greek mixed with the Irish and German Jo Erin recalled from her youth.

Had the stink been this bad then? She didn't think so, but perhaps she'd just been used to it. The children who scampered about the streets didn't seem to be aware of it at all.

What was she doing here, anyway? The trail led west, and her ticket for the Northern Pacific Railway, already purchased, lay folded and waiting in her breast pocket. She would find nothing here. Still, her train wouldn't leave for hours yet, and she had nothing else to occupy her time. She let her memories draw her forward.

Jo Erin turned onto the street where the Bantrys had once lived and saw a group of urchins huddled around the corpse of a cat. One of the boys, no more than eight years old, held a stick and poked timidly at the deceased. The stick touched flesh, and the children squealed and leaned away to distance themselves from the horror of it. A moment later, they edged back, unable to keep away. The cat was black with white paws, thin enough to have starved to death, but the puddle of blood around its head suggested a more violent end. It had no doubt been trod under hooves or wheels of a passing horse and cart.

The children were also thin, as well as dirty and ragged and probably as likely to end their lives violently as the cat had. The neighborhood, Jo Erin thought again, had changed. Times had been hard when she was a girl, but not so hard that children of working men went hungry. The Panic of '93 hadn't just hurt the pocketbooks of the rich.



Just as she was about to move on, a girl in the group looked up and smiled. Jo Erin felt her stomach clench at the sight of her face.

“You,” she said. “You girl.”

The girl turned from the cat and took a hop in Jo Erin’s direction, her head tilted like that of a little bird.

“Are you a Bantry?”

“Yes, sir. I’m Elizabeth.” Her tongue thrust against air where her front teeth once were, making her lisp.

Memories, too close to the surface already, burgeoned. Susan had been missing her front teeth when Jo Erin first knew her. She had refused to lisp, though. Her brothers had teased her every time she slipped up, and she’d developed the habit of choosing her words carefully before speaking, thus managing to avoid the most troublesome letters. If she couldn’t find the right words to say what she wanted, she remained silent. It was a habit Susan kept long after her teeth had grown back in, giving her an air of thoughtfulness and gravity very unlike her brothers.

The boy with the stick looked up, diverted from his cadaver. “I’m a Bantry too,” he said. “I’m Danny.”

The boy, too, had the heavily lashed, dark gray eyes of the Bantrys.

“Are you Donald Bantry’s boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jo Erin made a sudden decision. She had time, and maybe Donald could help her. “I want to talk to your father. Will you take me to him?”

Danny glanced back at the cat, reached out, and gave his sister a careless shove. “You take him, Lizzy,” he said. “I’m busy.”

Elizabeth ignored the shove and smiled again at Jo Erin. “I’ll take you, mister.”

The girl wasn’t much like Susan after all, Jo Erin decided. Susan would never have accepted a shove from her brother with a smile.

“This way.” She chattered as she led Jo Erin down the street, every step a skip. Jo Erin ignored her except to grunt or nod when the child seemed to expect it. She had little experience with children. At least, children of the present. Jo Erin let her mind wander back to the children of the past—the Bantry boys, Susan, and her.

Jo Erin was first drawn to the Bantry boys because they were rough and boisterous and rude and never alone. They ran and fought and played, belched and farted and spat anywhere, anytime, even in front of their mother. It was behavior never seen in Jo Erin's home, a house full of girls, and she reveled in it. She took to dressing like a boy and running with the Bantrys. She was big for her age and tough, so it didn't seem strange to the children that she played like a boy. She was taunted for it sometimes, got into fights, and was reprimanded by the adults, but she didn't let it stop her. She was good at being a boy. Eventually people seemed to forget, at least at times, that she wasn't really a boy. They called her Joe.

It was only at school, where she still wore skirts, that she was called Jo Erin, except for Susan. Susan always called her Jo Erin. When she was with Susan, Jo Erin never forgot she was a girl. When she was with Susan, she didn't mind.

There had always been a connection between them, a silent understanding that the Bantry boys didn't know existed and could never have understood.

"Here's our house," Elizabeth announced, calling Jo Erin back to the present. If she hadn't been so lost in thought, she would have known where they were going. Elizabeth had stopped in front of the old Bantry house. Donald, apparently, had kept the house after his father's death.

Elizabeth skipped up the two low steps and opened the front door. "You can come in," she said over her shoulder. She turned and ran to the back of the house to where Jo Erin knew the kitchen to be. "Ma, there's a man here."

Jo Erin stood in the open doorway, memories overlapping. A part of her felt it would be the most natural thing in the world to chase after the little girl, slamming the door behind her with the joy of a girl who wasn't allowed to slam doors in her own house.

The door of the kitchen opened. A strange woman stepped into the hall, and Jo Erin almost expected it to be Susan's mother, though it was impossible. The woman had a small child propped on one hip, and she smoothed her hair back with her free hand. The hand was damp, and Jo Erin guessed she had just removed her apron. She was a small, thin woman, probably still in her twenties, though she looked forty. Elizabeth trailed behind, peering around her mother's skirts.

"Hello, Mrs. Bantry," Jo Erin said as the woman walked forward. "I'm Joe O'Leary. I want to speak to your husband. Is he home?"

"He's here," the woman said, but there was doubt in her voice. "But he works nights. I'm not sure he...What is your name again?"

"Joe O'Leary. I knew him when we were children. I need to talk to him about his sister."

Mrs. Bantry's eyes widened. "His sister. Oh, I don't think..." She ran her hand nervously over the head of the baby.

"Da don't have a sister," Elizabeth said, disdain in her voice.

"Elizabeth, go outside," Mrs. Bantry said sharply.

"But Ma, he said Da's sister. Da don't have a sister."

"Outside, Elizabeth." She grabbed the girl's arm and thrust her out the door as she spoke. She let the door crash closed and turned back to Jo Erin. "I'll get Donald. Wait here in the parlor, Mr. O'Leary.

It might be a few minutes. He's sleeping." She opened a door off the side of the hall and ushered Jo Erin into the room. The door closed.

Jo Erin surveyed the room Mrs. Bantry had called a parlor. It had been the front room when she was a child. When had it turned into a parlor? She had spent many rainy hours in this room. She and the boys had arm wrestled, built forts and tepees, made slingshots and bows and arrows. On quieter afternoons they'd tell ghost stories or play hide the thimble. Best of all, it seemed from this distance of time, were games of checkers played with Susan, sprawled on their stomachs on the hardwood floor, chins propped on their fists, feet kicking the air and brows furrowed in concentration. Jo Erin usually won, but she remembered her losses fondly. Susan would laugh her husky little laugh, clap her hands, and beg to play again. Of course, that was before Susan's mother died.

Susan had always been a serious child, though. Jo Erin remembered once finding her huddled behind a garbage crate in the alley, sobbing harsh, vigorous sobs. Jo Erin couldn't remember how old they were. It was after Susan's teeth had grown back in, but before her mother died, so she must have been eight or nine. Jo Erin would have been a year older. The boys were nowhere around, and Jo Erin allowed her sympathy to emerge.

She'd crawled behind the crate to sit beside the crying girl. "What's wrong, Sukey?" she'd asked, using Susan's childhood nickname.

Susan looked up, tears dripping from her chin to darken the bodice of her dress, dark wet lashes framing her eyes like spider legs.

"N—n—nothing," she'd managed between shuddering sobs.

"Then why are you crying?"

She wiped her face with her sleeve, smearing dirt from eyes to ears, and blew her nose on her apron. "I'm just thinking sad thoughts."

"What kind of sad thoughts?"

Susan took a long, steadying breath. "I'm thinking about Mama dying."

Jo Erin was horrified. "Your mama's dying?"

Susan shook her head. "No."

"She sick?"

Susan shook her head again. "No. I'm just thinking about it."

"Why?"

"Well, she's going to die someday," Susan said. "This way I'll be ready."

Jo Erin scratched her ear. She tried to imagine her own mother dying, but the thought was too horrible to even consider. "Why do you want to be ready for that?"

Susan looked thoughtful for a moment and Jo Erin sensed, as she always did when Susan paused before speaking, that she was about to say something terribly important.

"It's the worst thing I can think of," Susan finally said. "When Mama dies, I might die too, if I'm not ready."

Jo Erin felt a moment of panic as she again imagined her own mother's death.

"So sometimes I just think about it," Susan said. "I close my eyes and think and think and think until I feel like it really happened. So someday, when it happens, I'll be ready."

She'd been right, it turned out.

A couple of years later, Susan's mother died suddenly of influenza. At the funeral, Susan was the only member of the family who didn't cry. Jo Erin thought it might have been better for her if she had. Her brothers accused her of not truly loving their mother. Her father frowned at her. Jo Erin's own mother had called Susan a cold little thing, even after Jo Erin explained. A child imagining her own mother's death, she'd said, was the coldest thing of all.

Jo Erin returned again to the present. She was reluctant to step further into the "parlor" for fear of tipping something over. No wonder the children were forced outside to play with dead cats. A carpet lay across the floor where once hard wood had gleamed, but its large rose pattern could barely be seen for all the furniture scattered about the room, and a coating of dust lay over everything. Jo Erin threaded her way past a sofa brimming with pillows, around a table cluttered with artificial flowers and glass figurines, and between a pair of matching stuffed chairs. She reached the fireplace mantle.

There, propped upon tiny easels, was a row of photographs. Jo Erin skimmed her eyes over all of them, then returned to the first and studied each photograph carefully. The subjects were all strangers to her except for those in the first photograph. Donald and his wife stared unsmiling at the camera, surrounded by a solemn brood of children. Danny was the eldest. He stood behind his mother, who sat with one child leaning against her knee and another on it. Elizabeth perched on her father's lap. There was no photograph of Susan.

The door opened behind her, and Jo Erin turned to face the man who entered. He was a tall, brawny man, with fatigue and skepticism evident on his face. He didn't move from the doorway, but eyed her up and down.

Jo Erin knew she looked fine and masculine in her traveling suit, but she flushed.

"Abigail said a man was here."

"Hello, Donald."

"Are you dressing like a man all the time now?"

"It depends on the job. Today I am."

"Still with Pinkerton then?"

"Yes. I'm on the Noonan case."

The wariness on Donald's face was erased by a red scowl. "Don't know what you think you'll learn here. I won't let that bitch anywhere near my house." He stepped quickly forward, as if expecting to pace, but found his way blocked by a tiny table covered with doilies and paper flowers. He raised a hand as if to swat it away, but instead pointed a finger at Jo Erin. "If she comes around my kids, I'll beat her to a bloody pulp. I mean it, Joe," he said, easily reverting to calling Jo Erin by her boy name. "She's nothing but a God damned whore."

"Apparently she's also a murderer," Jo Erin said. "She won't be coming around here. She boarded a train heading west. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?"

"Hell, no."

"When's the last time you heard from her?"

"The last time I saw her was the day after Da's funeral. The day she left to be that man's whore. That was eight years ago. She knows better than to come back here."

"Did she ever try to contact you?"

**“Just once, when the girl was born. She sent presents. Can you believe that? Presents from a whore for an innocent little baby. We sent them straight back.”**

**“You never heard from her again?”**

**Donald shook his head.**

**“I heard about Patrick,” Jo Erin said. “I’m sorry.”**

**Donald nodded. “Patrick was a fool.” He looked sad when he said it. “He didn’t know the first thing about living out West. Served him right.”**

**“You ever hear from Everard?” Jo Erin asked, since it would be strange not to.**

**Donald gave a hard laugh. “Everard’s the last person she’d run to. You know that.”**

**Jo Erin did, but she asked anyway. “Where is he?”**

**“I don’t know. He never even showed up for Da’s funeral. Probably dead, like Patrick.” Donald shook his head. “It’s just me now. Me and my family.”**

**“Do you have a photograph of her?”**

**“No. My kids don’t even know she ever existed. I want to keep it that way. Sorry I can’t help you, Joe. I wish I could help you catch the bitch.”**

**“It doesn’t matter,” Jo Erin said. “It would be easier if I knew where she was going, but I’ll find her.”**

**And she would. It wasn’t just that she was one of the best detectives in Pinkerton’s New York office. It wasn’t just that she’d never failed to bring back her man—or woman—in her nine years with the company.**

**It was because it was Susan. This, though she hadn’t realized it, was the case Jo Erin had been preparing for, training for, praying for ever since she found out Susan had become E.L. Noonan’s mistress.**

**Jo Erin was going after Susan.**

**LOTTIE PRESSED HER fingers and thumb around the nipple and squeezed, just like the nurse showed her, and a drop of milk oozed out and dripped down her wrist. She licked the back of her hand and made a face. How could babies drink the foul stuff?**

**She leaned over the bowl in her lap and expressed another drop of milk from her swollen breast. A tiny bit dribbled into the bowl. It hurt like hell to even get that much out, but it hurt worse not to do it.**

**Not too much, the nurse said, or you won't dry up. But the God damned nurse didn't have breasts swollen and throbbing with milk. Besides, who said she wanted her milk to dry up? Her milk was all she had left.**

**She squeezed again, and a stream of milk squirted beyond the bowl and landed on her skirt. "Jesus Christ!" She swiped at it before it could absorb into the cloth and leave a mark. She didn't need another skirt to launder.**

**The cat blinked, rose from its pillow at the foot of the bed, and crept over to investigate.**

**"Get away from there, you ugly creature. That milk's not for you."**

**It might as well be, though. Howie couldn't drink it any more. But she'd be damned if she let a mangy cat drink Howie's milk.**

**She squeezed again and got a steady thin stream right into the bowl, just as the newly installed bell tinkled above her head.**

**Lottie's delicate jaw stiffened. She deliberately squeezed another stream of milk before looking up. The cord attached to the shiny bell disappeared into a tiny hole drilled into the wall.**

**"You know," she told the cat, "for two cents I'd pull that damn thing out of the wall and wrap that cord around somebody's neck. Tight."**

**The cat stretched and yawned and jumped to the floor, where it waited for her by the door. It had already learned what the tinkling of the bell meant.**

**Lottie, however, didn't move. She sat in her chair and raged silently at the bell and what it signified in her life. She nursed her rage and let it grow and bubble until, when the bell tinkled again, she almost felt filled enough with hate to refuse its insistent call. Almost. But Lottie wasn't stupid. She knew where such a refusal would send her, and she was not ready to live on the streets. Not yet.**

**At the third ring she finally stood up. "All right," she said impatiently, pretending it was the cat she responded to. "I'm coming. Don't look at me like that."**

**She pressed a clean cloth to her breasts, fastened her corset and dress, and opened the door. The cat slinked down the servant stairs to the kitchen. Lottie turned in the other direction and followed the cord down the hall to its point of origin. She knocked once on the door and entered.**

**“Oh, there you are, Lottie,” Jennie Lynn said in her sing-song voice. “What took you so long?”**

**“I was changing my rag,” Lottie said and enjoyed Jennie Lynn’s look of disgust.**

**Somewhere in Jennie Lynn’s past someone had told her she sang like Jenny Lind, the famous soprano, and she’d been singing her words ever since. She’d even changed her name in imitation of the Swedish singer. Lottie had once found Jennie Lynn’s odd ways endearing. That was back when she still felt some kinship with the world.**

**That was before the bell.**

**Before the pox.**

**Before Howie.**

**“Lottie,” Jennie Lynn said, “I want you to accompany Miss Susan on an errand.”**

**Lottie hadn’t noticed the woman sitting in a shadowed corner of Jennie Lynn’s sitting room. Now she looked at her, prepared to nod and say hello, but the woman refused to meet her eyes. Shouldn’t blame her for that, Lottie thought with a sneer, but she did.**

**Miss Susan. Jennie Lynn insisted on that form of address for her mysterious friend, as if she were a grand lady or something, when they all knew she was no better than the rest of them, or she wouldn’t be staying at Jennie Lynn’s house in the first place.**

**“An errand?” Lottie asked.**

**“Yes, to Deed’s Jewelers,” Jennie Lynn said. “Take the covered buggy and wait with it outside the jewelers until Miss Susan comes out.”**

**“Can’t Matthew take her?”**

**“I don’t want Matthew to take her, Lottie,” Jennie Lynn said sharply. “I want you to do it. Will you do as I say?”**

**Lottie tried to swallow her fury, but it formed too large a lump in her throat. She coughed it out instead, managed a nod, and turned and left the room, leaving it to Miss Susan to follow.**

**So now I’m a common cab driver, Lottie raged, practically running down the back stairs. What’s next, mucking out the stables? She felt the sting of tears in her eyes and blinked them back. The last thing she wanted was for *Miss Susan* to see her cry.**

**It wasn’t that long ago that Lottie herself had been Jennie Lynn’s favorite, one of the most popular girls in the house. She’d always drawn more than her share of the perverts,**



of course, due to her tiny size. There were a lot of fellows out there who enjoyed romping in bed with a child, or at least someone they could pretend was a child. They'd paid handsomely for the privilege of a visit with Lottie, and Lottie had enjoyed her share of privileges because of it. Even when she was big with Howie, and could not service any customers, she'd been treated with the respect and dignity accorded the favored. Some girls were tossed out the door when they grew too big to work, but Jennie Lynn knew how valuable Lottie would be again, after the baby was born.

Then came the God damned pox. Lottie clenched her tiny scarred hands. She could still entertain a pervert now and then. She'd seen men like them in Denver, when she'd worked at Rita Belle's house. There'd been a girl there named Ginny who'd lost a leg in a carriage accident. All she had left was a little stump, but there were men who came in and asked for her by name. They liked to play with the stump, Ginny said, and she laughed when she said it. All the girls had laughed with her, but it wasn't funny.

Those were the kind of men who would enjoy playing with Lottie's little pock-marked body, men who couldn't hoist it up unless a girl was wrong somehow. Such men sickened her, but at the same time she wished there were more of them. She was no longer earning her place in Jennie Lynn's house. She'd only been kept on after the pox out of pity, because Howie had died and her looks were gone. She'd picked up the other girls' mending. After all, they said, she had nothing better to do. She tried to be as helpful as she could to Jennie Lynn, hoping she could make herself indispensable to the owner of the house.

Then came the bell.

The damned bell.

The God damned bell.

She'd become Jennie Lynn's personal maid, summoned at the ringing of a bell, and she'd better come running or have a damned good excuse.

Now she was a common cab driver.

Lottie pushed through the kitchen and slammed out the back door, ignoring the cook. When she reached the stable she forced herself to calm down enough not to frighten the horses. She hitched Shyster to the buggy and drove out to the front of the house, where her passenger stood waiting like the grand lady she apparently thought she was.

Susan walked up to the buggy but didn't climb in. Good God, was she waiting for Lottie to get down and help her up? She could wait until hell froze over if that was the case.

"Can we put the top up?"

Lottie sighed heavily and climbed down. She walked to the back of the buggy, took one side of the heavy leather, and pulled. Susan took the other side and together they managed to secure the top.

Susan then climbed up unassisted and immediately untied the curtains on both sides of the buggy.

Lottie climbed back into the buggy, noticing as she did so that Susan had added a spotted veil to her straw sailor hat. Lottie clucked to Shyster and directed him to the road parallel to the trolley tracks heading toward downtown Spokane. Susan sat as far back in the buggy as she could.

She's got it backwards, Lottie thought. I'm the one who should be hiding my face. Still, she was relieved not to have to look at that perfect, smooth skin. Lottie guessed that she and Susan were near the same age, but as far as she could tell, that was all they had in common. Well, that and that they were both whores.

She's never been hungry, Lottie guessed. Susan's hair was thick and dark and glossy, and her eyes were dark and clear and clever. Lottie's hair had all been chopped off when she was struck with the pox, but even before that it had been a thin, wispy blonde. Only her crystal blue eyes had not been ravaged by the pox. Except, she amended, where they had once sparkled with joy at life, they now glittered with cold hatred. Yes, even her eyes had been ravaged by the pox.

Shyster grew nervous when they reached downtown Spokane. Lottie concentrated on avoiding trolleys and other buggies, and finally pulled up in front of Deed's Jewelers.

"This is it," she said.

Susan sat forward and looked up and down the street before climbing down and entering the jeweler's shop.

Very curious. What was she hiding from? And what business did she have with Deed's?

Her orders were to stay with the buggy, but Lottie was tired of taking orders. She jumped to the ground and tied Shyster to the rail along the street. The little window to the jeweler's was only a few yards away. Lottie stepped into a shadow beside the window and peeked in.

Susan's purse lay open on the glass counter, and a glittering string of diamonds streamed over her palm. Mr. Deed reached out a long finger and hooked the bracelet from Susan's hand. She said something and Mr. Deed nodded and fitted his jeweler's lens to his eye. He held the bracelet to the light, examined it closely, and spoke to Susan. After a few more exchanges of words, they both nodded. Mr. Deed placed the bracelet in the glass case in front of him, wrote what appeared to be a bank draft form, and pushed it across the

glass counter. Susan took it, waved it in the air a few times to dry the ink, and tucked it into her handbag.

Lottie was sitting behind the horses when Susan came out.

“May we stop at the bank?” Susan asked as she climbed into the buggy.

Lottie didn’t answer. She merely clucked to Shyster and directed him toward the bank.

She’s a thief, Lottie realized as she waited outside the bank for Susan. And for that one little transaction with Mr. Deed she’s probably made more money than I ever made in a year. Lottie clenched her fists over the reins so tightly Shyster backed up. She forced herself to relax and noticed a pimply youth standing outside the bank staring at her.

“Pop your eyes back in your head, sonny,” she said in the come-hither voice she’d mastered years ago. “If you want a closer look, come on up to Jennie Lynn’s. And bring ten dollars in your pocket.”

The boy flushed so dark his pimples barely showed, and he practically ran down the street. Lottie laughed. She really missed the days when youths had stared at her because of her beauty, rather than because she was a freak.

Susan emerged from the bank and climbed into the buggy. They didn’t speak on the ride back to Jennie Lynn’s. When Lottie stopped the buggy beside the front door, Susan reached into her purse and pulled out two five dollar silver certificates.

“Thank you for driving me, Lottie,” she said. “I’d like you to have this.”

Lottie stared at the veiled face with loathing. She must have hundreds of dollars in that purse, Lottie thought, and she’s offering me the price of a frolic in bed. She felt the same repulsion she’d felt the first time she sold her body. She took the money, just as she had then.

Lottie returned the buggy to the stable, took care of Shyster, and climbed the back stairs to her room. She didn’t notice the new cord in the hall, snaking along the ceiling from the second finest bedroom into her chamber. It wasn’t until she reached her room and collapsed into her overstuffed chair that she saw the second shiny bell hanging beside her door, opposite the first.

She jumped from her chair, heart pounding, unable to believe her eyes. She wrenched the door open and traced the path of the cord with her eyes. It led to Susan’s room. Miss Susan’s room, she corrected herself furiously. She stormed down the hall to Jennie Lynn’s room and flung open the door without knocking.

“What the hell is that?” she asked, pointing to the cord in the hall.

Jennie Lynn sat at her desk, pen in hand and eyeglasses perched on her nose. She turned slowly and removed her eyeglasses. She didn't pretend not to know what Lottie was talking about.

"Everyone has to pull her weight in this house, Lottie. If you can't work in one capacity, you have to work in another."

"What about her? What does she do? I work." Lottie choked back a sob. "I work. I've done everything you've asked me to do. I sew for everybody in this house. I clean the bloody sheets. Now I'm a God damned buggy driver." Angry tears coursed down Lottie's scarred face, pooling in the deepest pits. "But I will not be a personal slave to that holier than God whore. She's no better than anybody. When is she going to start pulling her weight around here?"

"That's enough, Lottie." Jennie Lynn spoke quietly, but for once there was no lilt in her voice and it was as effective as if she'd shouted. "Miss Susan is a guest in this house, and she is to be treated as such. When she rings for you, I expect you to respond quickly and courteously. If you can't do that," Jennie Lynn continued, raising her voice over the start of a protest from Lottie. "If you can't do that, then you will no longer be welcome in this house. Do I make myself clear?"

Lottie tried to slow her pounding heart, to steady her breathing, but she wasn't successful. She found herself unable to speak, so she merely nodded.

Oh, yes, she understood. She understood very well. It was only a matter of time, Lottie realized. She would end up on the street, where a whore's life wasn't worth a dime. Her future was there. She'd known it ever since she'd woken up from the small pox still alive. She would end up on the street.

But not yet, dear God. Please, not yet.

She nodded once more and backed out the door.

THE CORPULENT GENTLEMAN stood at the window and gazed out through the night, across the sloping lawn toward the smattering of lights on the river. A gentle rain smeared the window, and he suspected the fishing would be good next morning. He closed his eyes and imagined the damp, early morning smell of the river in rain. He could almost hear the plop of the worm being swallowed by the water, almost feel the tug of the trout at the end of the line.

He opened his eyes, sighed, and turned from the window. No fishing for him for some time to come. He had a mess to clean up.

**There never was enough gold to go around. But in 1897, when the United States was in the midst of its worst depression ever, and the population of the country had doubled in twenty-five years while the supply of gold had not, the shortage of gold was more keenly felt than usual.**

**No, he amended. The shortage of gold was catastrophic, or it would have been, if action had not been taken. He wasn't sure what else he could have done to salvage the situation.**

**But at what a cost. What a cost.**

**The big man sat in the leather chair behind the desk and ignored the groans it made under his ponderous weight. Thick, hairy cords snaked from the ceiling to the telephone on the desk. He reached for it slowly. He had deliberately chosen this time when he would be alone. He couldn't, in all fairness, put it off any longer. He lifted the receiver.**

**"Get me Robert Pinkerton in New York," he told the operator.**

**"Yes, sir."**

**He glanced at the calendar. It was less than two weeks since E.L. Noonan rescued the American economy from collapse. Only nine days ago he had been killed. For two days after Noonan's death, the gold levels had fluctuated dramatically, but in the end the American people had decided to honor Noonan's memory by keeping faith with his last business transaction. Gold was stronger than ever. Catastrophe had been averted.**

**It had been a near thing, though.**

**The operator's voice broke into his thoughts. "Your party is on the line, sir."**

**"Thank you. Thank you. Pinkerton, you there?"**

**"Yes, sir. Robert Pinkerton here. What can I do for you, sir?"**

**"Operator, you there?" he called loudly. Only silence greeted his question, and he sighed in frustration. Damned newfangled inventions.**

**"I believe he's gone, sir," Pinkerton said. "We are the only two who can hear. What can I do for you?"**

**"Ah, yes. It's about this woman they say killed Noonan. Susan Bantry. Did she do it?"**

**"I believe so, sir. We weren't called in to investigate, but the police seem certain she did it."**

**"You were hired, though, weren't you? By the family?"**

**“Yes, sir. Noonan’s son, Henry, hired our agency to find the girl.”**

**“Any luck so far?”**

**“We know she headed west. We’ve got a good agent on her trail, sir. Someone who knew her when she was a girl.”**

**“Is there a reward?”**

**“Yes, sir. Ten thousand dollars.”**

**It was a tremendous amount of money, though it was a pittance to Noonan’s heirs. How much would Noonan have left his mistress? If she hadn’t killed him, that is.**

**“The reward, is it for alive only?”**

**“Yes, sir. They want her to stand trial and hang.”**

**“Hm.” For a moment the only sound sent over the telephone wire was the soft scratch of the big man’s thumb stroking his mustache. “Pinkerton?”**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**“I want you to keep me informed. It’s extremely important that I be told as soon as your man finds that girl.”**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**“And, Pinkerton?”**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**“Keep it under your hat, for now. You inform me yourself. Don’t have any of your men do it.”**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**“Well, all right, then. Good night. And thank you, Pinkerton.”**

**“You’re welcome. Good night, Mr. President.”**

**Grover Cleveland hung up the telephone and turned to stare once more over the south lawn of the White House, absently tonguing the roof of his mouth.**

**Did that girl have any idea what she’d done when she’d ended the life of Elias L. Noonan?**

## Chapter Two

**JO ERIN SETTLED BACK** into the plush seat of the railroad car and studied the photograph of E.L. Noonan's mistress. She'd already had the photograph when she asked Donald if he had one. It had been given to her two days before, the day she'd been chosen by Pinkerton to be the agent to track Noonan's killer. It was a plum assignment, and it would not normally have come her way, but Jo Erin had an advantage. She'd known for years the woman who'd poisoned Noonan and left him dead in her bed.

The woman in the photograph was lovely. Her dark eyes glowed softly into the camera, and just the hint of a seductive smile curved her lips. Glossy hair was pulled back into some intricate knot and the hair on the top of her forehead was cut into a fluffy fringe. The innocence in her gaze could have belonged to any society deb if it were not for the low cut of her silk dress and the cascade of diamonds at her ears and throat.

Jo Erin ran her fingers across the nape of her neck where her own hair had recently been shaved. She kept her hair neatly barbered at all times. It gave it the impression of a fastidious man, which helped explain the lack of whiskers on her face. She had a ladies' wig in her luggage, of course, but it was many years since she'd allowed her own hair to grow long.

Susan's hair had been such a trial to her as a girl, Jo Erin recalled. When her mother was alive, she'd made Susan wear it down her back in curls. Her brothers had never let it alone, yanking at the locks and untying the ribbons almost constantly. Jo Erin herself had often found it too great a temptation to resist. Strange that Susan's hair had fascinated Jo Erin so much, when her own brown hair held no interest for her at all. She remembered at least one time when she'd brought Susan to tears with a particularly vicious tug of an enticing curl.

She felt some shame now, thinking of it, but how was she to have known better? She'd learned how to be a boy from the Bantrys. From them she learned that boys tease their sisters and make them cry, so that's what Jo Erin did. It was several years before Jo Erin realized the Bantry boys were not the best models for how to be a man.

When Susan's mother died, Susan had started wearing her hair in a thick dark braid down her back. She'd worn it like that to the funeral. Jo Erin remembered her mother commenting on how sad it was that there was no one now to fix the little girl's hair, but Jo Erin knew that Susan was glad to finally stop wearing curls. She'd told Jo Erin once she

wished she could cut it all off. Jo Erin had laughed at her and told her she couldn't because she was a girl. Susan had been furious and run off, swearing she would never tell Jo Erin anything, ever again.

She smiled now at the memory. It was so easy to make Susan angry.

She glanced at the photograph again and her smile faded. The woman who stared back looked as if she'd never been angry a day in her life. She had the look of a woman listening to a joke, anticipating the punch line, eager to laugh. She didn't look much like the girl Jo Erin remembered.

The photograph had done the trick, though. Jo Erin discovered which train Susan had boarded in New York almost immediately, and since then she'd left behind a trail of porters who remembered her clearly. She'd worn a veil much of the time, but she had to remove it to eat and that had been enough to imprint her face on the minds of the porters.

Why did she do it, Jo Erin wondered? Even as she asked herself, she didn't know whether she questioned most why Susan had killed Noonan or why she'd become his mistress in the first place. How could she have let herself become a rich man's plaything? And, once she had done so, why, after eight years, did she murder him in cold blood?

Jo Erin tucked the photograph into the pocket of the coat she had draped on the seat beside her. She shrugged her shoulders and tried to ease the discomfort of the band of cloth she wore across her chest. She would have been much more comfortable in a sleeping car, where she could have loosened the bands and let her breasts hang free, but Pinkerton would not agree to the expense of a sleeping car. It would be different if the assignment required a woman, he'd said, but it did not. Jo Erin was selected for the job because she knew the subject of the chase, not because she was a woman. If she'd rather not accept the job, there were plenty of other agents who would.

That was out of the question, of course.

Jo Erin slouched into the seat, propped her brown derby over her face, and closed her eyes to let the gentle swaying of the train lull her to sleep.

She hadn't seen nearly as much of Susan after they'd reached their teen years. Jo Erin had gone on to high school, and the Bantry boys had gone out to work. Susan quit school when her mother died. She was not a big girl, but she was strong, hardworking, and dependable. No one had found it odd that she had taken over the management of her father's household at the age of eleven, and no one had been surprised when she'd managed it well.

Jo Erin saw her around the neighborhood sometimes. She'd stop her to ask how she was doing, but Susan always seemed to be in too much of a hurry to talk. She'd have a basket over her arm, doing the marketing like a busy little woman.



One afternoon, when Jo Erin was around fifteen, she ran into Susan at the drug store. It was raining madly, and she was able to talk Susan into having a cup of cocoa while they waited for the storm to subside. Jo Erin had been at school that morning and wore her skirts. Her clothing had been chosen for her by her older sister and was far more fashionable than Susan's, which looked like her mother's old skirts cut down to fit. Jo Erin was older, taller, more educated and more worldly, and yet she'd ended up feeling like the child that day.

"Remember when we used to pull your hair?" Jo Erin had asked, laughing. She reached out and tweaked a feather of hair that had escaped Susan's braid.

Susan gave a smile that didn't reach her eyes, the kind of smile Jo Erin's mother gave her when she'd said something particularly stupid.

"How is your mother, Jo Erin?" Susan asked.

Jo Erin scowled. "Oh, she's doing well. She never leaves me alone."

"It's because she loves you," Susan said. She looked wistful, and Jo Erin backed away from the subject. It wasn't right to complain about her mother to Susan, who didn't have one.

"What are the boys doing now?" Jo Erin asked.

Susan shrugged. "Working."

"What about you? What are you doing?"

Susan leaned over her cup and dipped her tongue into the steaming chocolate. "Working," she said softly. "What else?"

"I'm sorry you have to work so much," Jo Erin said. She'd felt a strong and sudden desire to ease Susan's burdens. "Maybe someday you can come live with me, and you won't have to work so hard. I'm going to be a New Woman."

Susan had glanced up from her cocoa then. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to get a job and earn my own way."

"Doing what?"

It was Jo Erin's turn to shrug. "I don't know yet. But I'm not going to get married. I'm going to have my own home, and you can come live with me if you like."

Susan smiled then, her first real smile since they sat down with their cocoa. "That would be lovely."

**Jo Erin felt she'd finally said something that wasn't foolish.**

**It had been an unsatisfactory visit overall, though. She'd tried to repeat it several times over the next couple of years, but Susan had no time to spare for Jo Erin. After asking about Jo Erin's mother, she'd be on her way, basket on her arm and scarf over her head, like a housewife off to cook dinner.**

**Eventually, Jo Erin graduated from high school, the first in her family to do so, since her sisters had all left school early to marry. Jo Erin worked briefly as a shop girl and made an attempt at factory work. The problem with those jobs was, despite being the work of a New Woman, which Jo Erin approved in theory, she was still expected to dress and act like a woman. Being womanly was acceptable on occasion, but every day? It was impossible.**

**That was when she had decided to approach the Pinkerton Detective Agency. She prepared her pitch carefully. She dressed that day as a man in a sharp new suit, had the barber trim her hair short, and presented herself to the agency as Joseph O'Leary, applicant for the job of a Pinkerton detective.**

**They had questioned her briefly and sent her on her way. Her high school education was interesting, but she was too young, too inexperienced, to be of use to them. Jo Erin was not discouraged. It was what she'd expected. She left the Pinkerton office and returned an hour later dressed as a fashionable lady in an umbrella skirt, leg-o-mutton sleeves, a convincing wig, and stylish boater hat.**

**Again they shook their heads. It was true that detecting was sometimes needed where a man could not go, but they had all the ladies on staff they needed. That was when Jo Erin had removed her wig and reintroduced herself as Joseph O'Leary. That got their attention. A lady detective might be occasionally useful, but a detective who could so convincingly pass as either a man or a woman was invaluable. She was hired immediately.**

**It was shortly after she'd become a Pinkerton detective that Jo Erin saw Susan for the last time before she became Noonan's mistress. Jo Erin was dressed in her finest men's attire when she'd run into Patrick, always her favorite of the three Bantry boys. Patrick thought it was a great joke that Jo Erin was once again dressing like a boy, and he had invited her to come home to dinner.**

**Jo Erin cringed now at how pleased with herself she'd been that she was sporting her new Pinkerton look that day. She was nineteen years old, and she was absurdly proud of her new Chesterfield coat and black silk top hat. She felt masculine and cosmopolitan, and a bubble of excitement grew in her chest at the thought that Susan would see her that way.**

**They'd entered through the back door into the kitchen. The first thing Jo Erin saw was Susan on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor with a brush. She wore an ancient, faded dress, and she had a gray rag tied about her head. Her face was flushed and dripping with**

sweat. When she sat back on her heels and saw Jo Erin standing there in her masculine finery, she turned a darker shade of red.

Patrick ignored his sister and walked right across the damp part of the floor that had already been cleaned, tracking a clear set of prints across it. "Donald should be home by now," Patrick said.

"And I know Da and Everard are here."

Jo Erin hesitated in the doorway.

Patrick stopped. "Coming, Joe?"

Jo Erin looked at Susan, but Susan wouldn't look up. The dress was too small for her, and the thin material strained against Susan's breasts. Her lowered lashes cast a fringed shadow on her cheek.

"Hello, Susan," Jo Erin said.

"Hello, Jo Erin." Her voice was husky, and she cleared her throat. "How's your mother?"

Jo Erin smiled at that, though Susan didn't see it. "She's doing well. How are you?"

"Joe's staying for dinner, Susan," Patrick said from the hall.

Susan didn't respond except to wave Jo Erin forward with the floor brush, still without looking up. Jo Erin walked gingerly across the kitchen floor, embarrassed now at the dandified spats that must be clearly in Susan's line of vision.

When they met again at dinner, Susan had changed into a dress only slightly less faded than the one she'd worn earlier, and she'd spiraled her braid into a mound at the top of her head. Jo Erin tried to include Susan in the conversation, but with little success. Mr. Bantry had merely grunted at Jo Erin, and she suspected he didn't even know who she was. The boys talked loudly, eagerly, and nonstop, trying to impress Jo Erin with what they were doing with their lives. It was a miserable meal, made only worse by Susan's quiet presence at the end of the table. After dinner, she disappeared into the kitchen.

The next day, Jo Erin left for her first undercover railroad job, one for which she was particularly well suited, since it required infiltration of the wives' club as well as the union itself. It was nearly a year before she finally returned to New York, with a month of free time and her pockets full of money, payment for a job well done. She had a plan by then and had gone straight to the Bantry's to convince Susan to join her in it.

Only to learn that, in the meantime, Susan had become E.L. Noonan's mistress.

**Jo Erin sat up and tossed the derby onto the seat next to her. She could close her eyes, but she couldn't rest.**

**Why did Susan do it?**

**Oh, Jo Erin knew she had no right to expect Susan to wait for her, and if she had returned from the job to find Susan married, she would have understood, though she would have been sorely disappointed.**

**But why did Susan throw away her reputation, her chance for a normal, happy life, to live a despised life with a man thirty years her senior, a man she couldn't possibly love?**

**The proof of that was that she'd killed him.**

**Jo Erin stared out the window at the blackness and thought about the very last time she'd seen Susan, after she'd gone to live with Noonan. A Pinkerton colleague was working on a case for Noonan, trying to catch an embezzler on Noonan's private staff. He'd been successful and he'd had to report in one last time to Noonan. Jo Erin had joined him, dressed as a woman this time, pretending to be his wife.**

**They were to meet Noonan at the home of a wealthy friend. While they waited in the entry hall for the butler to find Noonan, they'd heard women's voices coming from the back of the house. Jo Erin turned toward the sound and saw two women enter the hall, arms about each other, laughing.**

**One of the women was Susan.**

**They wore white tennis dresses, and their faces were flushed and damp, as if they'd just come off the courts. They moved toward the two detectives, heading for the stairs, and for just an instant Jo Erin's eyes met Susan's. Then she was gone, moving past as if Jo Erin hadn't been there, making no sign of recognition at all. Susan continued up the stairs, laughing at something the other woman said. The sound of Susan's husky laugh made Jo Erin shiver. She hadn't heard Susan laugh like that since before her mother died. Jo Erin watched her until she disappeared through an elaborate set of double doors on the second floor.**

**Jo Erin wasn't angry when she learned Susan had become Noonan's mistress. She had been disappointed and sad, but not angry. They were women. They were expected to marry and have children, an expectation they both rejected, which meant they had to find other ways to survive in a man's world. Jo Erin didn't like Susan's choice, but Susan might not like Jo Erin's choice any better. Jo Erin could live with that. But that day when Susan looked right through her as if she didn't exist, Jo Erin was angry. It was betrayal. Susan had to have recognized her. Jo Erin hadn't changed that much, even if she was dressed as a fashionable society woman.**

**Jo Erin couldn't help remembering the last time she'd seen Susan before that, and how ashamed she'd been at being found red-faced and sweating from hard, honest work. There had been no shame this time. Susan and her companion had worn their perspiring faces with pride, because the sweat had been earned at play, rather than at work.**

**When had the wealthy taken over sweat as their own badge of honor? The poor had been sweating for centuries, since time began, but always with shame. Suddenly the wealthy had decided that sweat earned by vigorous play was worthy sweat. But only the wealthy had time to play.**

**Was that what Susan had traded her reputation for, surrendered her honor for? Given Jo Erin up for? The right to sweat with pride, rather than with shame?**

**The thought enraged Jo Erin now as it had then. She pulled Susan's picture out of her coat pocket and studied it again.**

**"I will find you, my girl," she said softly to the smiling face. "And when I do—"**

**Perhaps it was fortunate that the porter chose that moment to enter the car and announce their arrival in Spokane. Because the truth was, when Jo Erin found Susan, she had no idea what she was going to do.**

**E.L. NOONAN MAY have been the hero of Wall Street and even of many common men in the East, but out West among the world of silver mines and silver men he was no hero. Before Noonan's rescue of the Treasury with his infusion of gold, the silver men of the West had watched with eager anticipation as the gold levels dipped lower and still lower.**

**Surely now, the silver men reasoned, the government would agree to coin more silver, as the silverites had been urging for years. The single gold standard would now be seen as the archaic absurdity that it was, and bi-metallism would rule the day. The slumping silver market would revive, more men would work, the economy would surge with renewed vigor, and the depression would end. Surely now the gold bugs back East would realize that silver was the answer to all problems.**

**The men who worked in the mines were as adamant in their pro-silver beliefs as the men who owned the mines. If the demand for silver was assured by the government, there would be no more talk of layoffs, no more weak arguments from the owners that three fifty a day was more than they could afford to pay a mucker for risking his life to do back-breaking work in the bowels of the earth.**

When the gold crisis struck, the miners scanned their weekly four page mining town newspapers as eagerly as the mine owners read *The Wall Street Journal*, hope rising as gold levels sank.

Then Elias L. Noonan stepped in to “rescue” the Treasury. His action was seen more in the light of sabotage than rescue by the silver men. When they learned of his murder only a few days later they were not saddened, although there was no revival of hope. The damage had been done.

Still, if any of the miners riding the train from Wallace, Idaho, up the narrow canyon to Needles Eye had known that the woman sharing their car was Susan Bantry, Noonan’s killer, they would not have hesitated to turn her in for the ten thousand dollar reward being offered for her apprehension.

They didn’t know it, and so nothing marred their pleasure in watching her try to keep her seat in the center of the passenger car as it wound its way uphill. Not that it was actually a passenger car. It was nothing more than a boxcar with a few narrow benches bolted to the floor. As the only woman in the car, she had been given the best seat, a bench with a low back rest, like a church pew. She was grateful, as the backrest was all that prevented her from sliding onto the floor when the train twisted its way up the winding gorge. The fashionable padding on the back of her skirt made it all the more difficult to maintain her seat, and only by stretching her ankles could she brace herself against the floor with her toes.

She clenched one hand on the edge of the seat with a grip that made her fingers ache. Her other arm looped around her travel bag on the seat beside her, wedging her parasol, purse, and heavy winter cape between the case and her body. The miners, mindful of her presence, seemed to be watching their language, but they thought nothing of spitting their tobacco juice onto the floor, which was already slick with brown slime. The lowest flounce of Susan’s traveling skirt was liberally decorated with splatters.

The train suddenly leveled out and lurched to a stop, nearly sending Susan forward onto the floor. There was no window in the boxcar, but the door on the side was open. Over the heads of the men, Susan could see nothing but the green side of a mountain and a wedge of blue sky. As soon as the train stopped, however, men began jumping from the car, and she could see that they idled in front of a wooden building that looked smaller than the car they had been riding in.

Soon only one man remained in the car. He stood in the open doorway, leaned against the wall, and glanced at Susan.

“Is this Needles Eye?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “This is Yellow. We’ll be heading out for Needles Eye in another minute or so.”

**“Why are we stopped here?”**

**“Refreshments, ma’am.”**

**“Refreshments?” The little building was windowless, but the door was open. She could see the men standing before a crude bar, mugs tilted at their lips.**

**Needles Eye was seven miles from Wallace, as the crow flies. The twisting route the train took made the journey longer, of course, but they had left Wallace only fifteen minutes before. That the men felt the need to refresh themselves in the midst of such a short journey convinced Susan, if she had needed convincing, that she was entering an unfamiliar world. She had better get used to such behavior, though. These men were to be her companions, for a while, at least.**

**She wondered why the man who leaned in the doorway had remained behind. He wasn’t dressed like a miner. He was very tall and slender, and he wore a brown flannel suit that fit as well as a New York banker’s. His fair hair was long and matched the mustache that curled at the corners of his mouth. Instead of chewing tobacco, he had a thick cigar clenched between his lips.**

**As if sensing her scrutiny, he looked at her and smiled. His eyes crinkled with amusement. She looked away.**

**Five minutes after the train had stopped, men streamed out of the miniature tavern, wiping their mouths on the backs of their hands. When they had all pulled themselves into the car, the smell of liquor was nearly overwhelming. Susan was grateful when the train started up again and fresh air flowed through the open door.**

**A few minutes after their brief stop in Yellow, the tall man spoke to her again, raising his voice over the churning of the train’s wheels.**

**“There’s Needles Eye, ma’am.” He stepped away from the open door so she could see out.**

**The train was making a slow, steep turn, and Susan had a clear look at the town before the front of the train made another turn and blocked her view. Needles Eye was tucked into the bottom of a narrow canyon, shadowed by heavily forested walls on both sides. The midday sun sneaked down and struck a creek, the only bright spot in the town, making it glint like a silver thread.**

**“Not much to it,” said a bleary-eyed man who looked as if he’d slept in his clothes. “Don’t know why anyone would come here who didn’t have to.”**

**Susan smiled slightly to acknowledge the hint, but she provided no other response.**

Minutes later the train reached the town and slowed even more, drawing an astonished “Oh!” out of Susan as the train actually pulled through a building before it pulled to a stop.

The bleary-eyed man laughed. “That’s our hotel,” he said. “Town’s not wide enough to hold a big hotel and a creek and a train track, so they built the hotel with a tunnel through it. See? Keeps everybody happy.”

Except for guests at the hotel, Susan suspected, but she thanked the man for his explanation. She stood and fastened her cape about her neck, gathered her purse and parasol, and waited for two of the men to carry a rough wooden staircase from the depot over to the car. The tall man lifted her travel bag, took her hand, and helped her down the first two steps. He passed her over to the bleary-eyed man waiting on the ground and handed the travel bag down as well.

“Thank you,” she said to both men as the tall man leapt to the ground beside her. She took a deep breath. There was no point in keeping her destination a secret. “Can either of you gentlemen direct me to Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy?”

The bleary-eyed man gaped at her. “The Hurdy?”

“Yes.” She kept her voice matter of fact. “I’m looking for Miss Aimee.”

The tall man gave her a speculative look while the other man smiled slowly.

“Well, sure, ma’am,” the bleary-eyed man said. “I can tell you where Miss Aimee is. You just follow these tracks back through the hotel. Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy’s right past the drug store, and Aimee’s place is right up the hill behind the Hurdy.”

“Thank you.” Susan lifted her travel bag and turned to go.

“Say—”

She turned back. “Yes?”

The bleary look faded as his smile turned into a wide grin. “Will I be seeing you at the Hurdy tonight?”

She smiled. She might as well start. “Yes, I expect you will.” She turned again and started walking through the tunnel beneath the hotel, feeling both men’s eyes on her.

“Well, that’s good,” she heard the bleary-eyed man say. Then, more emphatically, “I say, that’s killer good.”

The tunnel beneath the hotel was not long. When Susan stepped into the sunlight on the other side she turned and looked back at the tracks disappearing into the darkness. A narrow wooden sidewalk fronted the buildings on both sides of the street. Everything about



the town was narrow. The train tracks shared space with the only road that ran through town, and Susan wondered what would happen if a buggy happened to be on the road when the train came through.

The town was short as well as narrow. The mine buildings all appeared to be on the far side of the four story hotel. On this near side were businesses and a few houses. Susan walked past a general store, a restaurant, and the drug store, and paused at Lou's Hurdy Gurdy. The windows were dark, and she could see no one about. Of course, the dance hall wouldn't come to life until evening, and then it would stay active until dawn. As she stared at the darkened windows, the sun slipped behind a cloud, making the building look darker than before.

She was grateful for the relief from the sun. She wore her cape because it was easier than carrying it, but the heat made her itch. Then she looked up.

The sun had not slipped behind a cloud. Although it was still just afternoon, it was June, the month of long days, but the sun had already fallen behind the mountain to the west.

She remembered once, when she was a child, finding a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. It had miraculously not been injured, but it was too young to fly. She had put it in an empty bucket and watched it chirp and hop around the shadowed bottom. Now and then it looked up at the circle of sky above its head, knowing that it belonged up there, wondering how it had the misfortune to get stuck in this dreary dark hole.

Susan knew how that bird felt.

Even in the heat, she shivered as she remembered what had happened next. Her brother Everard had walked up behind her and asked what she was looking at. Immediately, without thought, she had reached into the bucket, grabbed the baby bird, and smashed it to the ground. To make sure it was dead, she had stomped on it, choking on her own bile as she felt the tiny bones crunch beneath her feet. When it was nothing but paste, she had run away to be sick in the alley. But she didn't regret what she had done. Better to have crushed that baby into nothing than to let Everard get his hands on it.

Susan quelled the shiver. She was not one to live in the past.

She walked around the building and saw a cluster of tiny shacks built into the base of the mountain rising behind Lou's Hurdy Gurdy. A steep wooden staircase led from Lou's back door to the nearest of the shacks. The staircase then turned into a rickety sidewalk that, propped up by wooden legs of various sizes, perched precariously on the side of the mountain and meandered past the other little buildings. Susan saw lanterns with red glass hanging from the doors on the row of shacks. None of them were lit at that time of day, but they assured Susan that she was in the right part of town. This was the red-light district.

The shack at the top of the staircase was slightly larger than and set apart from the others. Susan started up the stairs and rehearsed what she was going to say. She had three reasons for being in Needles Eye, but only one of them was for Aimee to know.

The first, of course, was to hide from the law. That had been Jennie Lynn's idea, and Susan was grateful for her advice. Spokane was a long way from New York, but it had a growing police force with telephones and telegraphing equipment. Communication between law enforcement agencies, especially from across the country, was practically non-existent, but Susan's description would certainly have been forwarded to Spokane, and there was no sense taking chances. Much better, Jennie Lynn had suggested, to spend the next few weeks somewhere more isolated.

"I've got a girl in Needles Eye," Jennie Lynn had said. "That's a mining town in Idaho. She's been running a house for me there. Well, houses, really," she amended. "We had some little shacks built up behind a hurdy gurdy, and Aimee went out to take charge of them for me. But it's not making as much money as it should be, and I can't get a straight answer from Aimee about why it's not. So you go out there, Susan. See if you can find out what's going on. I'll give you a letter for Aimee so she'll hire you, and you can write to me about what you find out."

That was reason number two for Susan's presence in Needles Eye.

And the third reason, of course, was to work at Lou's Hurdy Gurdy. That was the reason uppermost in her mind as she knocked on the door of the largest shack.

Movement came from inside, and the door was opened by a young woman.

Susan's eyes widened in surprise. "Miss Aimee?"

The woman nodded.

Well, that explained number two.

**BILLY WEEKS SAT** back in his chair at Lou's Hurdy Gurdy and balanced on its two hind legs. His thick, hairy fingers, as big around as a dog's leg, grasped a beer glass full of amber liquid. He took a long swallow, as if the liquid had been beer instead of straight whiskey, and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He enjoyed the feel of the heavy stubble on his jowls, and he passed his hand over his face again.

He always thought of his dad when he did that. Here he was, forty years old, and whiskers still made him think of Dad, as if he'd been the real man and Billy was still just a young upstart. An impostor.

The black eyes beneath his heavy brows were no more than dark smudges in the shadowy corner where he sat alone, apparently stupefied by drink. No one watching him could see the way those eyes grew alert and snapped toward the door every time it opened. No one watching could possibly know the fury that raged in the big man's breast.

A spy. He'd been harboring a God damned Pinkerton spy.

It was no surprise that a spy lurked within the Miners' Union. They'd known that for months. Ever since secret union business had somehow started showing up in the pages of The Silver Miner, the newspaper run by the Mine Owners Group. No, the existence of a Pinkerton spy was no surprise. They had one of their own.

But only today had Billy learned that the spy was one of his own inner circle. Only today had he learned that one of the three men he'd been trusting with the most exclusive Union business was a low-down, conniving traitor.

Billy's hand contracted so tightly about the glass that it might have shattered if the door hadn't opened just then to admit the man he'd thought of, up until then, as his best friend.

"Hey, there, Billy Boy," Dex called, making his way through the smoky room toward the corner table. "What the hell you doing back here in the corner? Jesus God, Billy, is that whiskey? I'm glad I'm not blasting with you tomorrow."

Billy forced a smile of acknowledgement and gave a small nod. "Dex."

"Is that new girl here tonight?" Dex asked, looking around at the milling bodies. "I rode into town with her, you know. She is some pumpkin."

"I don't know," Billy said. "Get yourself a beer, Dex. We got to talk."

Dex looked closely at Billy for the first time. "Something wrong?"

"Get yourself a beer."

Billy watched Dex make his way to the bar. Dex was a burly man with wide eyes and just a few long tufts of hair on his balding head, though he was barely thirty. It was Dex who had helped him bury Caroline last year, and it was Dex who had stood by his side when he married Martha six months later. He'd even put in a good word for Martha's oldest boy, Colin, at the No Tail Mine. Not that it was anything to be grateful about. The boy was only fifteen years old, too young to start mucking underground for a living. Still, Dex was asked to help out, and he had. He was a good friend. A little slow, but honest, Billy had always thought.

Now he wondered. Could anyone be as stupid as Dex seemed to be? Especially a powder and drill man. He'd never thought of that before. Stupid men weren't allowed to handle dynamite. Had it been an act all this time? Mourning for Caroline, celebrating with

**Martha, had he done those things only to dupe Billy, the president of the Miners' Union, into trusting him?**

**If he had, he deserved to die.**

**So when Dex returned to the table, Billy had no qualms about what he was about to do. He leaned forward, forearms on the table, hands cradling his glass, his posture a picture of secrecy. Dex mimicked him until their faces were only inches apart.**

**“We’re gonna blow up the pumps Thursday night,” Billy said, his voice lower than a whisper. “We’re gonna flood the mine.”**

**Dex looked startled for only a moment, then his eyes gleamed. “You want me to do it?”**

**“No, no.”**

**Dex’s face fell.**

**“They’d suspect a powder and drill man, Dex,” Billy said. “We don’t want them to know who did it. I’m only telling you about it so you can be sure to be somewhere else, somewhere people will remember seeing you. Like here.”**

**“Who’s going to do it?”**

**“That don’t matter,” Billy said. “You just make sure everyone knows you’re here when it happens.”**

**“Jesus God, Billy, that’s not fair,” Dex whispered explosively. “I’m the best man you got. Ain’t I the best man you got?”**

**Billy nodded. “Sure you are, Dex. That’s why I can’t risk you on this little job. I got bigger things in mind for you.”**

**Dex’s eyes lit up. “What?”**

**“Never mind for now. Just make sure you’re here tomorrow night, making noise.”**

**“Noise?”**

**“Make sure people know you’re here, Dex. Be loud, rowdy. You know how. Tomorrow night, Dex. Got that?”**

**Dex shot a stream of tobacco juice directly into the spittoon three yards away. “What time?”**

**“Midnight. And Dex.” Billy waited until Dex looked up. “Don’t tell a soul.”**

**“I know,” Dex said. “Spies.”**

**Billy leaned back in his chair, took another long drink of whiskey, and watched Dex over the rim of the glass. He tried not to remember the things Dex had done for him. Dex walking seven miles through snow to Wallace to get medicine for Billy’s kids. Dex covering for him with Caroline when he’d spent too long at one of Miss Aimee’s shacks. But God damn it, if Dex was the bastard who was selling secrets to the enemy, that was all a sham anyway. If Dex was the spy, he was very, very good.**

**Suddenly a chair was pulled up to the table, spun around, and straddled by a brawny man with a long, tangled beard of brown and gray. He slapped a gentle hand on Dex’s shoulder.**

**“Why so glum, son?”**

**Dex shrugged the hand off and scowled at the older man. “Don’t call me son, old man.”**

**The bearded man smiled. “You ought to get yourself a girl, son. You’ll feel better.”**

**Dex brightened. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m gonna dance with that new girl. You danced with her yet, Zeke?”**

**“Me? Hell, no,” Zeke said. “She’s too fancy for me.”**

**Billy smiled.**

**“She’s just a girl, Zeke,” Dex said.**

**“No, she’s not just a girl, son,” Zeke said, shaking his head. “Some girls aren’t just girls, you know.”**

**Dex sent him a doubtful look and drained his beer. “Well,” he said, standing, “I’m gonna dance with her anyhow, even if she ain’t a girl.”**

**“Better wash your hands before you touch that one,” Zeke called after him, then turned to Billy, who still smiled quietly. “What about you, Billy? You dance with her yet?”**

**Billy shook his head. “Been busy. Grab yourself a drink, Zeke. Something’s come up.”**

**Zeke was instantly alert. “I’m not drinking tonight. What is it?”**

**Billy reached into his pockets for the makings of a cigarette.**

**Zeke often didn’t drink. That was only one of the odd things about Zeke. He was a Union man, but he wasn’t an officer. And yet whenever Union excitement was brewing, he**

was always right there in the middle of it, never invited but always accepted, so quiet and busy he was hardly even noticed.

Billy had been lax about Zeke. He should never have been allowed to weasel his way into the inner circle, but Billy had let him do it. He liked Zeke. He liked his quiet humor and his gentle ways, though Billy was not often drawn to gentle men. There was something unique about Zeke. He seemed to fit in no matter who he was with.

Which was probably a good quality for a spy, Billy reflected as he gave the cigarette paper a final lick and rolled it closed. He held a match to the end of the cigarette and heard it hiss as the flame touched spit. He dragged heavily on the cigarette, licked his fingers, and pressed them over the still burning match. The hiss was louder that time.

Zeke waited patiently until Billy blew out a lungful of smoke and leaned forward.

“We’re going to blow up the Needles Eye pump,” he whispered.

Something flickered in Zeke’s eyes and was gone before Billy could identify it.

“When?” Zeke asked.

“Friday. Midnight.”

Laughter and fresh air burst through the door and caught Billy’s attention for just a moment. Mitty Monahan and a boisterous group of his pals entered, laughing, slapping backs, kissing girls, and buying drinks.

Zeke was not distracted. “What do you need me to do?”

This part was tricky. Zeke was not as easily led as Dex. Billy hunched even closer to Zeke’s ear.

“You know they have a spy,” he whispered.

Zeke nodded.

“We gotta find out who it is,” Billy said. “Somebody’s gonna run to Wallace with the news, right after it happens. If the guy that does that is a Union man, that’ll tell us something. I want you to watch the road to Wallace. Find out who goes to town right after.”

Billy sat back and drew on his cigarette again, watching Zeke pull at his beard. If Zeke was the spy, he wouldn’t bother to watch the road. But that didn’t matter. It wasn’t as if they were really going to blow up the pump. What mattered was that the mine owners thought they were going to blow it up. And when. Billy himself would be watching the owners. If they geared themselves up for activity at the pump on Thursday, that meant Dex

was the spy. If they prepared for Friday, Zeke was the traitor. If it was Saturday, the third man was the culprit.

“Okay,” Zeke said, his face and voice expressionless, as if agreeing to do no more than have a smoke. He continued pulling at his beard and turned his head to scan the room.

The new girl in her fancy silk gown danced, not with Dex, but with Mitty Monahan. Mitty must have cut to the front of the line, judging by the looks sent his way by the line of men lounging with Dex at the bar. Mitty wasn’t the type of fellow to wait in line for a girl.

Zeke wasn’t watching the dancers though. Billy followed his gaze to the farthest corner of the room. Miss Aimee sat at the end of the bar, as usual, turning the handle of the hurdy gurdy—the box organ that gave Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy its name. Music tinkled from the box with every turn of the handle, loud enough to be heard over the laughter, cursing, and stomping feet of the men. Miss Aimee’s huge stomach dominated her small frame. She’d be dropping that child any day.

At that moment she looked up, seemed to meet Zeke’s gaze across the smoke-filled room, and smiled. Zeke turned to Billy.

“I’ll take care of it, Billy,” he said. “Think I’ll go visit with Aimee for a while.”

Billy watched him cross the room, ignoring the enticing looks cast his way by the boldest hurdy gurdy girls, to go sit by a woman so big with child she could barely walk. Billy dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it beneath his hobnailed boot. Zeke was an odd one, all right.

The dance ended, and Mitty Monahan passed the new girl off to the next man in line. Billy picked up his nearly empty glass and moved to intercept Mitty as he left the dance floor. He stood directly in the flushed miner’s path, but it was a moment before Mitty looked away from the dance floor and noticed Billy blocking his way.

“Mit,” Billy said.

“Hey, Billy.” Mitty slapped Billy on the shoulder. “Your glass is empty, my friend. Let me get that for you.” He took the glass and pushed to the bar.

Mitty always had money to throw around, Billy realized. He bought drinks for all his friends, and he had a lot of friends. Everybody liked Mitty. Women liked him for his good looks. Men liked his humor and his open wallet.

Where did he get all that money? He had no family to support and he lived in company housing, but still, three-fifty a day didn’t go far. Even his job as secretary of the Union only paid a token stipend.

God, wouldn't there be hell to pay if it was discovered the spy was an actual Union officer.?

Mitty came back with two glasses of beer, one of them already half empty. He handed the other to Billy.

"We need to talk, Mit," Billy said.

Mitty didn't seem to sense the urgency in Billy's voice. "Sure, Billy, sure, but I want to take another turn with this new girl, while I got her warmed up."

Billy looked at the girl, flushed and panting, finally dancing with the exuberant Dex. "It won't be your turn again for a while. Let's talk first."

Mitty took mock offense. "You think I gotta wait in line? I'm just taking a little break, to catch my breath."

"Give the other fellows a chance, Mit. This is important."

Mitty finally seemed to notice the seriousness of Billy's expression. "Oh. Sure, Billy. Sure. Let's sit down."

"Back here." Billy led the way to his corner table. When they were seated he repeated his performance for the third time. "We're going to blow up the pump. Saturday night, midnight."

Mitty's eyes widened. "Shit! It'll flood the mine, Billy."

"That's the whole idea, Mit."

"Well, yeah, but, shit. Shit, Billy. You're talking thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage."

"Yeah. You got a problem with that, Mit?"

"Well, no, Billy. No." Mitty sat back in his chair and finished his beer, a stunned look on his face. Finally he smiled, sat forward, and slammed his empty glass on the table. "Hell, no. This'll be fun. Saturday night? When do we meet?"

"Eleven, at the Union Hall. You wait for me there. I'll come get you." He wouldn't, of course, but by then Billy would already have his answer. If Mit was the spy, it'd be handy to have him sitting around waiting for Billy at the Union Hall. Waiting for Billy to do what he had to do.

"I'll be there," Mitty said, laughing and spinning the empty glass on the table. "This is gonna be a hell of a party."



**“Hey there, Mitty.” Dex dropped into a chair, flushed and grinning. “I danced with that girl. Susan’s her name. She’s some pumpkin.”**

**“Yeah,” Mitty agreed, laughing at Dex’s excitement. “She’s a pumpkin, all right.”**

**“But she don’t do nothing but dance,” Dex complained. “She won’t even sell a kiss.”**

**“She won’t, eh?” Mitty sent a speculative look across the room at Susan, who now sat with Aimee and Zeke, trying to catch her breath. He banged his glass on the table. “By God, she’ll sell me a kiss or my name ain’t Mitty Monahan.”**

**He stood, a determined smile on his face, and started toward the far corner of the room.**

**“Holy God!” Dex hooted, scurrying after Mitty. “I gotta see this.”**

**Billy watched both men cross the floor to where Zeke sat with the two women. A moment later, all three of his suspects clustered around the new girl, laughing and flirting, apparently not one of them sparing a moment’s thought for the plan to blow up the pump.**

**But one of them was. One of them, even now, was planning to betray the Union he’d sworn under oath to defend. One of them would soon be running to the Mine Owners Group with news of the plan, and guard activity would be stepped up. Thursday, Friday, or Saturday.**

**His trap was set. Within three days, it would be sprung.**

## **Chapter Three**

**THE TROLLEY STOPPED** across the street from Jennie Lynn’s parlor house, a convenience arranged, no doubt, for the visitors who came from all over the city.

**Jo Erin jumped to the street and stood a moment looking up at the elegant three-story Victorian house, cursing herself for her stupidity. Two days she had wasted hunting for Susan throughout Spokane, showing her picture at hotels, boarding houses, and restaurants. It hadn’t even occurred to her to check the bordellos.**

**She’s a rich man’s mistress, Jo Erin reminded herself. A courtesan. Of course she’d mix with other loose women. But if it hadn’t been for a pimple-faced street urchin and a sharp-**

eyed jeweler, she'd still be searching for Susan among the respectable citizens of Spokane. Even in her first year with Pinkerton, she'd never made such a blind, stupid mistake.

Robert Pinkerton never should have selected Jo Erin for this job. The fact that she knew Susan was more of a hindrance than an advantage. She still thought of Susan as the girl she'd known years ago, her innocent childhood friend. She had to remember to search for Susan as she would a stranger. A stranger who would feel right at home in a brothel.

It was early afternoon. Jo Erin was the only passenger to get off at the stop, though it would be a different story in the evening when the brothel opened its doors. She crossed the street, mounted the steps, and turned the bell. A moment later she was shown into Madam Jennie Lynn's parlor.

It wasn't Jo Erin's first visit to a brothel. She'd visited several in the past as part of investigations, always as a man, of course. Each time she was forced to endure teasing from the women who assumed, from Jo Erin's boy-like appearance, that she was there to lose her virginity. Jo Erin allowed them to think so. It gave her a ready-made reason, only half faked, for bolting in panic at the thought of removing her trousers in front of a prostitute.

For this visit, however, she expected no such problems. It was too early in the day for a gentleman to arrive on business. She didn't expect to be treated as a customer.

Jennie Lynn's was a true parlor, much more refined than Donald Bantry's dirty, cluttered room. An elegantly dressed woman rose from a green brocade sofa and glided across a plush carpet, past furniture that gleamed with the reflected light of the chandelier. She looked more like a Duchess in a manor house than a madam in a bordello.

"How do you do?" she asked in an overly sweet, melodic voice. "I am Jennie Lynn. How may I help you?"

The woman seemed familiar somehow, but Jo Erin attributed it to the artifice that was fairly standard in bordello madams—artfully rouged cheeks and lips, darkened eyes, and low décolletage.

"I'm looking for Susan Bantry," Jo Erin said. Her voice came out much harsher than she'd planned. The thought that Susan might be in the house at that very moment, resting up from her exertions of the night before, preparing to entertain a new round of callers that night, made her forget completely her intended line of questioning. "Is she here?"

The woman's delicate eyebrows rose slightly at such rudeness. "My name is Jennie Lynn," she repeated gently, her tone a reprimand, as prim and graceful as a grand society dame. "And you are?"

Jo Erin swallowed and forced herself to calm her thoughts. She'd get nothing out of this woman if she offended her. "I apologize, ma'am. My name is Joe O'Leary. I'm a detective with the Pinkerton Detective Agency." She nodded politely and tried to soften her voice. "Is

Susan here?” Damn. Her voice went from menacing to wheedling. Couldn’t she even say Susan’s name in a normal voice?

“Please, sit down,” Jennie Lynn said, indicating the sofa. “We don’t have a Susan here, but we have a Sadie. She’s very popular. Is that who you mean?”

“No, ma’am, it’s not. I’m looking for Susan Bantry. I know she’s here.” There. She’d said her name without any emotion whatsoever.

Creases appeared between Jennie Lynn’s brows as she shook her head. “No. We have no Susan here.”

Jo Erin pulled Susan’s picture from her pocket and handed it to Jennie Lynn, who glanced at it and shook her head again.

“Not here.”

“Ma’am,” Jo Erin said, “perhaps you didn’t know that she’s wanted by the law. She murdered a man in New York. You’re harboring a criminal. You could be prosecuted yourself.”

Jennie Lynn gave the slightest of nods and compressed her lips, as if biting back a smile.

Oh, for the devil’s sake, she’d get nowhere spouting legalities to this woman, whose very livelihood was outside the confines of the law.

“There’s a ten thousand dollar reward for her capture,” Jo Erin said.

Jennie Lynn gazed pleasantly back, and again Jo Erin felt a twinge of familiarity. It was more than that she was a madam. Where had she seen her?

“Look, Jennie Lynn,” Jo Erin said heavily, “I know she came here. I have witnesses. She was seen with another girl from this house, a girl who’d had the pox. If I have to, I’ll get the entire

Spokane police force over here to tear this place apart. It won’t help your business, and I’ll find her anyway. Why don’t you just turn her over to me?”

Finally, a genuine emotion crossed Jennie Lynn’s face, a small expression of resignation and remorse.

“That won’t be necessary,” she said. “She was here.”

A surge of hope erupted for a moment before it crashed. “Was?”

Jennie Lynn nodded. “She stayed four nights. She couldn’t stay longer. She knew the law would be looking for her, and we get more than our share of attention from the police in this place.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me. We both thought it best if I didn’t know.”

She was lying. Jo Erin was as certain of that as she was certain that the woman had been telling the truth a moment before. She had been a detective too long not to know the signs—the refusal to look Jo Erin in the eye, the steady concentration on her hands, the pleating and unpleating of a fold in her skirt.

Jo Erin allowed the wheedle to reenter her voice. “Jennie Lynn, I’m not looking for Susan simply as an officer of the law. It’s true I was hired to find her, but that’s not the real reason I’m looking for her. I’ve known Sukey my whole life. She’s a friend, and I’m trying to find her so I can help her.”

Jennie Lynn looked up, her attention caught at the use of Susan’s nickname. “What did you say your name was?”

“Joe O’Leary. Joe A—Aaron O’Leary. Did she mention me?” She could have kicked herself the moment the question left her lips. She sounded like a child wheedling for a compliment, and it was stupid besides. If Susan had mentioned a Jo Erin from her past, she would have described a woman, not a man. She held her breath as she waited to see if she had given herself away.

She cringed when Jennie Lynn laughed, certain she had tipped her hand. But Jennie Lynn only said, “No, not that I recall. I’m sorry, she never mentioned you, Mr. O’Leary.”

Jo Erin flushed, embarrassed by her clumsy attempt to hear second-hand words about herself from Susan.

That laugh, though. That musical, tinkling laugh. She had a memory of tennis dresses, a cool glance, women’s arms around each other’s waists as they ascended the stair.

“You knew her in New York,” Jo Erin said. “When she was with Noonan.”

Jennie Lynn acknowledged it with a nod. “We were friends. She knew she could come to me in her need. But she didn’t stay. I’m sorry, Mr. O’Leary, but I don’t know where Susan is. If I hear from her, I’ll certainly tell her you’re looking for her.” She handed the photograph back. “Is there anything else?”

Jo Erin took the photograph and stared at the almost smiling face of Susan.

She looked up. “Why did she do it?” Her voice was pleading again, but this time she didn’t notice. “Why did she kill him? Did she tell you that?”

Jennie Lynn shook her head. “I didn’t ask. If she had wanted me know, she would have told me.”

“Did he mistreat her? Did he hurt her?”

Again she released that musical laugh. “Oh, no, not at all. Elias worshiped Susan. They were very happy together. He treated her like a princess.”

Jo Erin felt as if a bucket of cold water had been dashed over her.

All those years when Susan had been with Noonan, Jo Erin had imagined her miserable. The idea of Susan’s misery satisfied Jo Erin in some backward way. Imagining Susan unhappy evened things out. She was unhappy that Susan was with Noonan. It would only be fair if Susan were unhappy too.

She’d never really imagined Susan happy. She looked at the photograph once more and realized why it didn’t look like the Susan she remembered. Susan was happy.

As she left the house, Jo Erin planned the direction her search would take next. Getting the cooperation of the Spokane police in a search of the house was an empty threat. Jennie Lynn no doubt had an agreement with the city, paid for handsomely, to be left alone from the law. In any case, Jo Erin believed that Susan was no longer at the bordello. At least not this bordello. She would show the photograph around some more, this time to trolley conductors who brought traffic to every whorehouse in town.

Before she even reached the bottom step, however, she was hailed by a whisper from the corner of the house.

“Hey, mister.” A small girl stood in the shadows on the eastern side of the house, beckoning with her arm. Jo Erin walked toward her. “You looking for Miss Susan?”

Jo Erin joined the girl in the shadows. Only she was not a girl at all, but a tiny woman who must have been Jo Erin’s own age or more. Her skin was covered with scars from the small pox.

“Do you know where she is?” Jo Erin asked.

“I might have an idea,” she said and watched with steady blue eyes that should have been beautiful, but were not.

Jo Erin reached into her pocket and fingered some coins.

Five minutes later she boarded the trolley, twenty dollars poorer but with a destination in mind. She wondered where she could pick up some second hand miner's clothes.

**SUSAN GREETED THE** next dancer with a breathless smile just before he grabbed her about the waist and swung her onto the dance floor. The beat he chose to dance to was more rapid than the one being churned out by the hurdy gurdy, but Susan kept up without losing her smile. It was his nickel, after all.

His dollar, rather, which was the price of a drink and a dance. Sixty cents of the dollar went to Lou. Two bits went to Aimee, out of which a portion was sent to Jennie Lynn in Spokane. The remaining fifteen cents per dance was Susan's share. It wasn't a bad wage. On a busy night, she could earn more than a miner did for ten hours underground.

Not that she didn't work just as hard. Heavy hands squeezed her bruised ribs, and she tried not to wince.

Still, it had been four days, and she hadn't even earned enough to compensate for the damage done to her gown. She should have known better than to have worn silk, but after the first night the gown had been ruined anyway, so she continued to wear it. The men seemed to like it. It didn't bother them that she wore the same dress every night, or that the bottom twelve inches of the skirt was brown with tobacco juice, or that the silk at the waist was snagged and rough from the handling of dozens of calloused hands. It was still smooth to them.

Of course, she could earn a lot more money if she was willing to work out back, as Aimee kept reminding her. Girls who took men to the shacks could earn five times in an evening what Susan made just dancing. And, she thought, as the burly miner trod on her bruised foot, they got to spend at least part of the evening off their feet.

Susan looked to where Aimee sat in the corner of the room, cranking out music on the hurdy gurdy and talking with Zeke. It had been immediately apparent to Susan why Jennie Lynn's revenues had been shrinking, and she also understood why Aimee agreed to take the job in Needles Eye in the first place. Away from Jennie Lynn's observant eye, Aimee could maintain her pregnancy and keep her baby, something not easy to do in a busy brothel. Aimee's protruding stomach, however, precluded her from working in the shacks herself, and in the later weeks of her pregnancy she had difficulty even monitoring her girls. She was certain some of them were taking extra jobs. They stayed out too long between dances. In bypassing Aimee, they were able to keep the entire payment themselves, and Aimee was in no condition to prevent them.

Susan had not yet reported the situation to Jennie Lynn. Her sympathy was all with Aimee.

The song ended and Susan was delivered, puffing for air, to Aimee's table. One more dance and she'd have earned a break.

Susan took a quick swallow of cool tea and smiled at the next miner in line, a slender man in the same worn gray clothing all the miners wore. He reached for her, and Susan glanced up. The smile drained from her face and the room began to spin even before the miner turned her to the dance floor. Her legs felt foreign to her and she stumbled twice, kept from falling only by the arm wrapped around her waist. The music started, and the room began spinning in earnest.

She stared straight ahead at the collar of the miner's shirt. It was old, but clean, and was buttoned to the top of the neck. Over it, the miner wore a loose vest and a jacket. Susan had been handled by miners all week, but she had never been more conscious of the warm hand at her back. The grip was firm, but not rough.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her lips as stiff as her legs.

"Looking for you."

"Why?" It was a foolish question. She had committed a monumental crime, after all. There was a ten thousand dollar reward for her capture. Lots of people must be looking for her.

"Susan."

The word was gentle, and she had to blink the sting out of her eyes before looking up into brown eyes nearly as familiar to her as her own.

"You're still with Pinkerton, then?" Susan asked.

"Shh." The arm drew her closer and lips grazed her ear. "Don't mention Pinkerton. They kill Pinkerton men around here."

Susan shivered, but whether it was from the threat of violence or from Jo Erin's breathy whisper in her ear, she didn't know.

"Do you plan to arrest me?"

They danced slowly, but Jo Erin's breathing was loud, as if she were exerting herself. "Shouldn't I?"

Susan closed her eyes and danced without looking, relying on Jo Erin's arms to keep her steady.

Why Jo Erin, of all people? Didn't Pinkerton have enough men to send after her? It would be so much easier to be arrested by a stranger. Of course, Jo Erin had the advantage

of knowing the woman she was searching for. No doubt that was why Pinkerton selected her for the job.

But Pinkerton may have forgotten that Susan would recognize Jo Erin too, and he didn't know that Jo Erin would find her in the middle of a seething Union town where Susan's knowledge was as dangerous as Jo Erin's. Mr. Pinkerton might have made a serious mistake.

Susan's pulse calmed as she realized she had nothing to fear from Jo Erin, at least not in Needles Eye. She opened her eyes and smiled. She placed her hand on the back of Jo Erin's neck and drew her ear down to Susan's lips. "You wouldn't dare arrest me here," she whispered. "Your secret is as dangerous as mine."

Susan removed her hand, but Jo Erin kept her head down, nearly resting it on Susan's shoulder. Finally, Jo Erin stood straight. Her expression acknowledged Susan's words, and Susan relaxed. Jo Erin would not, could not, arrest Susan. Not in Needles Eye, anyway, where a Pinkerton man was no better than a scab. For a Pinkerton woman, it could only be worse.

"We can't talk here," Jo Erin said. She sped up the dance and guided Susan backward. "Let's go out back where we can be alone."

"No," Susan said. "I don't work in the back."

"I don't mean that. I just want to talk."

"No, everyone knows I don't work out back."

"You can this once," Jo Erin said, her voice sharp. "Don't worry, I have money."

"Don't, Jo Erin." Susan stopped, but Jo Erin pressed her, and Susan took a stumbling step backward. "I can't—"

Susan's backward path was suddenly blocked and she was sandwiched between Jo Erin and a large body.

"She stays in here, son," the man said.

One of the other women sidled up to Jo Erin. "Hey, mister, let her go. Susan don't work in the back." She smiled suggestively. "Take me. I work real good on my back."

Jo Erin flushed and dropped her hands from Susan as if she were on fire. She backed away, turned, and pushed her way through the crowd to escape out the front door.

The other woman laughed. "My, he's a hot one, ain't he? You better leave him to me next time, Suze."



Susan forced a smile and turned to the man behind her. "Thank you, Zeke."

"My pleasure, doll," Zeke said. "You ready for a break? You look a little tired."

"Yes, please." They moved to Aimee's table.

"You all right?" Aimee asked. "We were watching you with that man. Do you know him? You seemed to be getting pretty close."

Susan took a long swallow of tea. "No, I don't know him. He was all right. He just didn't understand..."

Aimee nodded. "Yeah, he thought you worked out back. He won't make that mistake again, I guess. He looked about ready to die when he found out."

Zeke and Aimee laughed.

Susan held the cool glass to her flushed face, and tried to still her racing pulse.

Oh, Jo Erin, why you, she thought? Why, of all people, you?

**"WHERE YOU RUSHING off to, Joe? I was going to buy you a drink."**

Jo Erin froze. She'd only been in town one day. She'd barely had time to get a room at the hotel and find Susan, nothing else. Who knew her name?

She turned but saw no one. Lanterns hung at intervals in the tunnel beneath the hotel, but between them, it was dark. She moved toward the nearest lantern, hovered at the edge of the light, and waited.

A figure stopped at the opposite edge of the circle of light. "You know me," the man said. "We worked together once." He stepped further into the light, and Jo Erin relaxed.

"Hello, Mitchell."

He smiled. "I knew you'd remember me. They call me Mitty here."

Jo Erin thought back. Mitchell was too smart to say out loud that they'd worked the Homestead Strike together. She'd worked both ways on that one, part of the time as a man and part of the time as a woman, but Mitchell had only known her as a man.

"Let's have that drink in my room," Jo Erin suggested.

It was unusual for a Pinkerton agent to run into an agent he knew on a job. Pinkerton was careful not to send two agents to do a job together more than once. Often agents were hired by both sides, each working against the other without even knowing it. The integrity of the agency and its agents was what made it so successful. Mine owners and union bosses alike relied on Pinkerton to ensure that any agent they hired would be true to the job at hand, even if it was the opposite side of the job the agent had undertaken the last time. It was not unusual for a Pinkerton agent to work for the mine owners on one job and the union on the next. Pinkerton isolated the agents from each other as they moved from job to job. If one agent recognized another Pinkerton man working for the other side, it would give him an unfair advantage. It was like a complex game, and those were the rules. It was up to Pinkerton to make sure it worked.

“What the hell are you doing here, Joe?” Mitchell asked as soon as they were in Jo Erin’s room. He’d brought a bottle of rum and poured them each a drink. Jo Erin took a sip and set the glass down.

“I’m on a job,” she said, “but it’s nothing to do with the mine.”

“Neither side?”

“Neither side. It’s something else altogether.”

He wouldn’t expect Jo Erin to tell him what it was. Confidentiality was another trademark of the Pinkerton Agency. Mitchell, however, was not so finicky about the rules. “That’s great,” Mitchell said. “Then I can tell you about my case. You won’t believe it. They made me secretary of the Union.”

Jo Erin laughed. “Congratulations.” She wasn’t as surprised as Mitchell seemed to think she’d be. Mitchell understood unions as

well as any man, and he had an easy way about him that generated trust. Everyone liked Mitchell. “You’re working for the mine owners then?”

“Yep. We’re having a secret meeting in a bit. We’re flooding a mine. At least, they think we are. The owners put twenty guards on it after I told them. There won’t be any mine flooded tonight.”

“Good work,” Jo Erin said.

They drank a toast to his success and laughed about old times until Mitchell left for his meeting. When he was gone, Jo Erin lay back on her bed and stared at the ceiling. Now and then she sipped from the glass of rum.

Susan didn’t wear a corset under that silk dress. When Jo Erin put her hand on Susan’s waist, there was nothing between them but the silk of the dress, and perhaps one thin petticoat. She could feel the heat from Susan’s skin against her palm. When she pulled

Susan close to her and whispered in her ear, Susan's breasts pressed against her. Jo Erin had wished for a moment that she weren't wearing bindings. She wanted to feel Susan's breasts against her own.

Susan had been perspiring heavily, and the scent of her was musky, sweet, and sour all at once. The soft movement of her lips against Jo Erin's ear, the tiny puff of air as she whispered her threat, caused a sharp tug in Jo Erin's groin and made her shudder.

Jo Erin slid a hand inside her trousers, touched herself, and groaned. Did the other miners feel this way when they danced with Susan? How could they not?

Was this how she'd made Noonan feel? Noonan, who had worshipped her, according to Jennie Lynn? Before she killed him?

Damn her.

She wasn't surprised by Susan's threat to unmask her. She'd known it was coming. If Jo Erin revealed Susan as Noonan's killer, Susan would reveal Jo Erin as a Pinkerton agent and a woman. If this were a game, they were at a stalemate. Neither was in any danger from the other, as long as neither of them moved.

**TWO HOURS LATER** Jo Erin was awakened from a restless sleep by a rattle at her window. Instantly alert, she jumped from the bed and peered outside. Her window faced the side of the mountain. The nearest tree was almost close enough to reach out and touch. A dark shadow moved beneath the tree and a moment later a smattering of pine cones and dirt rattled against Jo Erin's window again. She turned, pulled on her boots, and made her way silently outside.

She slipped around the east side of the building so that she came up behind the shadow, making certain who it was before she spoke.

"Mitchell," she whispered.

"Joe." The voice was weak. "You gotta help me."

She moved closer to the crouching figure. "What's wrong?"

"It was a trick. They set me up." Mitchell's voice wavered. "I'm shot, Joe."

"I'll get help."

"No, don't get anybody. They never saw my face. You gotta hide me."

It was too dark to see Mitchell clearly, but Jo Erin reached out and touched the side of his face. The skin was cold and damp, and the pulse in his neck was rapid. “Where’re you shot?”

“Here.” Mitchell removed his hand from his side, and Jo Erin could see that it glistened black with blood. If he was gut shot he’d already be dead, but who knew what was torn up inside him?

“You need a doctor,” Jo Erin said. “Is there one here in town?”

“Yeah. But he works for the mine owners.”

Jo Erin started to rise.

“No!” Mitchell pulled at Jo Erin’s shirt. “You can’t go to them. They got a spy.”

“You’re their spy, Mitchell.”

“No, no. The Union has a spy. In the Mine Owners Group. But I don’t know who it is. You can’t go to them. They’ll kill me, and you too.”

Jo Erin clamped a hand on Mitchell’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Mitchell. I’ll take care of you. I’ll take you to Wallace. They’ll have a doctor there.”

“No train ‘til morning,” Mitchell said weakly. “You got to hide me, Joe. Don’t let them find me.”

“Okay. Okay. Here, can you lean on me?”

She helped Mitchell wrap his arm across her shoulder and she half carried him into the woods behind the hotel.

SUSAN USED THE rail to pull herself up the rickety wooden steps to the shack she shared with Aimee. Since she didn’t work out back, Susan didn’t warrant a shack of her own. Not that she wanted one. They were tumble-down, one room structures, built mere inches apart and connected by a tottering wooden sidewalk that seemed to be stuck to the side of the mountain by nothing more than determination. Aimee’s shack, set slightly apart from the others, was the largest and, to Susan’s wary eye, the least likely to tumble down the side of the hill if the wind grew strong. It was also far more comfortable than the other shacks. Aimee had brought her own sheets, pillows, and curtains with her from Jennie Lynn’s. Instead of plain wooden walls, Aimee’s walls had silk hangings and paintings, and colored globes covered the lamps.

Susan's legs trembled. Four nights in a row she had danced to exhaustion. Tomorrow was Sunday, but there was no rest on the Lord's day for hurdy gurdy girls. The miners had every other Sunday off. Hurdy gurdy girls had none.

But it wasn't only exhaustion that made her legs weak.

Jo Erin was in Needles Eye. She'd come to take Susan back to New York, to face trial, prison, maybe even hanging. They did hang women, didn't they?

Jo Erin wouldn't dare to do it. Would she?

They were never best friends, not like so many little girls were. Jo Erin wasn't the sort of girl to have another girl for a best friend. Jo Erin was friends with Susan's brothers more than with her, but the two of them had shared a special bond, different than friendship. At least Susan thought they had. Had she imagined it?

Jo Erin was tough, like the boys, but she wasn't mean about it. For reasons she never really questioned, Susan had always craved Jo Erin's attention, and she basked in it when she got some. Sometimes, the best of times, Jo Erin would remember she was a girl and take a break from the boys' rough play to spend some time with Susan.

Susan smiled at the memory of their games. Jo Erin would let Susan dress her up and boss her around, and Susan would get her to play all sorts of foolish games she would never have played around the boys. They laughed so hard. Marvelous, lighthearted play, not worry-filled play like it was when the boys joined them. There was no fear that a game could turn into a fight, or worse, with no warning.

Of course, that all ended when Mama died. Susan had no time to play after that. There was only time for cleaning and cooking, laundry and marketing, sewing and ironing. So much work. And if she didn't get it done, Da or one of the boys would make her suffer for it.

There was no room in Susan's life or her heart, then, for lighthearted laughter.

She couldn't have played with Jo Erin then anyway. Susan's world had shrunk to the size of the kitchen, while Jo Erin's expanded in ways Susan couldn't even imagine. Jo Erin went to high school and became educated and worldly, while Susan grew self-conscious and shy. What was there to talk about? The sorry state of the turnips available in the market? She longed for Jo Erin's attention more than ever, but she was tongue-tied around her.

She had not seen Jo Erin for more than a year when she showed up with Patrick that day at the back door, dressed in her fine Pinkerton suit. Susan looked up from scrubbing the floor and saw Jo Erin standing there, far more handsome in her manly clothes than any man Susan had ever seen. Susan was used to seeing Jo Erin in boy clothes, but she had never before seen her dressed as a man.

Susan had looked into those brown eyes that seemed to see her as no one else did, and all those years of craving Jo Erin's attention fused into one pulsing moment. More than anything she wanted Jo Erin to stride across the fresh-scrubbed floor, lift her to her feet, and rescue her from her dreary life. Jo Erin had said once that she was going to be a Modern Woman, and that she would let Susan come live with her. Susan knew she hadn't really meant it, it was just foolish talk, but she never stopped dreaming about it.

Susan's face had throbbled with heat. She'd looked down at the scrub brush in her hand. Dirty suds dripped from her chapped hands to her lap, drops darkening the faded material of Mama's old skirt, and she was ashamed. She felt as worn and tired as Mama's old clothes, while Jo Erin was as vigorous and fresh as the pristine Pinkerton shirt she wore. Susan's dream popped like the gray soap bubble on the floor.

She could just leave, Susan thought now. She could pack her bag and board the morning train to Wallace. From there she could catch a train for Spokane or Missoula. Of course, by the time she reached either place, Jo Erin would have discovered her flight and telegraphed the police. With Susan out of town, Jo Erin would have no reason not to. Susan would not be around to identify Jo Erin as a Pinkerton agent.

No, she was safest right where she was. As long as they were both in Needles Eye, Jo Erin was at her mercy.

She pulled herself up the last step and glanced to the left, where lanterns on the other shacks still burned red. There was no lantern on Aimee's shack. Susan opened the door and stepped into the darkness. She leaned against the door and closed her eyes, prepared to savor the feel of being alone.

Her eyes flew open. She was not alone. Ragged breathing echoed off the walls and, even as her throat closed in fear, a heavy whisper said, "Susan."

Panic rushed through her, speeding her heart and amplifying the sound of her blood. She whipped around and grabbed at the door, but an arm reached around her and leaned against it, holding it closed. She inhaled a sob.

"Susan, don't be afraid. I need your help."

She recognized the voice. She turned. Jo Erin was a dark shadow, but she was close enough that Susan could feel the heat of her body. She realized then that the ragged breathing she heard did not come from Jo Erin. Someone else was in the shack.

Jo Erin leaned away. Susan heard the rasp of metal, and light from the lamp filled the room. There was only one bed in the room, and on it lay a man, eyes closed, face waxy, gasping for air.

Susan drew in a breath. "It's Mitty."

**“You know him?”**

**“We’ve danced.” She moved to the bed. “What happened to him?”**

**“He’s been shot. Listen to me, Susan. I need your help, and I don’t have much time.”**

**Susan looked up. Jo Erin was still in the miner’s clothes she’d worn earlier. A lock of her short hair fell over her forehead. Susan knew that most people looking at Jo Erin saw a slender young man, but Susan saw only the woman.**

**“My help?” Susan sat on the edge of the bed and placed her hand on Mitty’s forehead. “He needs a doctor.”**

**Jo Erin moved forward and knelt on the floor beside the bed. “I can’t take him to a doctor.”**

**“There’s one right here in town.”**

**“Yes, but I can’t...” Jo Erin hesitated. Susan glanced up and met Jo Erin’s eyes. With Jo Erin on her knees, they were nearly at the same level and very close. Jo Erin looked tired. When she spoke, her voice was barely more than a whisper. “In the dance hall earlier, you mentioned my secret.”**

**“Secrets,” Susan corrected. “You have more than one.”**

**Jo Erin nodded. “Right. I have secrets, and so do you. You can’t tell mine, or I’ll tell yours.” Jo Erin glanced at Mitty and back at Susan, her brows furrowed. “I have to let you in on another secret. Bundle it with the others. If you tell, they’ll kill me for sure. I hope you don’t want that to happen, but if you do...I’ll tell them about you before I die. I will, Susan.”**

**The words hurt. Susan didn’t want Jo Erin to see it. She reached down and pulled the bedspread up to Mitty’s neck. “You hope I don’t want you to die, but you’re willing to send me to the gallows?” She let anger push the hurt away and looked back up. “Where’s your sense of fairness, Jo Erin?”**

**“I don’t want to send you to the gallows,” Jo Erin said. “But I will if you betray me. That’s what I’m trying to say. We need to keep each other’s secrets. It’s the only way we can both be safe.”**

**“I won’t tell on you if you won’t tell on me?” Susan asked, putting it in the familiar phrase of childhood.**

**“That’s right.”**

It was what Susan had already decided, but she made a show of reluctance. She smoothed Mitty's hair back from his forehead. Mitty's eyelids fluttered open.

"Suze."

"Shh," she said. "You're going to be all right, Mitty. Don't try to talk."

"Aw, come on, Suze," he whispered. "Jus' one little kiss."

Susan leaned down and kissed Mitty gently on the lips. He smiled and closed his eyes.

Susan looked up. Jo Erin watched her closely.

"All right. I won't tell if you don't."

"Good." Jo Erin peeked over her shoulder, as if ensuring that no one had entered the cabin in the last minutes. "Mitchell's a Pinkerton agent. A spy for the mine owners. Someone from the Union figured it out and shot him." She leaned closer and lowered her voice even more. "I'm going to take his place."

"You? Why?"

"I'm already here," Jo Erin said. "The Union's going to be expecting Pinkerton to send a new man. They have a spy inside the Mine Owners Group. Mitchell doesn't even know who it is. The Union will be expecting Pinkerton to send someone to take his place, but any man Pinkerton sends will be spotted before he even gets off the train. I'm already here, and nobody knows I'm an agent. Even Pinkerton doesn't know where I am. All he knows is that I'm out west trailing you."

Susan bit her lip.

"I'm not on the mine owners' side," Jo Erin continued. "I'm not on anybody's side. But I'm not going to let the Union pick off Pinkerton men one by one. I'll find out who the spy is, and then I'll get out."

"If you take over Mitty's job," Susan said, "you could end up like him." She combed her fingers through Mitty's hair. "Even if I don't tell on you."

Jo Erin smiled faintly. "Then I guess you'll get away." She rose to her feet. "You can see why I can't get the doctor for Mitchell. They can't know I have any connection with him at all. You could, though. You can go to Wallace and bring a doctor back."

"Wallace?"

"Yes. But, Susan," Jo Erin said, "I'll be watching the train. If you don't come back, the deal's off. I'll telegraph the police in Wallace, Spokane, Missoula. You won't get away."



**“Don’t worry, Jo Erin. I won’t be going to Wallace. Mitty’s dead.”**

**Jo Erin’s eyes flew to Mitty’s face and back to Susan’s. At the same moment, they heard slow footsteps ascending the creaky stairs.**

**“It’s Aimee,” Susan whispered. “And Zeke.”**

**“They can’t find me here,” Jo Erin whispered back. There was no back door to the shack, but a window faced the mountain side. Jo Erin pushed aside the lace curtains and tugged the window up. She threw a leg over the sill, stopped, and looked back at Mitty and Susan.**

**“It’s all right,” Susan whispered. “I’ll take care of him. Go.”**

**Jo Erin slipped the rest of the way out, and Susan pulled the window shut. She crossed to the door and opened it.**

**Zeke assisted Aimee up the last few stairs. They both looked up when light from the open door spilled upon them.**

**“You still up, Suze?” Aimee asked breathlessly.**

**“I’ll leave you with her,” Zeke said. He passed Aimee’s arm to Susan as if it were a baton. “Good night, darlin’.”**

**“Zeke, wait,” Susan said. “Could you come in here a minute?”**

**If he was surprised at her request, he didn’t show it. He merely stepped into the shack and looked somberly at the figure on the bed.**

**Susan felt Aimee stiffen as she realized what was on her bed. “What’s he doing here? You seeing men behind my back, Susan?”**

**“No, he was here when I got here. He’s...”**

**Zeke moved to the bed and leaned over Mitty’s body.**

**“Oh, my God,” Aimee whispered. “Is he dead? How did he get in here?”**

**Susan shrugged. “The window was open. He was just lying there when I got here. It looks like he’s been shot.”**

**Zeke felt for a pulse, but when he found none he turned to Susan. “When did he die?”**

“He was already dead when I got here,” Susan said. Zeke looked skeptical, and Susan realized his hand was still on Mitty’s warm neck. “At least I think he was. I didn’t touch him, except to put the blanket over him. I was upset.”

Zeke looked more skeptical than ever, but Aimee was more understanding.

“Oh, God, a dead man in our bed! Where are we supposed to sleep now?”

Zeke lifted the spread to examine Mitty’s wound. “There’s only blood on this one blanket,” he reassured Aimee. “Did you bandage him up, Susan?”

She was unprepared for questions. “Me? No. Is he bandaged? It wasn’t me. I told you, I didn’t touch him.”

“I don’t blame you, Suze,” Aimee said, recovering enough from her own shock to be concerned about Susan’s. “I can’t believe there’s a dead man in our bed.”

“I’ll get him out of your way,” Zeke said. He wrapped the stained blanket around the still form and hefted it over his shoulder.

Susan stood in the doorway and watched Zeke make his way carefully down the stairs, his body merging with the corpse to form a ponderous hulking shadow in the night. He disappeared into the back of Lou’s, and Susan turned to Aimee to reassure her that the death in her bed was not contagious.

Privately, she wondered. Mitty wasn’t the only man who had died in her bed in the last two weeks.

**LOTTIE BREATHED THROUGH** her mouth as she opened the lower door of Jennie Lynn’s commode. The chamber pot, as usual, had been used. Who’d think one woman could have so much piss and shit in her? And why she couldn’t use the flushing bowl down the hall, God alone knew. Too much of a lady, Lottie supposed, to be seen entering the water closet. More ladylike for her piss and turds to be carried down the hall in a bucket, for everyone to notice.

Lottie poured the contents of the pot into her pail, wary of splashes, and slammed the lid on top. It did no good. The odor was in her nose now and would remain there until it was replaced by another smell. She rinsed the delicate porcelain pot in the corner sink and returned it to the commode, carried her pail to the water closet down the hall, and flushed Jennie Lynn’s offerings for the sewer gods down the pipes.

As she stepped back into the hall, she paused a moment to watch Matthew patch the holes where the bells had recently been strung through the wall. The stringed system had proved inefficient. When Susan left the bordello, Sadie had moved into her room and had taken immediate advantage of the bell, which Jennie Lynn still insisted Lottie answer. The other girls had complained of unfairness, so Jennie Lynn had ordered bells for them too. A web of strings wove along the hall to Lottie's room, where their constant jangling convinced her that she really had died of the pox, and this was hell.

The increase in bells, however, had destroyed the system, to Lottie's delight. She would hear a ringing, look up, and have no idea which bell had raised the ruckus. It provided an excellent excuse for not responding, and Lottie enjoyed a pleasant, if noisy, solitude.

It was not destined to last. Jennie Lynn, damn her eyes, had apparently decided that Lottie's servitude was too valuable for even a moment of it to be wasted. She'd hired a modern electrician who, at that very moment, was wiring electric bells to all the rooms, bells that gave a visual signal as well as a noisy one. That was bad enough. But even worse, Jennie Lynn had told the electrician to put the signal box in the little room behind the kitchen. There was no reason for Lottie to keep her room on the second floor any longer, Jennie Lynn said. It wasn't as if she worked there anymore.

Didn't work there. Was the woman blind? Lottie did nothing but work from dawn to dusk, and sometimes after that. Her degeneration in the household, once begun, had continued rapidly. Mistress of the Chamber Pot, that's what she was now.

She returned to Jennie Lynn's room and resumed her chores. Remove the sheets and replace with clean. Not that the others were soiled. Jennie Lynn rarely entertained in her bed any more, but she still insisted on clean sheets every day. Fluff the pillows, smooth the spread, drape the curtains just so. Dust the dressing table, buff the toilet articles, polish the crystal perfume bottles.

With a glance at the door, Lottie pulled the stopper from one of the bottles and held it to her nose. Aah, that did the trick. The gentle fragrance of Lilies of the Valley helped clear the odor of Jennie

Lynn's offal from Lottie's nostrils.

Funny how baby shit had such a pleasant smell compared to grown up woman shit. Lottie would rather smell baby shit than even Jennie Lynn's Lilies of the Valley. Maybe the pox had twisted her memories around, but Lottie would swear baby Howie's shit smelled sweet, almost. She'd loved changing his diapers those first days of his short life, before the pox got them both.

She placed the perfume back on the dressing table and turned to swab her duster over the oak writing desk. The lid was open, and the pigeon holes were neatly filled with bills, accounts, and correspondence. She noticed a New York postmark on one of the envelopes and slipped the letter out.

*June 16, 1897 Dearest Jennie Lynn,*

*My dear, I am in trouble. You told me once, if you recall, if ever I found myself in need, to turn to you. I am in dire need now. If you have been following the newspaper accounts, you will know by the time you receive this letter the nature of my trouble.*

*No doubt a reward is being offered for my recovery. I can count on you, can I not, dear friend, to ignore such a temptation? Will you provide me with safe refuge, only for a few days, until I can decide what is best for me to do?*

*I will be leaving New York the same day I post this letter. Passenger trains being what they are, I imagine I will follow it by a day or two.*

*God bless you, my dear. Susan*

**Damn.**

Lottie sank onto the chair beside the writing desk and read the letter again. **Damn!** A reward, and she'd been right there in the house. She'd been right there in the buggy, with Lottie driving. If Lottie had known, she could have driven right past Deed's Jewelers that day, pulled up at the police station, and collected that reward.

How much, she wondered? And what had Susan done? Lottie checked the date of the letter. She could check the newspaper accounts from two weeks ago and find out what they had to say about a woman from New York, possibly named Susan. And perhaps the police station would have a wanted poster with the amount of the reward. It might not be too late. After all, Lottie knew where Susan was.

**Damn.** She suddenly remembered the man who'd come around asking about Susan. She'd assumed he was the man Susan had robbed, but now she wondered. He was probably a bounty hunter, and she'd sold him Susan's whereabouts for twenty dollars.

Lottie folded the letter, stuffed it back into the envelope, and jammed it back into its pigeon hole. She slammed the lid of the writing desk down and flicked her duster over the top.

It still might not be too late. If Jennie Lynn's dear friend had been apprehended, Jennie Lynn hadn't yet heard about it, or Lottie would know. There was a chance. It was certainly

worth a trip to the newspaper office. A discreet stop off at the police station. Maybe even worth a trip out to Needles Eye.

Lottie stooped to gather Jennie Lynn's soiled laundry and heard the distant sound of electric bells as the electrician tested his work.

A nice, substantial reward for turning in that bitch just might be her ticket out of this living hell.

## Chapter Four

**“YOU NEED THAT hand?”**

**“What?” Jo Erin followed Dex's gaze to where her hand clutched the pole on the corner of the cage.**

**“You want to keep it, you better pull it inside.”**

**Jo Erin released the corner pole and grabbed the overhead bar just as the cage started its downward plunge. Christ! Her stomach tugged upward, and the rocky walls of the mine shaft zoomed at an incredible speed just inches from the sides of the cage. An instant later the cage entered a darkness so complete she felt as if her eyes had been plucked from her head.**

**Why the hell did they call it a cage? Cage implied bars or wire or fencing, something to prevent escape. There was nothing preventing a fall from this cage but her own sense of balance, which deserted her as soon as she'd lost her sight. She concentrated on the feel of the thin metal bar overhead, holding it so tightly her hand grew numb and she was afraid her grip would slip without her knowing it. She forced her hand to relax.**

**A flash of light as they passed the first horizontal level only made the next plunge into blackness seem all the darker. A second flash of light signaled the second level, and another the third. Jo Erin found her grip had tightened once more and she willed herself to relax again. Their destination was the fourth level, and she waited for the slowing of the cage that would let her know they had arrived. Just as she'd decided that the cable had broken and they were all plunging to their deaths at the floor of the shaft, it slowed. Light broke upon them, and the floor of the cage stopped even with the floor of the station.**

**“You can let go now, Joe,” Dex said, gentle ridicule in his voice. “We’re here, safe and sound.”**

**Jo Erin unwrapped her fingers and forced a laugh. “Hell of a ride,” she said, stepping on the rock floor. The hand that held her lunch pail was sweaty.**

**“It’s hard the first time,” Dex said. “But don’t ever let your guard down. You let any part of your body or clothes or tools or anything get stuck outside the cage, it’ll whip you out of there and grind you up against the walls ‘til you’re nothing but a bloody pulp.”**

**“Thanks for giving me so much warning,” Jo Erin said.**

**Dex shrugged. “Aw, I was just teasing you. You had a couple of inches to spare. Hey, Moss, this here’s Joe Burke. He’s our new mucker.”**

**A dark wiry man crouched on a barrel. Tufts of gray hair sprouted on his head and several days growth of whiskers gristled his face. He ignored Jo Erin and turned to Dex. “I heard Mitty bought the farm.”**

**“Yep,” Dex said cheerfully. “And did you hear he was a God damned spy?”**

**“I heard,” Moss said somberly. “Got what he deserved.”**

**“You’re damned right about that. Wish I’d done it myself, the son of a bitch.”**

**“What are you gonna do about the Fourth?”**

**Dex shrugged. “Guess I’ll just single-jack it. He was slowing me down anyway.” He turned to Jo Erin. “Mitty and me were gonna enter the double-jacking contest. He handled my drills for me in single-jacking, too. I’ll have to get someone else for that now, I guess.”**

**It sounded like a hint. “I’ll give you a hand,” Jo Erin offered.**

**Dex gave a howl of laughter. “No thanks. I want to win.”**

**Moss smiled. “It’s no place for beginners, Joe.”**

**Dex turned back to Moss. “There’s less competition in single-jacking anyway.”**

**Jo Erin pretended to follow the conversation and covertly studied the fourth level of the Needles Eye Mine. The only light was provided by candles stuck to the wall by iron rings, but they shed enough light to let her see they were in a cramped, rocky room shored up by massive beams of timber. Water barrels, tools, and mining supplies were stacked along the side, and narrow railroad tracks led from the edge of the shaft into the black regions of the mine. A rectangular, steel, chest-high bucket on wheels rested on the rails. The air was**

warm, but the rank smell of damp earth left her in no doubt that she was deep underground. She quashed a bubble of panic at the thought of being buried alive.

Dex picked up a hammer, steel drill bits, and a long wooden pole. “Grab a shovel, Joe. Time to get to work.”

Jo Erin selected a shovel from the pile of tools and prepared to follow Dex’s wavering candle into the blackness.

“You might need these, too.” Moss handed her a sledge hammer and a large pail.

Jo Erin took them without question and turned again toward the tunnel.

“Bring the car,” Dex called back impatiently.

Jo Erin turned back again, put the tools and her lunch pail in the rail car, and shoved it gingerly along the tracks. She tried to quell her irritation. She was a Pinkerton agent, she reminded herself, chosen because she was capable of doing any job. But she had an uneasy feeling that mucking with Dex might not be one of her more pleasant tasks.

The air grew smokier as they neared the back of the drift, where Dex had set off a blast of dynamite the night before. The ground was littered with rubble all along the drift, and Jo Erin concentrated on keeping her footing. She had three candles and a box of matches in her pocket, the daily ration for each man underground. She also had a tin band around the crown of her felt hat that would hold a candle in place when her hands were busy, but she hadn’t thought to light one. If she stopped to do so now, she might lose sight of the tiny spot of light ahead of her that was Dex, and she couldn’t bear to do that. She held tightly to the cart and let the tracks guide her.

“Watch out!”

The car jarred to a stop, and Jo Erin’s chest struck the rim.

The light had tricked her. Dex’s candle squatted on an outcrop of rock, and Dex himself stood in front of the car, pushing against it.

“Back up,” Dex yelled. “The track ends here. Jesus God, you trying to kill me? Where the hell’s your candle?”

Jo Erin pulled the car back a few feet and saw that the track ended right where Dex had stopped it. Ahead of it was a downward sloping, low-ceilinged cave piled with broken rock.

“Sorry,” Jo Erin said. She pulled a candle from her pocket and fumbled with the box of matches, but Dex snatched the candle from her hand and lit it from his own.

**“Don’t waste matches.” Dex handed the candle back. “All right, let’s get to work. This is our stope, okay? What you do is you get this rock out of here, okay? And what I do is I blast more in. Okay?”**

**Jo Erin removed her cap and wedged the candle into the band. “Okay.”**

**Their stope was an underhand stope, which meant the ground sloped underneath the vein of silver. Jo Erin’s job was to haul rock up out of the stope with the pail and dump it into the rail car. When it was full, she would push it back to Moss, who would send it up in the cage. It would come back empty and they would start all over again.**

**The rocky ceiling of the pit was low enough that Jo Erin could walk her hands above her head for balance as she slid down into it. Once there, she realized she’d left the bucket beside the car above her and scrambled up over shifting rock to retrieve it. She would have to make a clear path through the rubble first, she realized, so she could climb up and down the slope without breaking an ankle.**

**She bent to pick up some rubble and saw movement at the edge of the light.**

**“Rat!”**

**No amount of Pinkerton training could have prevented the word from erupting from Jo Erin, and her voice was disturbingly high, like a woman’s.**

**Dex only laughed. “Yeah, we got rats. Not too many down here on four. We’re loud enough, they pretty much stay away.”**

**Jo Erin hated rats. She remembered playing with rats with the Bantry boys when she was little, but she could hardly fathom it now. It was like that Jo Erin was a different person. Of course, that was before Everard and the board.**

**She grabbed some rocks and threw them into her bucket to make a nice racket. If noise kept the rats away, she would make noise.**

**She soon learned what the sledge hammer was for. Some of the rocks were too big for the pail and too heavy to carry. They had to be broken up into smaller bits before they could be moved. The stope was barely big enough for one person to maneuver around, let alone two, but somehow Jo Erin managed to bring the sledge hammer up in between Dex’s strikes on his drill.**

**Her first strike made a hollow thump. Nothing happened to the rock, but the blow reverberated up Jo Erin’s arms and into her shoulders. She swung again, harder, and felt the same reverberation, but this time she heard a crack from the stone. Two more blows, and the rock broke into four smaller pieces. She put the pieces into her bucket and quickly calculated.**



**She was a strong woman, and she had worked alongside men before and held her own. But slinging the sledgehammer was a different sort of work. She didn't have the upper body strength to manage it effectively for very long. The trick, she decided, was to make it appear as if she wielded the sledgehammer more frequently than she did. There was plenty of rubble in the stope to keep her busy filling her bucket without creating more. She only had to keep up the pretense for a few days, until she was able to ferret out the spy.**

**Dex wasn't watching her anyway. He stood underneath the vein, bent nearly double in the cramped space, and drilled upward to set his blast. He held the drill in his left hand and the hammer in his right, developing a head wagging rhythm as he struck. The right hand brought the hammer back, the left hand turned the drill. The right hand struck, left hand turned. Strike, turn.**

**"I wish you'd get the hell back to work," Dex said breathlessly, letting the hammer fall beside him as he pulled the drill from the hole. Sweat already poured down his face and chest. He'd removed his shirt when he started drilling. Jo Erin not only wore her shirt buttoned clear to her neck, but her vest as well. She'd use her job of carrying rocks as her explanation if anyone asked, but no one did.**

**Dex blew into the deepening hole, and rocky dust flew out and stuck to his skin, creating gray mud. "It'd be a damn sight easier to work in here if you got some of this shit out of the way."**

**Jo Erin brought the sledge hammer back and struck with all her strength at a large rock. The blow jarred through her arms, shoulders, and back, but the rock cracked with a satisfying report.**

**She imagined it was Dex's head.**

**By the time they stopped for lunch, Jo Erin's arms trembled so much she could barely lift her biscuit, let alone a ten pound sledge hammer. The stope was half way cleared of muck, though, and she could no longer touch the ceiling when she stood on the remaining rubble.**

**Moss lifted the coffee pot from the candle where it had been warming. He filled a tin cup and handed it to Jo Erin.**

**"You ought to get yourself some gloves," he said, noticing Jo Erin's blistered hands.**

**"And some waterproof boots," Dex added, looking at her soaked brogans.**

**Their drift was below the water table, and water seeped in constantly.**

**"We better get a pump in there tomorrow," Dex said to Moss. "It's really wet."**

Moss nodded. "So how do you like it?" he asked Jo Erin. "Think you'll like being a mucker?"

Jo Erin shrugged. She didn't know what answer the man wanted, and she was too tired to try to figure it out. "It's a job."

"That's right, it's a job," Moss agreed. "So, who do you think worked harder this morning, you or Dex here?"

Jo Erin glanced at Dex, who watched her closely. The question was a test of some sort, and she didn't know the answer. She admired Dex's skill with the hammer and drill, and he definitely worked hard, but so had she. She arched her back to stretch her aching shoulders.

"He worked damn hard," Dex said, surprising Jo Erin.

Moss nodded. "Sure he did. Did you know, Joe, that if you'd hired on a week ago you would have been getting paid three-fifty a day, just like Dex here?"

Suddenly alert, Jo Erin felt her pulse quicken. This was Union talk.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," Moss said, leaning forward to help make his point, "today is July first. Today's the day the new wage scale goes into effect. Starting today you and me only get paid three dollars a day instead of three-fifty, because you're just a mucker and I'm just a trammer."

Jo Erin felt a flicker of resentment. Her already sore muscles were going to feel a lot worse before the day was over, and even worse tomorrow. Surely she deserved three and a half dollars for the amount of work they were getting out of her. Jo Erin knew what was expected of her. She allowed her resentment to grow. The stope that a moment earlier had seemed half empty now seemed half full.

"Well," she said, making a reluctant show of reason, "Dex has to work with the dynamite."

Moss and Dex both nodded, making Jo Erin feel like a schoolgirl who'd given the right answer.

"That's right," Moss said. His dark skin barely showed in the faint candlelight, making the white of his eyes shine more intensely into Jo Erin's. "And dynamite's dangerous. But, Joe, suppose Dex here makes a mistake and blows us all to kingdom come. You think that dynamite's going to care that you only get paid three dollars a day? You think the dynamite's gonna know that Dex here's the one gets paid extra for that kind of danger?"

Hell, that dynamite's gonna just blow us all to kingdom come, muckers, trammers, cagers, and all. What do you think about that, Joe?"

Jo Erin allowed her resentment to show. "Doesn't sound fair."

"Now, don't go blaming Dex for that," Moss said. "He don't got nothing to do with it. Mine owners made that pay scale. See, they figure, if they cut everyone's wages to three dollars, the whole Union will vote to strike. But if they only cut the muckers and the cagers, that's you and me, Joe, they think the powder and drill boys won't want to strike. Those boys will still be getting their three-fifty and they won't care about what you and me get. It'll split the Union right in half. Divide and conquer, that's their plan. But it ain't working. You want to know why?"

"Why?"

Moss smiled and clapped a hand on Dex's shoulders. "Cause we got men like Dex, here. He's a Union boy, through and through. All our boys are. And the Union sticks together, no matter what. Right, Dex?"

"That's right, Moss," Dex said, though he kept his gaze on Jo Erin. "What about you, Joe? Are you Union through and through?"

"Of course I am," Jo Erin said. "I took the oath, didn't I?"

"Yeah, well," Dex said, "some men who take the oath don't mean it."

"Well, I did," Jo Erin said firmly, and she almost believed it.

Moss smiled. "I knew you did. We got a meeting tonight at the Union Hall, seven o'clock. Will you be there?"

"Sure." Jo Erin lifted her cup to her lips. "I'll be there."

For the first time, Dex smiled. "Afterwards we can go to Lou's," he said. "I want to dance with that new girl again. She is some pumpkin."

**SUSAN WAS TEN** years old the year of the rat incident.

Her brother, Everard, was a year younger than she, but he was by far the worst of her three brothers. Donald might enjoy catching a rat, and Patrick might enjoy chasing his sister with a rat, but Everard was the one who would suggest an afternoon of rat-catching upon learning of Susan's great aversion to the creatures.

Jo Erin was there that day, and when the boys came running from the alley, a rat in Patrick's hand, she'd joined in the chase with the boys, whooping and hollering. Susan had nearly been run over by a horse, she remembered, before an adult yelled at the boys to get rid of the rat.

She'd slumped back to the front stoop in relief, but her relief was short lived. Moments later she heard her name called. Looking toward the alley, she saw Everard with a board in his hand. The other boys and Jo Erin stood behind him, uncertain looks on faces gone white. Slowly, Everard turned the board around. Nailed to it, still alive, was the rat.

She jumped up, heart in her throat. "Kill it!" she screeched. "Kill it! Kill it!"

Everard laughed. "You kill it," he said. He placed the board on the ground and kicked it so that it skittered close to Susan. She jumped back, and he laughed again. "Go on, Susan. Kill it."

She stared at the rat, writhing on its bloody post, and took an uncertain step forward. She didn't know how she was going to do it, but she knew she had to fight her revulsion and put the creature out of its misery.

Suddenly, Jo Erin pushed Everard aside, flipped the board over, and jumped on it, crushing the rat to death instantly.

Everard had laughed at Jo Erin and told her to go play house with the girls, but Jo Erin ignored him. She'd thrown the board and rat back into the alley and joined Susan on the stoop, sitting with her for a long time without talking. They were both shaken.

Did Jo Erin remember, Susan wondered? She couldn't have forgotten such an experience, could she?

Susan had recovered from the shock of seeing Jo Erin in Needles Eye, and now she found herself inundated with memories she'd thought were long gone. She'd deliberately tried to forget. When she'd moved in with Elias, she hadn't wanted to remember how her life had been, or how it could have been. She'd closed that part of her life off and concentrated on the present. Only twice in all that time had she been troubled by the past.

The first time was when she'd learned that Donald's wife had given birth to a little girl, Elizabeth. Susan had been suddenly overwhelmed with feelings of love for the infant she'd never met, and she had impulsively ordered a beautiful layette to be sent to the house. Its return had been like a slap in the face, though she should have expected it.

The second time was when she'd unexpectedly seen Jo Erin at the home Jennie Lynn shared with one of Elias's colleagues. She and Jennie Lynn had been playing tennis and had come to the house to change for dinner. They'd entered from the lawn through the French doors, crossed the conservatory, and saw a man and a woman standing in the hall. The man was dressed sharply in business clothes, much like Jo Erin had worn when she'd

shown off her Pinkerton outfit, but he was not Jo Erin. The woman with him was tall and elegantly dressed in an emerald green walking suit. A black and green silk hat swept high. Trimmed with ribbons and ostrich feathers, perched on elaborately styled golden locks, it gave the woman a regal air. At the sound of their voices, the woman slowly turned and her eyes met Susan's.

It was a familiar face in an unfamiliar setting, and recognition was slow in coming. When it did, Susan and Jennie Lynn had already moved past the pair and had reached the staircase. Susan climbed the stairs on trembling legs and didn't look back.

There had been no recognition in Jo Erin's face either. She must have been on a Pinkerton job. Susan couldn't imagine that Jo Erin would dress like a high society matron if she weren't required to. No doubt Susan would have ruined the job for her if she'd exclaimed greetings to her old friend, but that was not why she hadn't said hello. She simply hadn't dared. What if Jo Erin refused to acknowledge her, after the choice Susan had made? What if Jo Erin turned her away? Susan had not had the courage to risk it.

It was a slow night at the Hurdy Gurdy. There was a Union meeting going on, and nearly all the miners were attending it. A few customers had straggled in, but for the most part they were content to drink or go out back with one of the other girls. It left Susan with nothing to do but drink cold tea and reminisce. She wandered over to the end of the bar where Aimee drowsed over her silent instrument.

"Who's going to play that thing when you have your baby?" Susan asked.

"Nobody," Aimee said. "Maybe one of the boys will bring a fiddle in that day. It doesn't take long to drop a cub anyhow."

"It may put you out for more than a day, though," Susan said.

"You do it then. Here I'll show you."

"Me? No, I can't," Susan said.

"Sure you can. I couldn't either until I came here. Ever play a piano?"

"Never."

"Good. It's nothing like a piano."

Aimee turned the crank at the end of the wooden instrument, and a hollow screeching moan echoed from it. It reminded Susan of the sound of bagpipes she'd heard once at a concert in New York.

"It turns a wheel inside," Aimee said. "It's like a round bow, and it rubs against the strings inside, like a fiddle."

**“That doesn’t sound like any fiddle I ever heard.” Susan put her fingers in her ears.**

**Aimee ignored her. “You press the keys to play the different notes. It’s easy to play because it just sits here on the bar, or on your lap if you prefer.”**

**“Why have a hurdy gurdy anyway? Why not a piano?”**

**Aimee shrugged. “When the mines first opened up, there wasn’t even a railroad up here yet. Everything was carried in on the back of a mule or a horse or a man. Would you want to haul a piano up that gorge?”**

**“There’s a railroad now.”**

**“The men like it,” Aimee said. “It’s different than the mine owners’ dance hall. They got a piano down there.”**

**The door opened and they looked up, along with all the other women in the room, but only a single man entered. He was not a miner, but he looked familiar. He scanned the room until he saw Susan. He smiled.**

**He was the man from the train, Susan remembered. The man with the long hair who wore the fancy suit, and who didn’t need to restore himself with a drink halfway through a forty-five minute train ride.**

**She greeted him as he approached. “Good evening, sir,” she said. “What will you have to drink?”**

**He tapped the back of one finger on the side of her glass. “What’s that?”**

**“Cold tea.”**

**“I’ll have that.”**

**“I have to charge you for a regular drink.”**

**He pulled a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it on the counter. She poured him a glass of tea.**

**“You’re not a miner.” She nodded at his fancy worsted suit.**

**“No,” he said. “I’m a lawyer. I heard the miners were in a meeting. Otherwise I wouldn’t have had the nerve to come in here.” He laughed unselfconsciously.**

**Susan’s chest tightened. A lawyer. She smiled into his eyes, pretending to be impressed, and tried to assess what he knew. His eyes were clear and smiling and seemed to hold nothing but pleasure in her company. There was no real reason to think he might know**

who she was, after all, except that lawyers were more likely than miners to read the big city newspapers.

“Why should you be nervous?” she asked.

The curls of his mustache curved upward when he smiled. “I’m the enemy, here. I work for the mine owners.”

“Oh.”

“My name’s Dave. Dave Davisson.”

“I’m please to meet you, Mr. Davisson. My name is Susan.”

“I know.”

Susan forced herself not to flinch. It was flattery, almost certainly. It didn’t mean that he did, indeed, know who she was.

“So why did you decide to come in here now?” she asked.

“I wanted to dance with you.”

He tossed another dollar on the bar. Susan stood and let him take her in his arms. Aimee turned the handle of the hurdy gurdy and slowly punched out a melody with the keys. They were the only dancers.

“I knew you would dance like a dream,” Davisson said after a moment.

“Thank you.” He was by far the finest dancer she’d partnered since coming to Needles Eye. Most of the miners either swung her around wildly or tried to touch as much of her as they could during their five minutes.

“I’ve been thinking about you ever since we rode up here on the train together,” he said. “Is this the same dress?”

Susan laughed. “No. Can’t you tell the difference between a traveling suit and an evening gown, Mr. Davisson?”

His eyes lit up and he joined her in the laugh. “Well, I like it.” He adjusted his hands to get a better grip on her.

“Thank you,” she said again. They danced in silence for a moment. She kept her eyes on his shoulder and strove to appear serene. His eyes never left her face.

“You’re a different sort of girl than these others,” he said finally.

**“Somewhat,” she said. “I don’t work out back, you know.”**

**“I heard that. I heard something else about you, though, that made me wonder.”**

**She started to tense, but forced herself to relax. There were too few layers of cloth between his hands and her skin for him not to notice if his words caused a reaction. “Oh?”**

**“There was a miner who was shot. They say he died in your bed.”**

**She looked up. He watched her closely. “Yes,” she said. “He died there. I don’t know how he got there.”**

**“So you don’t make exceptions? For some men?”**

**She shook her head. “I barely knew Mitty. He didn’t do anything in my bed except die.”**

**Davisson sighed and gave a wry smile. “Forgive me, but I had to ask. If you were available for more than dancing, I was...interested.”**

**She shook her head again, but smiled to soften the rejection. Propositions were easy to handle, as long as he didn’t suspect anything else.**

**“You’re quality, Susan,” he said after a moment. “It’s not just because you don’t work the shacks. The men here can’t possibly appreciate you.”**

**“They seem quite appreciative to me, Mr. Davisson.”**

**“I disagree with you, my dear,” he said firmly. “Any girl will do for them. Do they engage you in intelligent conversation? Do they have anything to offer you at the end of the day besides bruised feet and ribs?”**

**Many of the miners did enjoy a lively debate as they danced, and she’d been offered marriage four times already since she arrived in Needles Eye. But it was not the place of a hurdy gurdy girl to argue with the man who’d purchased her dance. Besides, she knew what he meant.**

**“I’m content with dancing,” she said.**

**“Then you should come up to Miller’s Dance Hall at the other end of town. That’s where the quality in this town spend their free time.”**

**“The mine owners, you mean?”**

**“Mine owners, lawyers, engineers, shop keepers.” He spoke with energy and conviction. “The dance hall is on the ground floor of the hotel. It’s clean and well-lit. There’s a real**



piano, and a real piano player too. You'd earn more money, and I'm sure they'd give you a room of your own in the hotel."

"If I didn't already know you were a lawyer, Mr. Davisson, I might have guessed it. You make a pretty argument."

"I can argue two sides of any matter," he said with a humble expression, "but I am more compelling when I mean what I say. And I mean this. You should move uptown, Susan."

She looked around Lou's, recalling how it had looked to her the first time she'd seen it. The floor was made of uneven pine boards and was decorated with grimy spittoons every few feet. A brass chandelier hung from the ceiling, but it was devoid of candles. Light came from smoky kerosene lamps scattered about the room. The mirror above the bar was broken, but the frame remained, filled in with crude sketches of half-dressed women. It was a place for men to drink and dance and find women, and as such it fulfilled its purpose admirably. But it was not pretty.

A burst of noise from the front door signaled the entrance of the miners.

Davisson gave a small laugh. "Looks like my time here's about up. Say you'll think about it."

"I'll give it some thought," she said, but she didn't mean it. Lou's was a crude place and it had been difficult enough to adjust to it at first, but she felt relatively safe there, for now at least. As long as she had to stay in Needles Eye, she would much prefer to do so surrounded by men who read nothing but the Union newspaper. Men who would never have heard of the woman accused of murdering millionaire philanthropist, Elias L. Noonan.

Another group of miners entered. Susan faced the door and saw that Jo Erin was among them. Their eyes met.

"Hey," a belligerent voice called, "what are you doing in here, Davisson? This ain't your side of town."

Davisson gave a humorous look to Susan, then turned to the miner. "I paid for my dance, and I intend to finish it." At that moment, the music stopped and Davisson laughed. "And I guess I have." He turned back to Susan. "Think about what I said, my dear. I hope I'll see you soon." He walked out of the room, ignoring the angry mutters that followed him.

A dollar was tossed onto Aimee's table, and large hands grabbed Susan roughly about the waist. She winced. Perhaps she should consider Miller's Dance Hall, after all.

Several dances later it was Jo Erin's turn. She pulled Susan close and moved her to the center of the busy room. They spoke in soft whispers.

**"Did everything go all right the other night?" Jo Erin asked.**

**"Yes. Zeke took care of him."**

**"He wasn't suspicious?"**

Susan hesitated. **"I don't think so."** She glanced at Zeke. He stood beside Aimee and laughed at something she said, but his eyes followed Susan and Jo Erin as they danced. Was he suspicious? Or just concerned? After all, the last time she'd danced with Jo Erin, Zeke had felt the need to intervene to prevent Jo Erin from whisking her out back. **"Everyone's talking about how Mitty turned out to be a spy. Nobody seems very concerned about where he ended up after he was shot."** Except for Davisson, of course, but he was interested for a different reason. One she would not share with Jo Erin.

**"I got his job," Jo Erin said. "At the mine."**

**"You? Doing what?"**

**"Mucking. I clear the rubble out of the stope after they dynamite it."**

**"How can you do that? It's heavy work."**

Jo Erin gave a half smile, shrugged, and winced. **"It's just work."** She lifted her hand and showed the soft side. Even in the dim light, Susan could see it was blistered raw.

Susan caught her breath. **"Jo! You can't work like that."**

**"I have gloves now. It'll be better tomorrow."** She returned her hand to Susan's waist. **"With luck, I won't have to do it much longer. But I need some help. I need you to mail a letter."**

Susan looked up. **"Why do you need help with that?"**

**"I can't put it in the mail pouch here. It'll never get out. I need to mail it from Wallace."**

**"Is it to Pinkerton?"**

**"Shh."** Jo Erin glanced around to make sure no one was near enough to hear, though Susan had barely breathed the word. **"I wish you wouldn't say that name."**

**"Why should I help you?" Susan asked. "How do I know you're not writing about me?"**

**“Because I said I wouldn’t,” Jo Erin said. “I’ll let you read it first, if you like. You’re the only one who can know I’m sending a letter to...to that person. I can’t take the time to go to Wallace. I have to work in the mine.”**

**Susan considered. She’d been thinking about making a trip into Wallace anyway. She needed some new stockings, face cream, and tooth powder, and she wasn’t satisfied with the quality of any of those things offered at the Needles Eye store. She also wanted to buy some things for Aimee’s baby.**

**“I want to read the letter first,” she said.**

**Jo Erin nodded. “Can you go tomorrow?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“What time do you go up to your cabin? I’ll bring it by tonight.”**

**“Not until one o’clock. Aimee comes up a little later. You need to be there right at one or you’ll run into her.”**

**“I’ll be there.”**

**For a moment they danced in silence. Jo Erin turned Susan smoothly in time to the tune Aimee played. To anyone watching, Susan was merely giving a dollar dance to an ordinary miner, and yet how different it felt from any other dance. It was ironic. Jo Erin was the only person in Needles Eye who knew Susan was wanted for murder. She was in more jeopardy from Jo Erin than anyone in town. Yet she felt safer in Jo Erin’s arms than anywhere else.**

**“How’s your mother, Jo Erin?” Susan asked suddenly.**

**Jo Erin laughed. “Why do you always ask about my mother?”**

**“Because you’ve got one,” Susan said, “and she loves you.”**

**“How do you know that?”**

**Susan lifted her hand from Jo Erin’s shoulder and fingered the collar of Jo Erin’s shirt. “She let you dress like this. Even when you were a little girl, she didn’t try to stop you.”**

**“She tried,” Jo Erin said, “but she didn’t insist, when she realized it would make no difference.”**

**“Because she loves you. She didn’t want to lose you.”**

Jo Erin nodded. “Yes, I think that’s true. And she’s fine, Susan. My mother is just fine.”

“GENTLEMEN, WE HAVE a problem.”

Jim Wilton, President of the Mine Owners Group, sat at the head of the table facing the owners and lawyers that made up the group. Brandy and cigars littered the table, jackets had been tossed, and more than one button had been loosened to accommodate the fine luncheon they’d just eaten.

Dan Avery, the youngest man present, ran a finger around his celluloid collar and wished he could remove his jacket like the others. But his ill-fitting shirt had bunched up along his shoulders and under his arms, and perspiration had turned the material into a soggy wad that he didn’t dare reveal. He looked out the window at tiny downtown Wallace. Why couldn’t they at least let in some fresh air?

Ivan Spencer, secretary, sat at Wilton’s right, a tablet open on the table before him. Nate Cheviot, Vice-President, lounged back in the heavy oak chair on Wilton’s left. The other officers, Borton, Dievert, and MacInnes, sat along both sides. At the end of the table were the lawyers, three of them tucked into space for two, hired to advise and represent the Mine Owners Group.

Avery, as the newest member, sat on an armless ladder-backed chair at the corner of the table, tucked between the other two lawyers.

“The Unions are taking a strike vote tomorrow,” Wilton continued, “at the No Tail, Yellow, and Needles Eye mines. And the way things look right now, they’ll vote to strike.”

“Tomorrow?” Spencer looked outraged. “On the Fourth of July?”

“That’s representative of the way they think, isn’t it?” Cheviot said. “We give them the day off, offer hundreds of dollars in prize money to help them celebrate, and they reward us by voting against us.”

“The date is irrelevant,” Wilton said, “except that they’ll all be able to vote. Because, as Cheviot says, we’ve given them the day off. What matters is what we decide to do if they do strike.”

“We don’t back down, that’s for sure.” Borton slammed a fist on the table, causing the brandy to shiver. “If we give every man three-fifty a day, who knows what they’ll demand next?”

**“Of course, they’ve been getting three-fifty until now,” Avery said. Every eye turned toward him, and he felt the boots of the flanking lawyers rap each of his shins. He remembered, too late, that he’d been ordered to listen, not speak. He tried to retrieve his error. “All I mean is, they’re not asking for anything new. They just want what they had before. Not that they should have it. That’s not what I meant. I mean—”**

**“What Avery means to say,” Dave Davisson said, rescuing his young law partner, “is that we all know the economy can no longer support those kinds of wages, and now that the government is backing away from silver again, things will only get worse. The Union will simply have to understand that those are the facts and accept our offer of three dollars a day for non-drillers.”**

**Another kick from Davisson jarred a weak response from Avery. “Yes, yes, that’s what I meant.” He resolved not to speak again.**

**“Yes, well,” Wilton said, “it’s all well and good to say the Union’s got to understand our economic pressures, but the fact is they don’t seem to. Or if they do, they don’t care. We have to assume they’re going to strike and plan our course of action. Do we close down the mine, temporarily of course, or do we bring in non-union labor?”**

**“If we bring in scabs we’ll be asking for trouble,” Spencer said.**

**“Don’t call them scabs,” Wilton said. “That’s a Union word.”**

**“We can handle trouble,” Cheviot said. “We’ll hire more guards. If we close down the mines, even for a short time, it’ll cost us thousands. Hundreds of thousands.”**

**“We’ll have to keep the pumps running,” Borton said. “That’ll cost a bundle right there, if we’re not bringing anything out to cover it.”**

**“Hiring guards will cost a pretty penny too, though,” Wilton pointed out. “Whatever we do is going to cost us. We have to decide what will be best in the long run, no matter what the cost now.”**

**“What’s best in the long run is breaking the Union up altogether,” Borton said. “We can’t give in on this. I don’t care what it costs.”**

**“Sounds like we might have a consensus here,” Wilton said. “Does anyone care to make a motion?”**

**“I move that the Mine Owners Group bring in non-union workers in the event of strike.”**

**“I second that.”**

**“A motion has been made that the Mine Owners Group will bring in non-union workers in the event of a strike. All in favor say aye.”**

**“Aye.”**

**The motion carried and the group broke up, anxious to leave the stuffy room.**

**IT’S A SECRET. It’s a secret. It’s a secret.**

**It sounded to Susan as if the train knew all her secrets and was telling them to the world with each sweep of its wheels.**

**It’s a secret. It’s a secret. It’s a secret.**

**The train chugged and steamed its way down the canyon, spitting out the words over and over. Susan wondered which secret the train referred to. She had so many.**

**Paramount, of course, was the immense secret of her own identity and the fact that she was wanted for murder. She wondered what sort of law enforcement Wallace had. Did a town of fifteen hundred inhabitants warrant a police force? Or did it rely on a town marshal, a sheriff, deputies? Would they have received a description of her? A wanted poster, perhaps? She should have masqueraded as a widow. A widow can be excused for wearing a veil at all times. Her features could have been hidden for months.**

**Next time, Susan resolved. When she was able to slip away from Needles Eye and Jo Erin. Next time she’d be a widow.**

**The secret of Jo Erin resided in her purse in the form of a letter to the Pinkerton Agency in New York informing Mr. Pinkerton that Mitty was dead.**

***While it was the trail of our suspect that brought me to Needles Eye, that matter must, I’m sure you will agree, await the resolution of this current crisis. A Pinkerton man has been killed. My arrival in town immediately before the incident is too fortuitous a circumstance to be ignored. I will attempt to identify the killer within the next few days, and then I will resume my search for Miss Susan Bantry.***

**“Do you have to say my trail brought you to Needles Eye?” Susan had asked the night before. “Won’t that make them think I’m here?”**

**“They would know your trail brought me here anyway,” Jo Erin said. “Why else would I have made my way up this canyon in the first place?”**

**“Will they send another agent to find me, since you’re busy with this other matter?”**

**“Why would they? I’m still the most likely person to find you and bring you back. Have you got some glue?”**

**Susan handed Jo Erin the jar from Aimee’s table and watched her seal the letter. She marveled that Jo Erin could so calmly discuss her arrest while sealing the letter, as if they discussed nothing more serious than party invitations.**

**“Will you really figure out who the spy is within the next few days?” Susan asked.**

**Jo Erin grimaced. “I don’t know. If I’d had a chance to plan it, I would have tried to come in from the other side, the Mine Owners Group.” She handed the letter to Susan. “It’ll take longer to get inside, being a mucker. I’ll still find out who it is, though.”**

**Susan took the letter and slipped it into her purse.**

**“Susan.” Jo Erin stopped and bit her lip.**

**“What?”**

**“Maybe I shouldn’t let you do this.”**

**“We’ve already gone over that, remember?” Susan said with a bit of scorn in her voice. “I’m not going to run away.”**

**“That’s not what I mean. If you get caught with that letter...” She frowned at Susan’s purse.**

**“Why would that happen?” Susan asked. “I have a letter of my own to mail. I’ll just put them in the box together. No one will see.”**

**Jo Erin was diverted by that. “Who are you writing to?”**

**“That’s really not your business.”**

**“You understand about postmarks, though, don’t you?” Jo Erin asked. “Whoever gets your letter will know you mailed it from Wallace.”**

**“I know that. I’m not stupid.”**

**Jo Erin said nothing, which carried its own meaning.**

**“You’d better leave,” Susan said. “Aimee will be coming up any minute.”**

**“Okay.” Jo Erin opened the window and threw her leg over the sill. She stopped, straddling it. “Susan?”**

**She was only a dark shape outlined in gray, but something in her voice warned Susan that this was important.**

**“What?”**

**Jo Erin held out a hand. Without thinking, Susan grabbed it. Jo Erin drew her close.**

**“Susan,” she said softly, as if seeking reassurance. “You did kill Noonan, didn’t you?”**

**Susan stiffened and pulled back, but Jo Erin didn’t release her hand.**

**“Did you kill him, Susan?”**

**“Of course I did.” Susan tugged her hand free. “Who else could have done it?”**

**There was a moment of disappointed silence, and Jo Erin disappeared from the window.**

**Susan moved to the window, shut it, and leaned her forehead against the pane.**

**“Damn you, Jo Erin,” she whispered. “Damn you.”**

**The train’s refrain had changed.**

**Damn you, Jo Erin. Damn you, Jo Erin. Damn you, Jo Erin.**

**Susan braced her feet against the floor of the car as the train maneuvered around one last turn. Keeping her balance was much easier than it had been on her trip up the canyon. This time she was not burdened with travel bag and winter cape. With just her purse over**



her arm and her parasol in her hand, she prepared to alight as the train screeched to a halt before the Wallace train depot.

The population of Wallace was not much greater than that of Needles Eye, but it was a very different sort of town. Sturdy brick buildings squatted along the street. Not only saloons, dance halls, and pool halls, but also restaurants, a department store, a dress maker, a bakery, and even an opera house. Awnings over doorways protected pedestrians from the sun.

Awnings were necessary. The most glorious difference between Wallace and Needles Eye was that the sky over Wallace was big. The town was situated in a little valley hugged by dense trees, but the valley was concave like a shallow finger bowl, and the sky was accessible from every vantage point. Needles Eye, on the other hand, was more like a hip flask, in which the sky could only be seen from the center, if one stared straight up. In Needles Eye, awnings were not needed, and there was no room for them anyway. The train passed too close to the front of the buildings and would knock them down each time they passed.

Susan felt such an exhilarating sense of freedom upon entering the wide street, she forgot for a moment the burdens of her secrets. A desire to purchase something fun came over her. She eyed the department store and wondered how much money she could afford to spend. She did not forget that she had four hundred dollars tucked away in her travel bag, proceeds from the bracelet she had sold in Spokane, but that money was reserved for her future travels.

She had her dancing money, though, and her shoes were in poor shape from the beating they took every night. It wouldn't hurt to see if Wallace's Finest Department Store offered fashionable ladies' shoes. Besides, law officers were unlikely to be found near the ladies' shoe department.

Thirty minutes later she left the store wearing new patent leather shoes with curved heels and black satin bows. She carried her old shoes in a bag and was accompanied by a cloud of the scent she had sampled at the perfume counter. The sight of a flag at the end of the street reminded her of her real purpose for being in town. She unfurled her parasol and headed toward the post office. A wooden box with a slot whittled in the side stood beside the open post office door. Susan loosened the strings of her purse and removed the letters just as she felt a hand encircle her elbow.

"Susan. What a delightful surprise."

She instinctively tightened her grip on the letters so that they crumpled slightly beneath her fingers.

"Careful there," Dave Davisson said. "You're ruining your letters." He reached for them.

**“No.” She snatched her hand back. At his surprised look, she forced her fingers to relax. She smoothed the envelopes with her left hand while keeping a secure grip on them with her right, making certain all the while that Jo Erin’s letter to New York remained beneath her own to Jennie Lynn. She attempted a coy smile. “You startled me, Mr. Davisson.”**

**“I apologize then. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Here, let me mail those for you.” He reached again for the letters.**

**Susan held them behind her back, acting playful. “Oh, no, sir. These are private letters.”**

**He placed himself between her and the box, his smile lifting the ends of his mustache. “What sort of secrets do you have, Susan?”**

**She stepped back, lowered her chin, and pouted, a tactic that she’d perfected in her years with Elias. “A gentleman does not pry, sir. I told you, these letters are private.”**

**He laughed. “That’s why I’m so curious.” He reached a long arm over her shoulder, but she dodged beneath it and jammed the wrinkled envelopes into the slot.**

**She heard the letters slap the bottom of the box and turned back with relief. She could afford to laugh now. “You’re too slow, sir.”**

**He grinned and wrapped his hand more intimately around her upper arm. “I’ll just have to learn your secrets another way, my dear. What are you doing in town today? Besides mailing letters.”**

**She lifted her skirt to exhibit the new shoes.**

**“Charming.” He slid his hand up and down her arm, smiling steadily into her eyes. “The train won’t return for an hour or more, and I happen to know that the drug store has a soda fountain that serves Coca Cola. Have you tried it?”**

**She had tasted Coca Cola many times in New York, but she didn’t want to reveal that part of her history. “No. What is it like?”**

**“Come with me and taste it. I think you’ll enjoy it.”**

**Susan hesitated. She had some experience at being recruited to become a gentleman’s mistress, and she was fairly certain that was what Dave Davisson was up to. She didn’t intend to continue that line of work any longer, not unless she had to, but perhaps it would be wise to act as if she did.**

**Jo Erin thought she could discover the identity of Mitty’s killer if she could come at it from the mine owner’s side. Maybe Susan could help her out.**

Davisson gave her arm a slight squeeze, and Susan made up her mind. "I'd love to."

**THE VEIN OF** silver that Dex had been following proved rich. It snaked steadily downward for several feet before it made a horizontal turn. As Dex traced its path with dynamite, Jo Erin's pit grew in depth and breadth. A pump removed the constantly dripping water, and a ladder was required to get into and out of the pit. Mucking slowed down considerably.

Jo Erin had to climb down the ladder, break the rock, fill the bucket with ore, climb up the ladder, haul the bucket up with a rope, empty it into the waiting car, lower the bucket, climb back down the ladder, and fill it again. After perhaps twenty such trips, the car would be filled and she could push it along the rails to the shaft. She then rang the bell to signal the hoist room above. She was allowed a brief moment of rest while the cage was sent down to the fourth level. When it arrived, she pulled the empty car it carried onto a short side track, shoved the loaded car into the cage, locked the wheels, rang the bell again, and the ore was lifted to the top. Then she pushed the empty car back to the stope to start all over again.

It was a two person job. Ideally, a mucker would work in the pit, breaking rocks and filling the bucket. The second man, the trammer, would work above, hauling the buckets up, emptying them into the car, and pushing the cars to and from the shaft. Four times as much work would get done with only twice as much labor. But it was the third of July, the day before the drilling competition, and Jo Erin's trammer was otherwise occupied.

Moss had been chosen by Dex to be his partner in the single-jacking contest. Moss's job consisted of handling the drill bits, passing them to Dex quickly and smoothly so as not to slow Dex's pace or make him lose his rhythm.

It didn't seem fair to Jo Erin that she should be doing the work of two men just so Moss and Dex could practice such a simple task. She wondered if she was being duped. She couldn't risk complaining, though. Her success at infiltrating the Union depended on complete acceptance by the Union men.

She emptied the bucket of ore and started pushing the loaded car along the drift toward the shaft. The flickering of the candle on her hat provided adequate light as she made her way. She had already grown used to the dim light, to the dampness, the musty odor of dirt and rock, the hardened wax drippings all over her clothes, and the permanent black under her fingernails, under her skin. She'd even grown used to chasing the rats away by scuffing her boots, kicking rocks, and calling them names.

What she hadn't grown used to was the backbreaking nature of the work. Only three days, and her body cried out for rest. She was grateful for the holiday next day, and she

found herself hoping the Union would vote to strike if only to ensure that she wouldn't have to come back down in the mine.

Suddenly the hoist bell rang out. Jo Erin counted. One, two, three, four. Damn. She abandoned the car and ran back toward the stope.

"Someone's coming," she called.

Dex's hammer stopped and Moss scrambled up the ladder. Practicing for contests was not supposed to be done on company time. Moss hurried toward the shaft to meet whoever alighted from the cage. Dex started his hammer going again at a slower, working pace, and Jo Erin climbed down the ladder, picked up the sledge hammer, and attacked a large rock. She wondered if someone was checking to see why the ore today was coming up at half pace.

A few moments later a half dozen candles bobbed toward the stope.

"Dex, Joe," Moss called. "Hold up a minute there."

Their hammers stilled and they looked up from the bottom of the pit. Men in suits with vests and satin ties hanging around their necks stood at the edge of the pit looking down.

"These men are from the Mine Owners Group," Moss said breathlessly, his skin shiny from nervous sweat. "They've come to see how we get on down here."

Jo Erin studied the men carefully. Was one of these men the Union spy?

"What are your names, boys?" asked a stout man in black.

The condescension in his voice tempted Jo Erin not to answer, but Dex had a better understanding of their roles.

"Dex Haight," he said expressionlessly.

"Joe Burke," Jo Erin mumbled.

A lanky man in a flannel suit said something quietly to the stout man, who nodded and leaned over the side. "Why don't you boys go on with your work," he said loudly. "Let us see how you get on."

Dex nodded and turned back to the hole he'd been drilling. The ringing of his hammer on the end of the drill started its steady rhythm. He seemed untroubled by his audience. Of course, he was used to drilling before crowds. It was what he was practicing to do the next day.

Jo Erin, on the other hand, was extremely conscious of the eyes that peered down at them, as if they were animal exhibits in a zoo. She hefted the sledge hammer behind her back, slung it over her head, and brought it down heavily on the rock. She missed center, and it slipped off the side. She gritted her teeth and tried again. She'd grown quite good at aiming the hammer, hating the wasted effort of a blow that missed. Her second strike was dead center. A few more blows and the rock was in pieces. She put down the hammer, loaded the rubble into the bucket, and gave the rope a sharp tug.

Moss scurried behind the suited men to haul on the rope, then stood with the bucket in his hands and nowhere to dump it. He gave a nervous laugh. "We just filled a car," he said, licking his lips. "We passed it on the rail, remember?"

Some of the men nodded and others looked bewildered. Dex continued working as if they weren't even there. Jo Erin picked up her hammer and did the same. She only knew they left when the light from their candles faded away.

They heard the ringing of the hoist bell again and a moment later Moss returned to the pit.

"God damn it," he said, lowering himself to sit on the edge of the pit with his legs hanging down. "You know what they're doing?"

"What?" Jo Erin asked.

"They're getting ready for scabs," Moss said bitterly. "They know we're taking a strike vote tomorrow, damn it. They're going to every level. They're getting ready to give our jobs to scabs."

Dex laughed. "Let 'em try," he said. "We ain't gonna let no scabs have our jobs."

"How are we going to stop them?" Jo Erin asked.

"Hell, I don't know," Dex said, turning once more to pound his drill. "But no God damned scab's gonna get my job. We'll stop 'em. If we have to blow 'em clear to kingdom come. We'll stop 'em."

## Chapter Five

**“GET IT IN there, Dex!”**

**“Slap that thing home, Mac!”**

**“Steady on. I got my money on you, Dex.”**

**“Push it in, Mac. My old lady needs a new petticoat.”**

The voices came from opposite sides of the five foot high platform placed in the center of the narrow street, nearly drowning out the ring of hammers on drill heads. Mac’s supporters stood on the eastern side while those rooting for Dex cheered from the west.

It was early in the afternoon of July fourth, still hot, but a strong breeze blew up the canyon slinging fat white clouds overhead. The single-jacking competition had been narrowed down to the two finalists. Bets were high, as was the excitement, both augmented by the liquor that had been flowing freely all morning long.

Jo Erin edged as close to Dex’s platform as she could, feeling a proprietary interest in the outcome of the competition. She thought she’d grown accustomed to Dex’s expertise at drilling, but she’d never seen him work like this.

Sweat spattered from his chin and forehead to splotch the dust on the granite boulder on which he worked, but nothing marred the intense concentration on his face, the quick steady rhythm of the hammer. Moss crouched beside him, a sharpened drill held ready in one hand, his attention focused on Dex’s every move. The instant Dex needed a new drill, Moss had it in place, the old one tossed aside, in a movement so smooth the rhythm of the hammer hardly slowed.

Jo Erin was embarrassed now that she’d offered to replace Mitty. No wonder Dex had rejected her so scornfully. She’d had no idea what the job entailed.

Moss switched over drills again. The fifteen minutes were almost up. Jo Erin glanced at Mac, a burly Irishman who swung his four pound hammer as easily as if he were tacking shoes. It was going to be close.

**“Get him, Dex!”** Jo Erin shouted, the thrill of competition pulsing through her despite herself. **“You almost got him.”**

A bell clanged and both men dropped their hammers. Dex put his hands on his knees and leaned over, only now taking the time to gasp for breath. A covert glance beneath his arm revealed Mac’s progress. Dex looked grim.

**“Dex,”** Jo Erin called. **“I think you got him.”**

Dex shook his head, discouraged. **“Hope you didn’t bet on me.”** He accepted a cloth from Moss, wiped the sweat from his face, and watched a judge from the Mine Owners

Group measure the depth of the holes in Mac's granite boulder. A moment later he measured the holes in Dex's boulder and declared Mac the winner.

"Shit!" Dex dropped to the edge of the platform and sat with his legs dangling. "I couldn't of drilled any faster than that. That damned Irishman is just too God damned big. Sorry boys," he said to the men who gathered around him. "Hope you didn't lose too much on me."

"Aw, don't worry about it. You made runner up."

"Hell, I made a bundle. I bet on the other guy. Let me buy you a drink."

"We'll all buy you a drink. Get you good and drunk."

Dex perked up. "Hey, I made runner up. Twenty-five dollars ain't chicken feed. I'll buy you all a drink. Let's everybody get drunk."

A cheer greeted Dex's announcement, and the men followed him to the Mine Owners' Office to watch Dex collect his winnings.

Jo Erin followed slowly. She had no intention of getting drunk. Pinkerton agents were trained to feign getting drunk while still keeping their attentions focused on the job at hand. It was training that Jo Erin had paid especially close attention to, since she had more to lose than most if she lost her concentration about who she was supposed to be. Besides, the strike vote was coming up later in the day, and she wanted her wits about her for that.

When she reached the Mine Owners' Office, Jo Erin stopped short. Standing outside the office doors, in the midst of a crowd of celebrating men, was Susan.

Susan had mailed Jo Erin's letter the day before, but Jo Erin only knew that because Susan had given her a nod across the room the night before. They didn't dance. Jo Erin had been indulging a fantasy, she realized, in which somehow, magically, the evidence had been wrong and Susan was innocent of Noonan's murder. Susan had blasted that fantasy away with her blunt admission that she had killed Noonan. Still, Jo Erin found herself inventing excuses for her. Susan couldn't have killed Noonan for no reason. Perhaps, despite what Jennie Lynn said, Noonan had mistreated Susan. Perhaps killing Noonan was the only way Susan could find to escape her role of being a rich man's mistress.

It appeared now that Jo Erin was wrong.

Susan looked innocent enough. She wore a white dress with big ruffled sleeves and a sash of red, white, and blue bunting around her waist. The wind blew the soft ruffles about her, and she held a hand up to a straw hat decorated with a bouquet of white and red flowers. She would have been at home on the promenade in New York City's Central Park, and she certainly drew the eye of every man in Needles Eye. Particularly that of the man on whose arm she hung.

Jo Erin stared, open mouthed, as Susan looked up at the man and laughed gaily at something he said. Just then a trio of small boys ran by, tossing a string of lighted firecrackers toward the pair. The tiny sticks exploded, and Susan shrieked and buried her face in the tall man's shoulder. He laughed and wrapped his arm about her waist, pulling her closely to him.

When they were children, Jo Erin and the Bantrys had play daredevil games with firecrackers. Susan was more daring than even her brothers with the little sticks, holding onto a lit firecracker for agonizing seconds before tossing it away. Seeing her now, cowering in the lanky man's arms at the pop of a tiny cracker, made Jo Erin's stomach twist.

Dex and his followers burst out of the Mine Owners' Office.

"Joe." Dex clapped her on the shoulder. "We're gonna get drunk."

"Wait." Jo Erin grabbed Dex's arm and pulled him back. "Dex, who is that man? The one with Susan?"

Dex looked and gave a low whistle. "Don't she look good enough to eat? What the hell's she doing with him?"

"Who is he?" Jo Erin asked again. There was something familiar about him.

"That's Dave Davisson. He's a lawyer for the mine owners. You saw him yesterday. He's one of those assholes who came down in the mine. Damn. I don't like him taking our girls. I guess she won't be coming back to Lou's no more, with a fellow like that taking her up."

They stood and watched as Susan and Davisson strolled toward them. Just as she reached Jo Erin, Susan glanced up. She looked straight at Jo Erin, then through her, and moved on past as if she hadn't seen her. Just like in that hallway in New York.

Dex clapped Jo Erin on the shoulder again. "Let's go, Joe. Let's get drunk."

Jo Erin allowed herself to be pulled along. Suddenly, getting drunk didn't seem like such a bad idea.

**BILLY WEEKS PACED** the empty Union Hall, kicking an empty whiskey bottle out of his path as he did so. What the hell was taking them so long? The last of the miners had straggled out of the hall over an hour ago. More than half of them were drunk, but the vote



had gone as he'd hoped. The Needles Eye, Yellow, and No Tail miners were now officially on strike.

But didn't any of them realize that their real work had just begun? They'd started carousing as soon as the votes were tallied, as if going on strike were just an elaborate Fourth of July celebration. Did they think the mere mention of a strike would make the mine owners back down? They had work to do.

Finally, the door of the Union Hall opened and Zeke walked in, followed by two stumbling miners.

"I got him," Zeke said, "but I don't know how much good he'll do you."

"Damn it, Dex," Billy said. "Why'd you have to go and get drunk?"

Dex smiled benignly at Billy. "It's the Fourth of July," he said. "B'sides, there's no work tomorrow. We're on strike."

"Being on strike is work, you jackass, at least for us."

A nearly sober look came over Dex's face. "We got work to do, Billy?"

"Yes. Get rid of him first," Billy said, nodding at the drunken man whose arm was draped around Dex's neck. "Zeke, why'd you let him bring this drunk with him?"

Zeke raised an eyebrow. "They won't be parted."

"Joe's my new best friend," Dex said, tightening his grip on the other man's arm to prevent him from slipping to the floor. "B'sides, he won't hear nothing. Look at him."

Billy looked at the drunk. Billy was suspicious of everyone, and he'd been especially careful since he'd had to kill Mitty. The secretary of the God damned Union turned out to be the spy. He'd sure as hell make sure nothing like that happened again. He'd be suspected himself if another spy wormed his way into Union business.

Pinkerton would be sending a new man, and every newcomer was suspect, but Billy recognized the boy on Dex's arm. He'd arrived in town the same day Mitty bit the dust. He couldn't be from Pinkerton. Besides, there was no denying the boy had passed out. He made breathing noises that sounded as if he were half choking, a trickle of drool trailed from the corner of his mouth and down his chin, and his eyes, nearly closed, showed enough white to reveal that they had rolled back into his head.

"Well, put him down somewhere," he said impatiently. "We got to talk."

Dex gently lowered his new best friend to the floor and gave him a pat on the head. "Okay." He stood up straight. "I'm ready."

**“Sit down, Dex. You too, Zeke. We got some plans to make.”**

**He waited until they were both seated facing him, Zeke completely sober and Dex trying hard to look as if he were.**

**“The owners are bringing in scabs,” Billy said.**

**“Sons of bitches!” Dex tried to leap from his chair, but lost his balance and was only prevented from falling by Zeke’s steadying hand.**

**“It’s no surprise,” Billy said. “We expected it. But I know when they’re coming in.”**

**Zeke stared at Billy. “How do you know that?”**

**Billy couldn’t prevent the smug look that twisted his mouth. “I got sources.” He’d regained his trust in Zeke and Dex after Mitty had been exposed, but he had no intention of telling them who his source was. Nobody needed to know that but him.**

**“When are they coming?” Dex asked, striking a fist against his palm. “I want to give ‘em a little welcome party.”**

**“Day after tomorrow,” Billy said. “And I got a better idea than a welcome party.” That got their attention.**

**“What is it?” Dex asked, his eyes lighting up.**

**Zeke leaned forward.**

**“They’re sending a train load in from Spokane,” Billy said, speaking low. “We’re gonna meet that train in Wallace, lock the scabs in the cars, and send them on down to Missoula. They’ll never set foot in Needles Eye.”**

**“Yeehaw!” Dex shouted, causing the drunk on the floor to mumble and stir.**

**Zeke placed a restraining hand on Dex’s shoulder. “How are we gonna get the train to go to Missoula?” he asked.**

**Billy pulled his Colt from his holster and waved it casually at the drunk. “Do you know any train engineer won’t go where this thing tells him to?”**

**“Yeehaw!” Dex shouted again.**

**“What if they just come back?” Zeke asked.**

**“We’re gonna tell ‘em not to,” Billy said, “in a way they won’t misunderstand.”**

**“Yeehaw!”**

**“For God’s sake, Dex, shut up,” Billy said, holstering the gun. “Now listen up, so you’ll know just what to do.”**

**SUSAN SLIPPED THE white lawn nightdress over her head and fell back on the bed, too weary to tie the collar. Her Independence Day date with Dave Davisson had forced her to get up early that morning, and the exuberance of the celebratory miners at Lou’s had sapped her of the remainder of her strength.**

**How much longer could she survive as a hurdy gurdy girl? She’d never worked this hard in her life. But she couldn’t move on, not yet. Not with Jo Erin still in town.**

**There was an alternative to working at the hurdy gurdy, though. Dave Davisson’s suggestion that she move down to the other side of town had some merit. She wouldn’t have to dance so vigorously with mine owners and lawyers if she worked at Miller’s Dance Hall, where the men knew gentler ways to dance. She’d get to sleep in a room at the hotel, too, maybe even a room of her own. There would be drawbacks, though. At Lou’s, the miners accepted Susan’s choice to do nothing but dance. Davisson had hinted the same might not be true at Miller’s. She could make a lot of money there, he’d said, but Susan didn’t need money.**

**Sleep muffled her thoughts, and she nearly incorporated the sound of tapping into her dreams. The noise grew louder and she sat up, instantly awake. She stumbled to the window, pulled aside the curtains, and pushed up the pane.**

**“What are you—?”**

**Jo Erin started to pull herself into the room.**

**“No, don’t.” She pushed Jo Erin back. “Aimee will be here any minute.”**

**Her shove knocked Jo Erin off balance, and she fell backwards to the ground, three feet below.**

**“What’d you do that for?” Jo Erin grabbed the window sill to pull herself upright.**

**“Shh. Quiet, Jo Erin. You can’t come in.”**

**“You come out here, then.” Jo Erin reached through the window and grabbed at Susan’s shoulders.**

**“You’re drunk.” Susan twisted out of Jo Erin’s grasp. “Go away. You’re going to get caught.”**

**Jo Erin shook her head. “Can’t go away,” she said, her words slurred. “Need to write a telegram. You have a pen? Paper?”**

**“Now? You need to write a telegram right now?”**

**“S’important,” Jo Erin said. “I write it. You send it. Tomorrow. Today. In Wallace.”**

**“Are you sure?” She tried to gauge Jo Erin’s credibility. She was a mess. Her normally light brown hair stuck out from her head in dark sweaty clumps, and her eyes were bloodshot and bleary.**

**“S’important,” Jo Erin insisted. “Bringing in scabs. Gonna steal the train, attack the men. We gotta stop ‘em.”**

**“How do you steal a train? Who?”**

**“S’right. Gotta stop ‘em. Need some paper. And a pen.”**

**Susan sighed and turned from the window to rummage in her travel bag. A moment later she returned to the window with paper and her fountain pen.**

**“Need a light,” Jo Erin said.**

**“You can’t write it here,” Susan whispered. “Aimee will be right—Oh, for heaven’s sake, I hear her coming. Go.”**

**“Come with me.” Jo Erin shoved the pen and paper into a pocket and once again reached through the window to grab Susan’s shoulders.**

**“No.” She wrenched away and backed from the window, but Jo Erin leaned in and started to pull herself over the sill. Susan had enough experience with drunks to know that reasoning with Jo Erin would not work. She would not be able to talk her into leaving. “All right! All right, I’ll come. Get back. I’m coming.”**

**Aimee and Zeke were nearly at the door. Susan pushed Jo Erin away from the window and climbed out. “Quiet,” she whispered. She grabbed Jo Erin’s hand and yanked her around the corner of the shack. They leaned against the wall. Susan put her finger to her lips and gestured to Jo Erin to be quiet. They both held their breaths as Aimee opened the door.**

**“Susan?” Aimee called. She stuck her head out the window. “Suze? That’s odd. Where would she go?”**

**“She got a fellow?” Zeke asked.**

**“She spent the day with that lawyer,” Aimee said.**

**“That’s where she’ll be, then.”**

**“Don’t know why she had to leave the window open, though.” The window closed.**

**Susan released her breath and looked up at Jo Erin. The moonlight was just bright enough to reveal the direction of Jo Erin’s gaze. Susan looked down and saw that the collar of her nightdress gaped open revealing nearly her entire bosom. Susan caught her breath, and her breasts rose. She flushed and quickly tied the strings at her neck.**

**“Spoilsport,” Jo Erin said.**

**“Hush.” She took Jo Erin’s hand and drew her toward the incline behind the shack. When they’d put enough trees behind them to muffle their voices, she stopped. “This is far enough,” she said. “Now you write the telegram and I’ll take it to Wallace in the morning.”**

**“I can’t write here,” Jo Erin complained. “It’s too dark.”**

**“Then go find some light, write the telegram, and bring it back here. I’ll wait.”**

**“You come with me.” Jo Erin pulled on her hand.**

**“No. Oh, why did you have to get so drunk? Look at me. I’m barefoot. I can’t go anywhere like this.”**

**“I’ll carry you.”**

**Before Susan could respond, Jo Erin wrapped her arms around Susan’s waist, pulled her against her, and lifted her from the ground.**

**“No.” She tried to wriggle free, but Jo Erin just tightened her grip and took a step. “You’re going to drop me.”**

**“I’ve been mucking,” Jo Erin said. “Pretty strong now.”**

**“Jo Erin, think. I can’t send telegrams for you if people see us together.”**

**Jo Erin ignored her and continued walking. “Put your arms around my neck,” Jo Erin said. “It’ll be easier.”**

**Instead, Susan placed her hands over Jo Erin’s eyes.**

**Jo Erin stopped. “I can’t see.”**

**“I know. Put me down.”**

**“Move your hands so I can see.”**

**“No. Put me down, Jo Erin.”**

**Jo Erin sighed heavily and set Susan on her feet. She leaned back against a tree and slid down until she was sitting on the forest floor, legs sprawled in front of her. She put her hands on her face and rubbed vigorously, as if scrubbing, and gave a loud groan.**

**“I’m sorry, Sukey.” Jo Erin’s voice was muffled by her hands. “I didn’t mean to get drunk. I never get drunk. Drunk is dangerous.”**

**Susan squatted next to her. “Why did you?”**

**Jo Erin lowered her hands and narrowed her eyes. “When did you get so afraid of firecrackers?”**

**“What?”**

**“Oh, help me!” Jo Erin said in a falsetto voice, her hands fluttering about her face. “It’s a firecracker. Oh, I’m so afraid!”**

**Susan frowned. “Shut up, Jo Erin.”**

**With the sudden mood swing of a drunk, Jo Erin suddenly turned woeful. “Why were you with Davisson today?”**

**Susan dropped to a sitting position. She landed on a rock, winced, and rose to brush the rubble beneath her away.**

**“Sit here.” Jo Erin patted her knee.**

**Susan ignored her and settled back on the ground. “You said it would be useful to have someone close to the Mine Owners Group.”**

**“Not that close,” Jo Erin said.**

**“I don’t particularly like Dave,” Susan said. “I’m just pretending. I’m being a spy. Like you.”**

**“No.” Jo Erin shook her head vigorously and bumped the back of it against the tree. “Ouch. No, Susan, listen. I know I’m drunk. I’m being stupid. But I know one thing. Davisson is dangerous. They’re all dangerous. They have a spy, and they’ll do anything to keep who it is a secret. Stay away from the Mine Owners Group, okay? Stay away from Davisson.”**

**“It’s no more dangerous for me than it is for you.”**

**“Yes it is. I’m trained in this. I know what I’m doing.”**

**“Like tonight?”**

**“No.” Jo Erin shook her head mournfully, her lower lip pouted out. “Not tonight. I bungled it tonight.”**

**Susan laughed, and shivered as a breeze blew through the trees.**

**“You’re cold,” Jo Erin said. She ran her fingers along Susan’s shoulder and pinched the thin material. “You’re wearing practically nothing.”**

**“I wasn’t planning on coming out tonight.”**

**“Come here.” Jo Erin wrapped her arms around Susan and pulled her sideways toward her. “Let me warm you up.”**

**This time Susan let herself be drawn into Jo Erin’s arms. She leaned into Jo Erin’s chest and, briefly, closed her eyes and rested her head on Jo Erin’s shoulder, letting warmth and comfort enter her body. Jo Erin smelled of tobacco and sweat and liquor. It was the smell of the dance hall, and Susan was used to it, but it was odd to smell it on Jo Erin. She was the one person in the world from whom Susan held no secrets, aside from a few about Elias. She let herself relax fully into Jo Erin’s arms in a way she could do with no other.**

**Her pose was awkward, though, her legs pressed painfully into the earth. As if realizing it, Jo Erin dropped an arm beneath Susan’s legs, lifted her slightly, and pulled her fully into her lap.**

**“Oh!”**

**“I just want you to be warm,” Jo Erin said. Her voice was low, and Susan felt it as much as heard it, she was so close.**

**“I am,” Susan assured her. “I am quite warm now.”**

**She was, in fact, quite flushed. Jo Erin’s eyes glowed black in the darkness, and Susan could see that she once again examined Susan’s breasts as they rose and fell beneath the thin white cloth. Seeing Jo Erin’s gaze made Susan’s breath come faster and her chest rise more noticeably. She felt, faintly, the rise of Jo Erin’s own breasts against hers. She wondered what they looked like.**

**Susan knew, she had always known, that Jo Erin was different than other girls. She knew, without being told, that Jo Erin would never lie in bed with a man if she could help**

it, and that she had engineered her life so that the possibility of such a thing happening was remote. There were women, she knew, who preferred lying in a sexual way with other women. She had even allowed herself, once or twice, to wonder if Jo Erin would enjoy lying in such a way with her.

Susan had not disliked the sexual life she shared with Elias. The culmination of the sex act, at least, was pleasurable for her, and the kisses and other gestures of affection he bestowed on her had pleased her. But she had never lost her breath because of the way Elias looked at her, never thought to imagine him without clothes, never felt dampness between her legs because of the feel of his fully clothed body pressed against hers.

She wondered now, as her eyes locked on Jo Erin's, and her breath came fast, and wetness dripped between her legs, was she a girl like that?

As if to test her, Jo Erin lowered her head, preparing, Susan knew, to kiss her. Susan wasn't ready.

"Are you going to write that telegram?" Susan asked abruptly, her voice high and nervous.

Jo Erin pulled her head back and once again struck the back of it against the tree. "Ouch."

"You said it was important," Susan said.

"Yeah." Jo Erin licked her lips and blinked as if she'd just woken up. "Yeah. It's important. I have to write a telegram."

"I know." Susan sat up and scooted off Jo Erin's lap. "You put the pen and paper in your pocket."

Jo Erin pulled the items out and looked at them as if she'd never seen them before.

Susan rose to her feet. "Let's move over here, where there's some light." She held her hand to Jo Erin, who took it and, with the aid of the tree, pulled herself upright. She followed Susan to a sliver of moonlight.

"Use my back." Susan turned away from Jo Erin, put her hands on her knees, and hunched her shoulders to make her back a desk. She felt Jo Erin lay the paper on her back and smooth it with both hands. She listened as Jo Erin unscrewed the cap and tapped the pen to get the ink flowing, and she felt the pen begin a slow scrawl across her back. Jo Erin's writing was unsteady, but it was a short note. At one point Susan felt the nib of the pen poke through the paper to prick her skin, and a moment later she felt a spot of dampness soak into her gown as a blot of ink seeped through the paper.



When Jo Erin finished, she waved the paper in the air to help it dry. Still looking at the paper, Jo Erin whispered, "I'm sorry."

Susan pretended to misunderstand. "It's an old gown. A spot of ink won't matter."

Jo Erin sent her a remarkably sober look, but only said, "If anyone catches you with this note, or asks you about the telegram, tell them you know nothing about it, just that I asked you to mail it."

Susan nodded.

"You can go tomorrow?" Jo Erin asked. "Today, I mean?"

"I'll go today."

"Good." Jo Erin frowned. "I shouldn't have you do this."

"How else will you get the word out about the train?"

"I can't think of another way."

"Men's lives are at stake?"

Jo Erin nodded. "I think they are."

"Then we don't have a choice. I'll be fine, Jo Erin."

Jo Erin ran her hand through her hair and grimaced. "If I weren't drunk..."

"I need to go back," Susan said. "So do you." She folded the paper and tucked it into her sleeve.

Jo Erin looked down and saw Susan's feet. She looked up with a jaunty grin. "Want me to carry you back?"

"No, thank you." Susan turned and walked a few steps away. She looked over her shoulder and saw Jo Erin watching her. "Maybe if you weren't drunk..." she said, and laughed at Jo Erin's startled expression.

**GROVER CLEVELAND WAS** a big man. It was a fact the cartoonists continually delighted in lampooning. As if he cared about that. His life would be a lot more pleasant if they'd limit their barbs to such trivial matters as the size of his waistline.

Now that a little time had passed since he'd made that deal with Noonan, the press was having second thoughts about his decision.

The economy was almost universally better. Aside from a few silver states in the West and South, everyone agreed that things were looking up. Even the journalists didn't try to deny that. What they did instead was suggest that the economy would have improved anyway, that his deal with Noonan was unnecessary and expensive. They couldn't seem to grasp how close the country had come to outright bankruptcy and ruin.

Noonan had the advantage of being dead. He was still hailed as a hero and would probably be recounted as such in the history books for eternity. Cleveland, on the other hand, was very much alive and had no intention of altering that state in order to win the favor of a bunch of loutish yellow journalists.

He sighed. And now there was this business out in Idaho, something about striking miners. It shouldn't be his affair. Cleveland, unlike most of his Democratic contemporaries, firmly believed that too much federal interference violated the charge placed upon him by the Constitution. But the infant state of Idaho was so new it didn't even have its own militia. If the miners turned violent, he'd have to send in federal troops. The press would have a field day with that, but there was no way around it. He'd be damned if he did and damned if he didn't. He had to do what would save the most lives.

"Cleve."

He looked up at the young woman sitting at the end of the table.

"What's wrong, dear?" she asked softly.

He shook his head and frowned. "Nothing that need concern you."

"You're not eating," she pointed out. "That does concern me."

That made him smile. "So it does. So it does," he said, picking up his fork. "You are a good little mother, Frankie."

She gave him that wise smile that always made him feel she knew him a great deal better than he knew her. Which was reasonable, he supposed, since she'd known him since the day she was born. He, on the other hand, hadn't made her acquaintance until he was twenty-eight years old. Now that had been another triumph for the reporters, when they'd learned he was marrying his own ward. They'd tried to turn it into something sordid, but Frankie's own sweet innocence thwarted them. It was clear to even the meanest of them that she loved her 'Uncle Cleve'. Even if she hadn't, it wasn't a bad deal for her. She'd married the President of The United States, after all.

Besides, what man wouldn't choose a woman thirty years younger than he, if he could get her? Noonan had certainly done it, with that beautiful girl. No one had raked him over

the coals for it, and he hadn't even had the decency to marry his. If he had, Cleveland wondered, would he still be alive today?

Where was that young woman? He'd better put in another call to Pinkerton. It was crucial that he know of it the instant she was found. The thought of what might happen if he weren't informed in time made him put down his fork.

He had lost his appetite.

## Chapter Six

JO ERIN'S BORROWED horse was skittish. She hoped Dex wouldn't catch on to the fact that the beast was merely picking up on its rider's mood. The scab train should arrive any minute, and if her telegram had been received, there was no sign anyone was doing anything about it.

Of course, even if Jo Erin's uneasiness were noted, it wouldn't seem out of place.

Over two hundred miners waited at the Wallace train station. About a third of them sat on horses. Half were drunk, and nearly all had guns. The weather, cool, cloudy, and spitting rain, only contributed to the jumpy energy of the crowd.

The plan, made known to the men only hours before, was to board the train as soon as it stopped in Wallace, hold the engineer at gunpoint, and force him to take the train southeast rather than up the Needles Eye Canyon. A few miles out of town, they would stop the train, haul the scabs from the cars, beat them up, lock them back in the cars, and send the train on to Missoula. There was no talk of killing, but Jo Erin had enough experience with mobs to know that once the beatings started, the smell of blood would stir the crowd out of control. There would be killing.

The miners had been on strike for two days now, long enough for the initial euphoria to wear off and fear to set in, particularly among the married miners. Going hungry was difficult, but not as difficult as seeing hunger in the eyes of your children. There was a grim look on the faces of such men. To them, a scab was nothing more than a thief, coming to steal food from the mouths of their babies. They would do whatever it took to prevent that from happening.

The single miners were less grim and more volatile. Rather than eke out their few remaining dollars to buy beans and flour, they spent them recklessly on booze and women. To them, the strike was a great excuse to have a party. They had nothing to lose and were raring for a fight. They wouldn't be letting any scabs get by them without a serious bruising, at the very least.

Jo Erin shifted restlessly in her saddle. She was not accustomed to riding, but Dex had conjured up two horses, one for each of them, believing them essential to their role in the scheme. How could they chase the train and beat up the scabs without horses? Jo Erin couldn't refuse the mount without drawing suspicion, or at least risk losing Dex's valuable friendship, so she rode.

At least on the horse she was high enough to see over the heads of the milling men. She looked for a sign of guards or militia or anyone prepared to intercede before the men boarded the train, but she saw nothing but agitated miners.

They had to have received her telegram.

But, Jo Erin remembered uneasily, she wasn't even certain what the telegram said. She'd been drunk when she wrote it, and distracted beyond reason by the feel of Susan's warm back beneath her hands. The material of her nightgown had been so thin, Jo Erin imaged she could see Susan's skin beneath it, even in the moonlight. Just thinking about how Susan had felt in her arms made Jo Erin twitch in the saddle, and the horse danced.

Maybe Susan hadn't even sent the telegram. She might not have understood its importance. Jo Erin probably wasn't very clear, and Susan had been distracted too, Jo Erin would swear to it. She'd wanted to be kissed, whether she admitted it or not. There was no mistaking that look.

Jo Erin scolded herself for the hundredth time for getting so drunk. It went against all her Pinkerton training. She'd put her own life at risk and probably Susan's too, if the alcohol had loosened her tongue enough to let anything slip about their true identities. She didn't think she had. Her impressions of the evening were sporadic and hazy, but if she'd revealed who she was, she wouldn't have survived the night.

If she hadn't gotten drunk, though, would she ever have had the courage to pull Susan into her arms? If she hadn't gotten drunk, would she have coaxed Susan into the forest in her nightdress? Would she have seen the moonlight on Susan's breasts or felt her warm body tremble in her lap? Would she have seen the sensual, teasing look Susan threw over her shoulder as she tiptoed into the trees, like a forest nymph?

Getting drunk may have been the smartest thing Jo Erin ever did.

And had she really picked Susan up and carried her? Jo Erin's memory was unclear, but her arms remembered the feel of Susan squirming against her, trying to get down.

The telegram, which had seemed so urgent when she made her drunken way to Susan's cabin, had faded in significance once she'd held Susan in her arms. It would be no surprise if Susan didn't understand the importance of it.

If the telegram was not sent, there would be no one but Jo Erin to stop the miners from commandeering the train.

She was facing what they called a "Pinkerton Decision". Did she blow her cover and risk her life to stop the miners and prevent near certain death of at least some of the men on the train? Or did she maintain her role as a striking miner, join in with the violence, in hopes of preventing even more bloodshed in the future? She wasn't the first Pinkerton agent to be faced with such a choice. She, like all agents, was trained to assess the risks and weigh the benefits of her options, but there was no right answer. In the end, it came down to a hunch. The feeling in her belly would tell her which way to move.

If only there was some sign the mine owners had received her telegram.

At that moment the long low whistle of an incoming train blew in from the west, causing a rustle of anticipation in the crowd.

"This is it, Joe," Dex cried, nearly standing in his stirrups in excitement. "Come on, boys, let's have a party."

Cheers erupted from the miners as the train rounded the bend and headed toward the station. Jo Erin reached down and wrapped her fingers around the handle of her Colt. Her gut was churning, but she couldn't yet interpret what it wanted her to do.

"Here she comes," a miner hollered.

"She better slow down," another said.

"Hey, it's not slowing down."

"It's speeding up."

"God damn it. It's passing right by!"

"It's heading up the canyon!"

Jo Erin masked her relief with a scowl of disappointment. They'd received the telegram. Susan had sent it, and the message had been received. The train churned unmolested up the mountain. Once the scabs reached Needles Eye, they'd be protected by the mine guards. Violence had been diverted, temporarily, at least.

**“God damn it. Come on, boys, let’s meet ‘em up there.” Dex spurred his horse up the canyon behind the train. The other mounted miners followed, while those on foot headed for the nearest saloon, discouraged.**

**Jo Erin gave a giddy whoop as she urged her horse to catch up with Dex. She didn’t have to fake her enthusiasm, now that her Pinkerton Decision had been taken away from her. She was willing to seem eager for a fight, since there was little chance it would happen. They couldn’t possibly reach Needles Eye before the train, and even when they did, their numbers were too low to risk a confrontation with armed guards.**

**Two hours later Jo Erin sat at a table in Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy with Dex, Zeke, and Billy Weeks. She knew she hadn’t earned the right to sit at the same table with the Union president, and she could feel Billy’s speculative gaze settle on her every minute or so. But, as Dex’s new best friend, she had been invited, and she had no desire to turn such an opportunity down.**

**“God damn them guards,” Dex fumed. He had been almost continually drunk since the strike vote had been taken, and he showed no signs of slowing down. “We could have handled them scabs with our bare hands, but they had to go hire extra guards.”**

**Jo Erin nodded sympathetically and sipped her beer. She watched Susan dance from across the room. She longed to buy a dance with her, but she couldn’t waste this chance to learn the Union’s plans. Besides, ever since her drunken moment in the moonlight, she was feeling shy.**

**The girls had cut their prices when the strike went into effect, but even so, many of them sat around looking bored. The miners were running out of money, and some of the girls were talking of leaving town. Susan was still popular, though. Men who before had been only interested in going out back now sought less expensive diversions, and dancing with Susan was a favorite.**

**“Got your eye on Susan, son?”**

**Jo Erin gave a start. Zeke hadn’t spoken to her much. Jo Erin had the impression he didn’t like her, hadn’t ever since her first day when she’d tried to get Susan to go out back. And now he’d caught her mooning over Susan like a school kid. She blushed and forced a laugh. “Yeah, I suppose so,” she said. “Who wouldn’t? Look at her.”**

**Zeke nodded, but he didn’t look at Susan. Instead, he watched Jo Erin.**

**“What we ought to do,” Dex said, flourishing his beer glass, “is blow that damn mill up. Where’ll they put those scabs then? Huh? Just give me some dynamite, mister, and I’ll blow that damned mill to kingdom come.”**

**“Shut up.” Billy leaned forward and lowered his voice. “We ain’t gonna let the whole God damned bar in on it. We’re gonna plan it right. And sober up, Dex. I’m not giving dynamite to no drunk.”**

**Dex stared at him a moment, and pushed his glass away from him. “Okay, Billy,” he said, beginning to smile. “Okay. When are we gonna do it?”**

**Jo Erin turned her gaze back toward Susan and tried not to reveal the intense interest the words provoked. It sounded very much as if Billy had taken Dex’s suggestion seriously. It sounded as if he was planning to blow up the mill.**

**DAN AVERY ELECTED to stand in the cramped office next to the Needles Eye mill. There wasn’t enough room to bring in chairs for everyone, and besides, it allowed the rest of them a better view of his brand new custom tailored sateen shirt that didn’t bunch or wrinkle anywhere. His mother had suggested stripes and his sisters had voted for checks or polka dots, but Avery had insisted on white. He could add other designs as his wardrobe grew, but for now pure white seemed the most luxurious choice.**

**He selected what looked like the cleanest spot on the wall, crossed his arms, and leaned negligently back with the air of a man who has dozens of white sateen shirts to spoil. Even the weather was cooperating. It was warm enough so it didn’t look odd that he’d removed his jacket, yet it was cool enough that perspiration was not a worry. Davisson leaned against the opposite wall, hands in the pockets of his trousers, making his expensive summer suit look cheap.**

**“I appreciate everyone coming out here,” Jim Wilton said from behind his desk. “Things are too damned tense right now for me to leave. Those miners are just itching for a fight. If they’d been able to stop that train, there would have been killing for sure.”**

**“Any trouble with the new men?” Cheviot asked.**

**“Not yet. We’ve got them bedded down in the mill for now. Those Union boys will kill them if we send them over to the Company House.”**

**“Can they do the work all right?” Spencer asked.**

**“They damned well better do the work all right,” Cheviot said, “at four dollars a day.”**

**“Four dollars a day?” Avery emerged from his careful slouch. “But the miners only wanted—”**

Surprised looks from the mine owners and a glare from Davisson reminded Avery once again that he was to listen and not speak. He leaned back against the wall, a bit less relaxed this time.

“Being a scab is more dangerous work than mining, Mr. Avery,” Wilton said patiently. “We don’t bring them in to save money in the short run. When the strike is over, wages will return to normal.”

Avery nodded.

“Meanwhile,” Wilton continued, looking around the room, “I’ve wired the Governor. If these miners decide to start a war, we’ll need more than a few hired guards. The Governor has notified the President, and federal militia troops are on stand-by.”

“You think it will come to that?” Spencer asked.

“I sincerely hope not,” Wilton said. “But you know what happens when men go on strike. They lose all reason. We have to be prepared for the worst.”

There was a moment of silence that was interrupted by a knock on the door. A telegram was handed in and passed to Jim Wilton, who took it, read it, and passed it on to Spencer, who scanned it.

“Christ.” Spencer leaped to his feet. “Jesus Christ!”

“What is it?” Cheviot asked.

“Read it yourself.” Spencer crumpled the paper and threw it across the room like a baseball.

Cheviot caught it and smoothed it out, reading silently as he did so. With a stunned look, he passed the paper on to Dievert. After the officers had read it, the telegram was passed to the lawyers, ending with Avery.

“Read it out loud, Mr. Avery,” Wilton ordered, staring hard at him.

Avery blinked and swallowed rapidly.

“Read it, Avery.”

Adam’s apple bobbing, Avery read. “Urgent. Stop. Union informant among inner circle. Stop. Reliable source. Stop. Take immediate precautionary measures. Stop.” Avery paused. Feeling more was needed, Avery added, “It’s...it’s not signed, sir.”

A leery silence descended upon the group, broken after a moment by Dievert’s quiet voice. “That must be how they found out about Mitchell.”



**“Among other things,” Wilton agreed. His gaze swept from one person to the next, assessing everyone in the room. “What do you think about it, Avery?”**

**Avery noticed that, after wary looks at each other, the officers were all looking at him. He swallowed again and felt a tentative trickle of sweat drip down his back.**

**“I—I don’t know, sir. It could be anybody.”**

**“Not quite anybody, Mr. Avery,” Wilton said. “Only anybody in this room.”**

**“Well, what are we going to do about it?” Cheviot asked. “Christ. We got a God damned spy right here in this very room.”**

**“We won’t do anything about it right now,” Wilton said calmly. “No official action, anyway. But I’ll be giving it some thought.”**

**Another trickle of sweat dripped down the back of Avery’s new shirt.**

**“HEY, PUSS, COME on over here and sit in my lap.”**

**“Don’t listen to him, ma’am. He’s got the clap. Let me buy you a drink.”**

**“Come on, little cherry, I’ll give you a good ride.”**

**“Shut up, you son of a bitch. She ain’t no whore. Let me buy you a drink, ma’am.”**

**The comments were interspersed with low whistles and many open stares. Susan had thought she was used to the boldness of miners, but the men in Millers’ Dance Hall truly shocked her. She turned to leave, then remembered that the lives of hundreds of men were at stake. These men. They were hard men, gaunt and desperate. They must have been desperate to have risked their lives to work as scab labor. They were crude, but they didn’t deserve to die. She turned back.**

**She’d been in Miller’s before, on Independence Day with Dave Davisson, but it had been a different place then. It was still brightly lit by elegant chandeliers, and the dark wood of the bar and tables still gleamed, but the well-dressed businessmen and elegant dance girls were gone. In their place were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of replacement miners. Scabs.**

**She stepped further into the room amid more whistles and vulgar remarks. There were very few women in the room, and Susan was surprised to see that she knew some of them. Since the Union men had run out of money, some of Aimee’s girls had disappeared. Susan**

thought they'd left town, but apparently they'd just moved up the street. It didn't matter to them whether the men they serviced were Union or not.

"Flaire," she called.

"Suze, what are you doing in here?" Flaire took Susan's arm and pulled her behind the bar, away from the men. "This ain't your kind of place, Suze. These men don't want to just dance, you know."

"I know," Susan said. "I'm not looking for a job, Flaire. I'm looking for Dave Davisson. You remember, the man I went out with on the Fourth?"

Flaire's eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah. The rich fellow, lawyer or something? Good for you, Suze. That's the way to do it. Wish I could find me a rich man to take care of me."

"Have you seen him?" Susan asked. "I thought he might be here."

"No. Those Mine Group fellows don't come in here no more. It's too rough for them now. He'd be over at the mill or one of those other buildings." Flaire gave Susan a slight shove. "You go get him, Suze. Make him take good care of you."

"Thank you," Susan said and turned to face the gauntlet of men between her and the door. Not content with merely embarrassing her, this time they took liberties with their hands. By the time she'd gained her freedom she'd been patted, caressed, and actually pulled onto the lap of one hairy man before she managed to wriggle from his grasp. She also suspected she would have more than one bruise in the morning from spirited pinches.

She was relieved Dave hadn't been at Miller's. If he had been, she would have had to find another excuse to go to the Mine Owners' Office. She had no intention of delivering her message to Dave or any other member of the Mine Owners Group except the president, Mr. Wilton. Jo Erin had been very clear about that. Dave was merely her excuse for being on the mine owners' side of town.

Susan walked from Miller's Dance Hall to the mill next door. The weather had turned stormy. The wind blew through her clothes and she shivered in the July dusk. She almost wished she'd worn her winter cape.

The building that housed the mill actually looked like four houses built piggy-back against the mountain, one on top of the other. When she opened the door, however, she saw that it was actually one large room with half-floors, like giant stairs, that worked their way up to the top. Different sorts of steam-driven machinery clamored on each floor, and the noise was tremendous.

All the available floor space was taken up with blankets and bedrolls, temporary sleeping quarters for the men, but the work of the mill went on.

Susan stood in the doorway. A group of men lounged on a pile of blankets near the door. Apparently it was their off time, but they didn't even try to sleep. They played a desultory game of poker, but brightened when they saw Susan.

"Hey, look who came to play cards with us. Come here, baby."

She backed out and shut the door. The man she was looking for would not be there.

She walked along the outside of the mill until she reached a lean-to at the end. It was small compared to the mill, but it was well built. A sign above the door said simply "Office." When she opened the door she could still hear the noise from the mill, but it was muffled, and instead of machinery she saw walls painted yellow, another door, and a desk. Behind the desk sat a young man in shirtsleeves who stood up, startled, when he saw her.

"Oh, miss. What are you— Er, may I help you, miss?" As he spoke, he pulled a jacket from the back of his chair and donned it over a bright white shirt.

"Yes, please," she said. "I'm looking for Dave Davisson. Do you know him?"

"Davisson? Sure, I know him. He's my partner. My law partner. Well, my boss, really. What do you—? Oh." Enlightenment dawned on the young man's face. "You must be his fiancée. Mary, isn't it? I'm Dan Avery. I'm pleased to meet you."

"No." She backed away from his outstretched hand. "I'm not his fiancée. My name is Susan. I work at Lou's Hurdy Gurdy."

"Oh." Avery looked thunderstruck for a moment and blushed deep red. "Oh," he said again. "I'm sorry. I mean, I'm sorry about his fiancée, or, not that he has one, but that I thought you were..."

"It's all right." Susan gave a nervous laugh. "Is he here?"

"Davisson? No, no he's not here right now. I'll tell him you stopped in, though."

"I really need to find him." Susan let a hint of desperation creep into her voice. "Where is he? Will he be back soon? It's an emergency."

"I don't really know, miss," Avery said, beginning to sound a bit protective. No doubt a dance hall girl's emergency was low priority to lawyers. "I'll tell him you were here."

"What about Mr. Wilton?" she asked. "The president? May I speak to him?"

"Wilton?" Avery cast a horrified glance at the closed door behind him. "Of course not."

Susan looked at the door. "Is that Mr. Wilton's office?" She took a step toward it.

**“No!” Avery moved out from behind his desk and blocked her path. “No, of course not. His office is in Wallace, not here.”**

**She slumped. “I’m sorry to bother you.” She turned to the outer door and stood a moment, waiting.**

**“Oh.” Avery moved forward to open the door for her. He stepped around her and reached for the latch.**

**Susan whisked over to the office door. “I’ll just check—”**

**“No, miss!”**

**She spoke quickly as she opened the door. “Sir, I must speak with you.”**

**“Here, what’s going on?” A large man with penetrating blue eyes stood up behind his desk.**

**“I’m sorry, Mr. Wilton, she slipped by me.” Avery came up behind her and grabbed her arm. “I’ll get her out of here.”**

**“Sir, I must speak to you.” Susan stared directly into his eyes, trying to send him an unspoken message. She spoke slowly, spacing her words for emphasis. “It’s extremely important that I have a word with you, sir.”**

**Wilton raised a hand. “Here, hold up there, Avery. Let the girl have her say.”**

**“But sir.”**

**“Let her go, Avery.”**

**Susan’s arm was dropped. She glanced from Mr. Wilton to Avery and waited.**

**“That will be all, Avery,” Wilton said. “You may leave us.”**

**The instant he closed the door behind him, Susan rushed to the desk.**

**“Mr. Wilton,” she whispered urgently, “you must remove those men from the mill immediately. The Union men are planning to blow it up.”**

**Wilton stared at her intently, his crystal gaze a trifle unnerving, but she didn’t look away. “Who are you, girl?”**

**“My name doesn’t matter. I work at Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy.”**

**“Where did you get this information?”**

**“I can’t tell you that,” she said. “You do realize you have a spy in your Mine Owners Group, don’t you?”**

**“Yes, I am aware of that,” Wilton said. “I’m curious to know how you know it.”**

**“I can’t tell you that.”**

**“Who’s the spy? Tell me that, then.”**

**“I can’t tell you that either, because I don’t know it.”**

**“Well, how are they planning to blow up the mill? We’ve got armed guards.”**

**“I don’t know how. I only know they have a plan, and they aren’t worried about the guards.”**

**“You don’t know very much, do you, girl? Sit down. Sit down.**

**Let’s talk about this.”**

**“I can’t stay.” She glanced at the door. “I took a risk coming here at all. I’m pretending to be looking for Dave Davisson. You might tell him, when you see him, that I was asking about him.”**

**“Davisson?”**

**“Yes, we—we had a date once, on Independence Day. It’ll be safer for me if everyone just thinks I’m chasing him a bit. To explain why I’m here. I have to go now. You’ll move the men, won’t you?”**

**Before he could answer, there was a sharp rap at the door. It opened and Davisson stepped in.**

**Susan gasped. “Oh, here he is!”**

**“Davisson,” Wilton barked. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your girlie business out of my office. I can’t think what Avery was about, letting her barge in here.”**

**“I’m sorry, sir.” Davisson wrapped a steely hand around Susan’s arm. “Let’s stop bothering Mr. Wilton, my dear, shall we?”**

**She let him draw her out to the street while she tried to slow her racing heart.**

**“I’m sorry, Dave. I didn’t mean to get you into trouble. I just so desperately needed to see you.”**

**“See me about what?” Davisson asked tightly.**

**“I’m in trouble, and I don’t know what to do.”**

**“About what?”**

**“Well, you know, we talked that time about me dancing at Miller’s instead of at Lou’s. Remember?”**

**“I remember.” He moved his hand from her elbow to her waist.**

**She forced herself to lean against him. “Well, things are awfully slow at Lou’s right now. The miners are running out of money.”**

**“I know,” he said. “That’s what happens when you go on strike.”**

**“So I thought I’d go ahead and work at Miller’s, like you said that time. But I looked for you in there, and it’s not the same. I can’t dance with those men, Dave.”**

**“Of course you can’t.” He ran his hand up and down her side. “Things have changed, Susan. You don’t have as many choices as you did before.”**

**“I know.” She tried to ignore the touch of his thumb as it reached the side of her breast. “So I didn’t know what to do, except find you. What do you think should I do?”**

**He let his hand linger at her breast. “I think you already know the answer to that, Susan.”**

**“You mean—?” She pulled away and widened her eyes. “No, I told you before. I can’t do that.”**

**His lips thinned. “What sort of game are you playing, Susan?”**

**Susan shook her head. “No game. I just thought...” Susan lowered her head and raised a hand to her eyes, as if hiding tears.**

**“I’m sorry I bothered you. I wasn’t thinking. I won’t bother you again.”**

**She turned and walked quickly back toward the hurdy gurdy, feeling Davisson’s eyes on her all the way to the dim tunnel beneath the hotel.**

**“IT’S TIME TO go boys. You ready, Dex?”**

**“You bet.” Dex drained the last of the tea from his glass, grimaced, and slapped Jo Erin on the shoulder. “Let’s go, Joe. We’re gonna go shoot off some fireworks. Hee hee. Get it? We’re gonna shoot fireworks.”**

**“We get it, Dex,” Billy said. “You sure you’re sober enough for this?”**

**“Course I am. I haven’t had anything but tea for hours, have I, Joe?”**

**“He’s sober enough,” Jo Erin said. “But you better leave me here. I don’t know a damn thing about blasting.”**

**“Joe, you gotta go. This is gonna be better than the Fourth of July.”**

**“You’re coming with us,” Billy said. “It’ll be a good experience for a new Union man like you.”**

**Jo Erin looked at Billy and shrugged. She knew he was troubled by her. He wasn’t letting her out of his sight. There was no way to back out of this without bringing more suspicion her way.**

**They filed out of Lou’s. It was dusk. They were moving earlier than Jo Erin had expected. Where was Susan? Had she gotten word to Wilton? If the men had been moved, Jo Erin had no qualms about blowing up the mill. The mill could be rebuilt. Some property damage was to be expected in a strike situation. But if the men were still housed in the mill, Jo Erin knew she’d have to do whatever it took to stop the plan, even if it meant killing—or being killed herself.**

**She hoped they would run into Susan as they went through town, but instead of following the tracks, Billy led them through the narrow passage between Lou’s and the neighboring drug store to the mountain behind it. They passed Aimee’s shack, which was dark, and kept on climbing.**

**Though it was July, the mountain air was cool, and the strong smell of pine reminded Jo Erin of Susan in her nightdress and bare feet. Would she always think of Susan now when she was in the woods?**

**“For God’s sake, Billy,” Dex said, as they started the nearly vertical climb. “Where the hell are we going?”**

**“Shut up,” Billy whispered. “No point in hiding the stuff if you’re going to announce to the world where we are.”**

**Billy should have saved his breath. The steep climb robbed them of their ability to speak anyway. Their boots sent cascades of rock, dirt, and pine needles as they pulled themselves up the face of the mountain. Billy led the way, followed by Dex. Jo Erin brought up the rear.**

As she grabbed a sapling to help her stay upright, Jo Erin thought she heard a sound behind her. She paused and looked back, but saw nothing. The wind was picking up. It may have been nothing more than that. She continued following Dex, but a moment later another sound convinced her they were being followed. She said nothing. A surreptitious pursuit could only be prompted by a desire to prevent the miners from accomplishing their task, a desire Jo Erin shared. She only wished their pursuer knew her feelings. A bullet in the back would be a heavy price to pay for her silence.

Billy disappeared into a black hole on the face of the mountain. “Here we are.” His voice echoed, sounding unnaturally loud. Apparently he was no longer concerned about being overheard.

“What is it?” Dex asked.

“An abandoned shaft,” Billy said. “We used to bring ore out this way before the cage got put in. It ain’t been used for years.”

Billy struck a match and lit a candle, which he stuck into the rock wall. Jo Erin joined them in the small man-made cave. Billy knelt before a wooden box, pried off the top, and pulled out a handful of dynamite sticks, which he thrust into a burlap sack.

“Caps are over there, Dex. Here, Union man, carry this.” He held the sack out to Jo Erin, who backed away.

“Dynamite? I don’t think I—”

Dex laughed. “Aw, go on, Joe. That dynamite ain’t gonna blow. I got the blasting caps over here.”

Jo Erin took the sack.

“Don’t drop it.” Billy said.

Jo Erin flinched and Dex laughed again. “He’s pulling your leg,” Dex said. “Just don’t hit it with your sledge hammer, and you’ll be fine.”

Billy filled another sack with dynamite and slung it over his shoulder. “Got the caps, Dex?”

“Right here.”

“Jesus! Don’t sling them around like that. All right.” He blew out the candle. “Let’s go.”

Jo Erin allowed Billy and Dex to precede her out of the mouth of the cave. She didn’t want either of them to catch on to the fact that they were being followed.



**She hoped they would head back down the mountain toward town. It would be her last chance to find out if Susan's warning had gotten through. Instead, they headed east, parallel with the town but several hundred feet up. She was disappointed, but not surprised. They could hardly walk through town with a hundred pounds of dynamite. She supposed they would work their way down to the mill when they had reached the mountainside directly behind it.**

**She could see the lights of the town below, and when she judged they were about even with the mill, Billy turned and headed down. Descending was worse than the climb up. The forty pound pack made it difficult for Jo Erin to keep her balance, but even worse was the volatile nature of what the pack contained. Every time she slipped or jarred in the darkness, she expected to be blown sky high. Still, she was glad they were heading toward the mill. Perhaps she could find a way to warn the guards or the men inside, if any were still there.**

**When they were about two hundred feet above the mill, though, Billy stopped. Jo Erin saw where they were, and her heart sank. So that was the plan. They were at the top of the tramway where ore cars were loaded for shipment to the mill. An empty car waited at the top, and Jo Erin knew that its next shipment would not contain ore. Her suspicions were confirmed when Billy laid down his pack and started unloading the dynamite.**

**"Jesus God, Billy." Dex whispered. "This is brilliant."**

**"Shut up and start packing this dynamite."**

**That's why they weren't worried about guards. A thousand guards couldn't stop a hundred pounds of dynamite from blowing when it struck the mill.**

**Dex casually tipped his sack upside down and poured a coppery stream of blasting caps onto the ground. "Here, Joe," he said, "let me show you how to pack this dynamite."**

**With hands that shook, Jo Erin tried to follow Dex's instructions while she thought rapidly about what she could do. If only she knew that the men had been warned.**

**Would it be possible to slip away somehow and make it down to the mill to check? If she took off running now, and didn't get shot, she'd probably make it that far, but not before Billy and Dex had started their lethal load on its trip downhill, a trip that would take no more than a few seconds, half a minute at most. Even if she magically survived, the men in the mill wouldn't be able to get out in time.**

**Where was their pursuer? She hadn't heard any sounds for some time. Had she only imagined that they were being followed? She couldn't wait around to find out. There was only one thing she could do. She'd have to stop Dex and Billy herself. As the pile of charged dynamite grew, she tried to figure out a way to do so without killing them.**

Suddenly a movement in the trees behind Billy and Dex caught her attention and she nearly dropped a dynamite stick. She forced herself to place the stick carefully with the others, stood up and stretched.

“What the hell are you doing?” Billy asked.

“Gotta take a piss,” she said, walking casually toward trees.

“So piss,” Billy said.

“He’s a little shy,” Dex said.

“Well, be quick about it, God damn it.”

When she reached the cover of the trees, she moved quickly.

“Susan,” she whispered.

“Here.” Susan’s dress was dark. It was the paleness of her face and hands that had caught Jo Erin’s eye as she stepped from behind a tree.

“Get back.” Jo Erin took Susan’s arm and drew her further away from the tram.

“I followed you,” Susan said quickly. “I told Mr. Wilton to get the men out of the mill. I told him they were going to blow it up. I knew you’d have to know. I came as fast as I could, but it was hard keeping up.”

“Good girl,” Jo Erin said. “Did he move them out?”

“I’m not sure. We were interrupted. I told him they were going to blow up the mill, but I didn’t know how. Now that I see how they’re doing it...What if he just puts on more guards or something? What good would that do?”

“No good at all,” Jo Erin said. “If he has any sense, he won’t take a chance like that.”

“He seemed like a sensible man,” Susan said.

Jo Erin frowned. What should she do? Now that she knew Susan had been their pursuer, she couldn’t count on help from anyone else. If anyone was going to stop Billy and Dex, it would have to be her and Susan. But did she want to stop them?

It was another Pinkerton Decision, and she didn’t know if she had the nerve to make it. “You think he listened to you?”

“He didn’t reveal me to Dave, and he could have.”

**“How certain are you?” she asked. “Would you bet the lives of those two men on it?”**

**“What do you mean?”**

**“The only way I can see to stop them is to kill them,” Jo Erin said. “Do I kill them to stop them from blowing up what might be an empty mill? Or do I let them go ahead and blow up the mill, hoping Wilton didn’t leave a couple hundred men there to die?”**

**Susan stood still and said nothing.**

**“What should I do, Susan?”**

**“I don’t know,” Susan said in a tight voice. “Why are you asking me?”**

**It wasn’t fair to ask her. Jo Erin had made Pinkerton Decisions before, and she’d made them with little hesitation, trusting her instincts like she’d been trained. But she’d never had the lives of so many men at stake before, and her instincts failed her. She was afraid.**

**Jo Erin put her hands on Susan’s shoulders and turned her so that the moonlight shone on her face. “There’s no one else. Help me.”**

**A sound from the tramway made them both jump.**

**“Joe!” came a harsh whisper. “Where the hell are you? We’re about ready.”**

**Jo Erin put her face just inches from Susan’s. “Please, Susan. You spoke to Wilton. What do you think? Did he believe you? Do I kill those two men over there, or do I let them blow up the mill?”**

**Susan closed her eyes and lowered her head. Jo Erin slumped, fingered her Colt, and turned toward Billy and Dex.**

**“Joe!”**

**As she drew her gun, she heard a whisper behind her. “Let them blow up the mill.”**

**Jo Erin sighed in relief and hurried back to the tramway.**

**Minutes later, the mill exploded with a reverberation that shook the valley. When the smoke cleared nothing was left of the mill but a jumble of timber, as if a giant child had thrown down his jackstraws in a fit of rage. There was no way to tell, from two hundred feet up, if there were bodies among the rubble.**

**“HOW IN THE hell did they know?”**

**“It’s obvious you’ve got a leak somewhere, Billy.”**

**“That’s impossible. I never told a soul what the plan was, not even you. I told ‘em to get sober, but I never told ‘em what we were doing, and I never told ‘em when, not ‘til an hour before we left. So tell me, how the hell did they know?”**

**“An hour’s a long time. It would only take five minutes to run down to the mill and give warning.”**

**“No, they couldn’t have done that, I tell you. I kept those boys with me every minute from the time I told ‘em what was up until we blew up the mill. They never had a chance to tell anyone.”**

**“Where did you keep them?”**

**“What?”**

**“You said you kept them with you every minute. Where?”**

**“At Lou’s. I swear, they didn’t do a damn thing but dance and drink tea.”**

**“Who did they dance with, Billy?”**

**“Well, there ain’t very many girls left anymore. They danced with all of ‘em, I think. They’re only charging two bits now, you know.”**

**“I see.”**

**Billy stared. “What are you getting at? You think one of the girls is involved?” His mouth dropped open. “By God, you do. Shit. You think the spy is a girl?”**

**“I think there might be a pair of spies, Billy. I don’t know if she’s working with Dex or Joe, but I think I know which girl it is.”**

**“Which one? I’ll kill him with my bare hands, and her too. I don’t care if she is a girl.”**

**“Hold on there, Billy. Don’t do anything just yet.”**

**“Why the hell not? You expect me to just sit back down and drink with those boys and watch ‘em give Union secrets away to a God damned girl spy?”**

**“I don’t care who you sit and drink with, Billy. Just leave the girls alone for now, and the boys too. Let me handle it.”**

**“Shit. Well, she better end up dead, and soon, and him too. That’s all I got to say about it.”**

**“Don’t worry about that. Anyway, we may all end up dead before this thing is over. You heard they’re bringing in the militia, didn’t you?”**

**“Yeah, I heard. God damned government thinks we’re the enemy. What the hell. What are they gonna do, arrest the whole Miners’ Union? I’d like to see them try.”**

**“I think you will, Billy. I really think you will.”**

## **Chapter Seven**

**RAIN BEAT DOWN on the roof of Aimee’s shack as Susan folded her chemise and added it to the travel bag. Lou had given orders for all the girls to leave town. Miners were coming into the hurdy gurdy armed to the teeth. Tables were used for drawing up impossible battle plans, and liquor flowed freely. War in the little mining town was imminent, and it was no place for women.**

**What about Jo Erin, Susan wondered? This was no place for her, either. They had already saved hundreds of men’s lives, first by thwarting the attempt to capture the train full of scabs and then by getting the men out of the mill before it blew up. Wasn’t that enough? It was time now for brutal warfare, and Jo Erin had no reason to be a part of it.**

**Not that Susan cared one way or the other whether Jo Erin’s body was pumped full of holes in a gunfight. She was furious with Jo Erin for forcing her to make a decision that could have cost those men in the mill their lives. The fact that she made the right decision did not excuse Jo Erin one bit. What if she’d been wrong? What if the scabs had still been in the mill when it blew up? What if all those men had died? It would have been Susan’s fault. Jo Erin had seen to that by making Susan decide. Right now Jo Erin was probably patting herself on the back for saving all those men’s lives, but if it had gone the other way...**

**At least this time Susan had been proven right. She would go to her grave not knowing if she had done the right thing by killing Elias.**

Her travel bag was too full to close. Susan pulled out her dancing shoes and tossed them into a corner. They were so worn as to be practically useless, and she didn't plan to be doing any dancing again for a very long time.

"Susan."

She turned toward Aimee. "Do you need some help?" Aimee's stomach was so big she could barely maneuver around the little shack. Even packing was difficult for her.

"Suze, I don't think I can get on that train." Aimee's voice shook, and Susan looked at her more carefully. Her face was pasty and white, and she was blinking back tears.

Susan sat by Aimee on the bed. "What's wrong?"

Aimee grabbed Susan's hand. "I think I'm having the baby." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I've been having pains. I hoped they'd go away. But they're just getting worse." Her grip tightened. "What am I going to do, Suze?"

Susan patted Aimee's hand and tried not to panic. "Are you sure you can't get to Wallace? If we had some men carry you to the train, couldn't you—"

"Oh God," Aimee wailed, leaning into Susan and gripping her hand more tightly than ever as pain came over her. "Oh God, it hurts, Susan. It hurts."

Susan jumped up and eased Aimee gently back on the bed, her heart pounding. "All right, Aimee, I'm here. I'll take care of you." She cleared the bed of Aimee's packing, lifted her legs onto the bed, and removed her shoes. "Aimee, have you ever seen a baby born before?"

"No." Aimee moaned, turning her head to the pillow.

Susan swallowed. Neither had she. She had no idea what to do.

"Well," she said firmly, "the first thing we need to do is get you more comfortable." She loosened Aimee's dress, slipped it over her head, and pulled a nightdress over her, all the while thinking rapidly. She couldn't do this by herself. She needed help.

"Get Zeke," Aimee said.

"Zeke? Does he know about babies?"

"I don't know. I just want him. Go get him, Suze, will you?"

Susan had an inspiration. "The mine owners have a doctor. I'll go get him."

"Wait! Don't leave me alone. Send Zeke to me first."

**“All right. Don’t worry, Aimee, everything’s going to be just fine.” She pulled the blanket up to Aimee’s chin and smoothed damp hair from her forehead. “It’ll be all right. I’ll go get Zeke and the doctor, and I’ll be right back.”**

**She shut the door softly behind her and ran down the rain-slicked stairs just as Dex emerged from the outhouse behind Lou’s.**

**“Dex, have you seen Zeke?”**

**“Nope. Aren’t you supposed to be getting out of town?” Just then the warning whistle blew for the train. “You want me to carry something for you?”**

**“I can’t. Aimee’s having her baby. Will you go find Zeke and then go get the doctor?”**

**“The doctor? You mean the mine owners’ doctor? They’ll kill me if I go up that side of town.”**

**“Oh, well, will you sit with Aimee, then, until I get back?”**

**Dex looked horrified. “I can’t do that. I don’t know anything about babies.”**

**“You don’t have to. Just sit with her a minute, until Zeke gets there. She’s afraid to be alone.”**

**At that moment a cry from the shack above them caused Dex’s eyes to widen and his jaw to drop. “Is that her?”**

**“Yes.” She took his arm and pushed him toward the stairs. “She can’t be alone right now, Dex. Just go sit with her.”**

**He moved reluctantly up the stairs, and Susan pulled open Lou’s back door.**

**Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy was barely recognizable. It was packed with men, each armed with two or three handguns, shotguns, or rifles. Between drinks, the firearms were being cleaned, loaded, and tested with random shots at the ceiling. There was no sign of Zeke or of Jo Erin.**

**Susan slipped behind the bar. “Lou, have you seen Zeke?”**

**“What are you doing here, Suze? The train’s gonna leave any minute.”**

**“I can’t go. Aimee’s having her baby. Have you seen Zeke?”**

**“No. She’s having her baby right now? Aw, that little gal don’t got good timing, that’s for sure.”**

**“Do you know anything about babies, Lou?”**

**“Me? Hell, no. But I know we gotta get her out of here. I’ll just get some of these big fellas and we’ll put her on the train.”**

**“It’s too late for that. I’m going for the doctor. If you see Zeke, tell him Aimee needs him up there, all right?”**

**“Where you gonna get a doctor?”**

**“The mine owners have one. He must be at the hotel.”**

**“I don’t think you should go there, Suze. That’s where they moved the scabs, you know, after the mill blew.”**

**“I know, but I’ll just get the doctor and leave. Will you tell Zeke?”**

**“Sure, I’ll tell him. Be careful, okay?”**

**“I will.”**

**Susan pushed outside, hunched her shoulders against the rain, and hurried down the wooden sidewalk to the hotel. The town seemed empty. The miners were all at Lou’s, and the scabs were holed up at the hotel. No one was working. The mill was destroyed, and the mine had been shut down until the militia arrived to protect the workers so they could rebuild it.**

**Just as she stepped into the tunnel beneath the hotel, the train on the other side gave a low whistle. The sound echoed in the tunnel and she stepped back to avoid the passing train. It moved slowly, and she had a clear view of the women inside the shoddy passenger car. Shop-owners’ wives and prostitutes shared space as they fled town. Susan waved, but through the rain and the shadows, she doubted she was seen.**

**She continued through the tunnel and pushed into the hotel. At first glance it looked a lot like Lou’s. Men crowded the first floor, and guns were very much in evidence. Fewer guns, though, she realized, and fewer men. And less liquor. The men were somber. Until the militia arrived, they knew they were outnumbered.**

**“What are you doing in here, girl?” asked a boy who looked barely old enough to shave.**

**“Is there a doctor here?” she asked, wiping rain from her face.**

**“You should of went out of town, miss.”**

**“I need a doctor. Please, is he here?”**



**“I’m the doctor,” a thin man said. “What’s wrong?”**

**“My friend is having a baby,” Susan said. “We don’t know what to do. We need help.”**

**“A baby, today?” He shook his head. “They just don’t wait for a nice time, do they? Where is she?”**

**“In a little house behind Lou’s Hurdy Gurdy.”**

**“A whore?” the boy asked. “You want our doc to go take care of a whore?”**

**“She’s having a baby and she needs help,” Susan said. “Please.”**

**“She’s with the Union men,” another man said, coming up behind the boy. “It’s a trick, Doc. Don’t trust her.”**

**“Why didn’t you leave town, ma’am?” the doctor asked.**

**“I couldn’t. Aimee’s having her baby. Please help her, Doctor. It’s not a trick.”**

**“All right,” the doctor said. “Let me get my bag. Until the fighting starts, I’m no good here.”**

**“Doc, she’s with the enemy,” the boy protested. “They’re gonna capture you.”**

**“Don’t be stupid, boy. Why would they want to capture an old coot like me? You go ahead, miss. I’ll follow you when I get my bag.”**

**“Thank you, Doctor. Thank you.”**

**Susan had to walk through the tunnel again to get to Lou’s. It was dark in the passage, but she barely noticed it in her eagerness to get to Aimee. She didn’t see she wasn’t alone until someone stepped right in front of her. She pulled up short.**

**“Wha—? Oh, you frightened me. Excuse me, please, My friend is—”**

**“Your friend will have to wait, my dear,” he whispered. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and placed the long hard fingers of one hand tightly over her mouth. “You’re coming with me.”**

**JO ERIN CREPT up behind Moss, the pounding rain masking any sound she might make, and struck him across the skull with the butt of her Colt. She relieved the**

unconscious man of his decrepit Winchester and little Schofield revolver, but let him keep his pocket knife. He was unlikely to inflict much damage on the federal militia with that.

“Sorry, my friend,” she whispered. She threw the weapons into a thicket of young firs and moved quietly down the canyon toward Yellow, alert for other sentries.

She didn’t know which side of this little war she was supposed to be on, but she did know she couldn’t let federal troops be ambushed by a bunch of drunken miners. They weren’t bad men. They were just caught up in some fantasy that they were fighting a glorious war. Anyone who opposed them was the enemy, and they had no qualms about killing. In a week or a month or a year they might realize that there had never really been a war and that the soldiers were not their enemy. They would regret, then, the men they’d killed.

She smelled the next sentry just a moment before she saw him. Posted above Yellow, the man sat propped against a tree, carelessly smoking a cigar beneath a shoddily constructed awning of pine boughs. He apparently believed the reports that said the troops would not be arriving until morning.

The sound of the train whistle from up the canyon brought the man to his feet, and a moment later the engine pulled past the Yellow settlement without stopping. A flash of brightly colored skirts showed through the open side door, and the sentry and Jo Erin both watched it until it pulled out of sight toward Wallace.

Susan had better be on that train, Jo Erin thought. She hadn’t had a chance to talk to her about it, but Susan would know to leave, wouldn’t she? Would she wait for Jo Erin in Wallace, or would she keep right on going? If she had any sense, she’d run far away from the reach of any law or Pinkerton agent, but Jo Erin hoped she would wait.

She brought the handle of her gun down hard on the head of the carefree sentry.

An hour later Jo Erin shook the rain from her coat and hat, slipped into Lou’s, and ordered a beer. Her usefulness as a Union man was wearing thin, but if she had the chance to keep this little skirmish from turning into all-out war, she had to try, and to do that, she had to be in the thick of things. She leaned against the bar and surveyed the room.

It looked more like a war headquarters than a dance hall. Crude maps were drawn on tables, and shot glasses were moved around on them like troops while heavily armed men gathered around nodding. Jo Erin decided she’d feel more comfortable if more of the men were sober.

Suddenly her eyes met Billy’s, and she froze. If looks could kill, Jo Erin would have found herself the first casualty of the war. She turned her back on the room and ordered another beer, though she still nursed her first. It was obvious Billy suspected at least something of what she’d done. So why was she still alive? Why didn’t Billy announce it to the room? The mood the men were in, she’d be torn to pieces within minutes.

**She forced herself to sip her beer as if nothing had happened. She'd finish her drink and leave town. She'd follow Susan to**

**Wallace. Maybe she'd still be there, and when Jo Erin found her they'd run off and start a new life together, if Susan was willing. Lou came down to Jo Erin's end of the bar.**

**"The girls all get out all right?" Jo Erin asked.**

**"Most of 'em. Miss Aimee went into labor. Susan stayed with her."**

**Jo Erin choked. "Susan's still here?"**

**"Yep. She went and got the mine owners' doctor. Can you believe that?"**

**"Where are they?"**

**"Aimee's shack. Don't worry. We got boys posted all around it. They ain't gonna let no militia man hurt 'em."**

**Damn.**

**She couldn't leave now, not with Susan still in Needles Eye. With guards posted around the shack, Jo Erin wouldn't even be able to get word to Susan that she was here, waiting for her.**

**Jo Erin would have to stick around and wait until the baby was born. Then she'd grab Susan and get them both the hell out of there. With a little luck, they'd be in Wallace before the militia even arrived.**

**She glanced in the mirror over the bar. Billy's steady gaze met her.**

**A lot of luck, she amended.**

**"SORRY, MA'AM, YOU can't ride this train."**

**"But I got a ticket. Look, see here? It's for this train."**

**"That don't matter. This train has been commandeered by the United States government for the transport of federal troops."**

**"That's not fair," Lottie said. "They sold me this ticket. They shouldn't have sold it to me if I can't use it."**

**“Your ticket will still be good tomorrow, ma’am. But you’re not getting on this train.”**

**“Can’t you just squeeze me in, mister? I’m not very big.”**

**“Look, you’re not getting on the train. So just go away.”**

**The uniformed man crossed his arms and looked over Lottie’s head as if she weren’t even there. He stood on the metal step that led to the car, and Lottie’s eyes were even with his balls. She stared at that portion of his body, letting herself imagine all the different ways she knew to inflict pain upon him. She stared until he shifted nervously from one foot to the other, and she saw his hand come down as if to cover himself up. She looked up, smiled, and sauntered away, knowing he was now shriveled up down there like a dried runner bean.**

**Son of a bitch. He could have sneaked her on that train. He would have, she’d bet, if she’d never had the pox. It was a pain in the ass getting anything out of men, now that she was ugly.**

**Of course, if she’d never had the pox she wouldn’t even want to get on that train. She’d still be working at Jennie Lynn’s, still be her favorite girl, still loving on her little baby boy and making money hand over fist.**

**If she’d never had the pox, she wouldn’t have told Jennie Lynn to go to hell. She wouldn’t have told her she had a voice like a rusty tea kettle, and she wouldn’t have stolen that letter or found the wanted poster.**

**She wouldn’t have discovered there was a ten thousand dollar reward offered for the apprehension of one Miss Susan Bantry.**

**Ten thousand dollars, and that uniformed bastard wouldn’t let her get on the train. Of course, one more day might not matter. The reward had not yet been collected. If that man she’d seen at Jennie Lynn’s meant to turn Susan in, wouldn’t he have done it by now? Still, it made no sense to delay. She couldn’t go back to Jennie Lynn’s. What was she supposed to do all night if she couldn’t get on the train until morning?**

**Lottie tossed her satchel onto a wooden bench just outside the train station and sat down beside it. Her feet dangled above the ground. She swung her legs and chewed her lip. She had a little money, but not very much. She’d be damned if she wasted it on a hotel room. Who knew how long it would take for the reward money to come through? She’d need something to live on until then.**

**A man sat down at the other end of the bench, and she absently pulled her satchel onto her lap, wary of thieves. Taking her movement as an invitation, the man slid over on the bench until his leg pressed against hers. She looked up.**

**“Hello, little girl.” He smiled, and she saw gold in his teeth. “You look lost. You need a place to stay tonight?” He was a big man. The thigh that pressed against her was as wide around as her waist.**

**But he looked rich.**

**She considered. She could have a place to stay the night and make a little extra money besides.**

**She smiled back.**

**DAVISSON DRAGGED SUSAN up the mountain toward the entrance to the mine. She struggled, but couldn’t break free. His hand over her mouth made it impossible to call for help and difficult to breathe. They saw no one on their journey. It likely would have made no difference if they had. Anyone who recognized them would assume they were off for a tryst. They’d spent all of Independence Day together, after all, and only one day ago she’d gone to the mill seeking him out. No one would intervene if they saw Davisson bundling her off into the woods.**

**Susan had never been in the mine before. The entrance was housed in a building that didn’t look much different from any of the other mine buildings. Inside, though, it held a gigantic spool of steel cable, a steam engine wheel and pump, and other large equipment. She saw no one, but the wheel of the steam pump churned slowly and made a loud grinding hiss.**

**Davisson released his hand from her mouth. She could scream now, but no one would hear her. He used his free hand to hold her more securely against him as he pulled her over to a wooden platform set into the floor, perhaps three feet square. He hauled her to the center.**

**“Lean into me,” he said. “And hold your skirts close. If you lean out, you’ll be crushed against the wall.”**

**Before she could comprehend what he meant, the floor dropped beneath them. She screamed then, as they plummeted into the earth. She gripped Davisson tightly about the waist and buried her face in his chest. She had no thought of breaking away from him, as the black walls flew by only inches away.**

**Finally, the platform slowed and stopped. Davisson released her, and she almost missed his touch. She was in blackness darker than anything she had ever experienced. Almost instantly, though, she heard a scrape, and a flash of light showed her they were in a tunnel of the mine. Davisson touched his match to a candle he drew from his pocket.**

**“This way, my dear.” He bowed and gestured with his arm. She stepped from the platform onto the floor of the tunnel.**

**“Why are you doing this?” she asked. She was relieved her voice did not shake. He must have discovered who she was—perhaps he had always known—and had finally decided to collect the reward money. But why the mine?**

**“You take me for a fool,” he said pleasantly. “Both of you.”**

**“Both of us?”**

**“You’ve been playing with me since the day I went into Lou’s to find you, haven’t you?” They could have been walking on a promenade in New York instead of in a tunnel hundreds of feet underground, for all the concern in his voice. He walked from the shaft deeper into the tunnel. He no longer held her. He didn’t have to. He took the only light with him, and she hurried to keep up.**

**“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.**

**“I do like you, Susan,” he said. “I’m tempted to give you one last chance.” He stopped abruptly and turned to her. “Who is he?”**

**“He? Who?”**

**“Don’t you play the fool too, Susan.” He held his candle up to her face to see it better. “What is the name your confederate? Who sent you to warn Wilton about the mill?”**

**He didn’t know who she was then. He was after Jo Erin. She shook her head. “Nobody. I mean, I didn’t. I was looking for you.”**

**He gave a short laugh and walked again. “It doesn’t matter. I know it’s either Dex or Joe. It has to be one of them. I just need to wait and see which of them goes looking for you when you disappear. I’ll figure it out soon enough.”**

**Before she could confirm or deny his suspicions, Davisson stopped again. He was at the end of the tunnel. Before them was a black hole in the ground, perhaps eight feet deep and no more than six feet wide. A ladder was propped up inside it.**

**“In you go, my dear,” Davisson said pleasantly.**

**Susan backed away but she was not quick enough. He grabbed her arm and gave a heavy sigh. “Your cooperation would make this much easier on both of us,” he said, “but it’s not necessary.”**

**He wrapped his hands around her upper arms, lifted her, and swung her over the dark pit.**

**“No!” She clutched at his arms, but he dropped her and she could not hold on. She landed hard on her feet and fell backward into several inches of water. The back of her head struck rock, and she sat stunned for a moment. By the time she’d recovered and regained her feet, the ladder had vanished, and the faint light from the candle was disappearing. “No!” she shrieked.**

**“Sleep well, Susan.” His voice was already faint. Soon she could no longer see the light of his candle. Moments later she heard the distant sound of a bell, and the whirl of the cage rising up the shaft.**

**She was alone, trapped in a pit in the bowels of the earth, with no company but blackness and silence.**

**IT WAS ONE in the morning when the first dazed sentry staggered into Lou’s with claims that he’d been attacked from behind and robbed of his weapons. His news was met with some skepticism, since he appeared unharmed. He was given a spot on the floor and told to sleep it off.**

**The men who had houses of their own had gone home to sleep, knowing the militia would not come in the night. Men who lived in the company boarding house, however, did not dare pass the hotel to get to their beds. They stayed at Lou’s. Some of them slept. Most, like Jo Erin, sat up, played quiet games of poker, and drank.**

**Dave Davisson stopped in at the doorway once. He had a shotgun in one hand, a pistol in the other, and a rifle slung across his back. He was either very brave or very foolish to venture into the Union side of town. The men rose up, shouting for him to get the hell out, and one miner even fired a shot into the ceiling, but Davisson appeared unfazed. He skimmed the hall, clearly looking for someone. He stopped when his eyes met Jo Erin’s, and he stared at her as if searching for something in her eyes.**

**Jo Erin felt her eyes widen. She knew who Davisson was, of course, but she didn’t think the man had ever noticed her before. What was he looking for?**

**Whatever it was, he didn’t find it. He frowned, continued scanning the crowd, and finally heeded the warnings of the miners and left.**

**Jo Erin hoped no one else had noticed Davisson’s gaze land on her. That sort of attention was dangerous. If she’d needed any more hints, there it was. It was time for her to leave Needles Eye. But she couldn’t leave without Susan.**

**When the second sentry stumbled in an hour later with a similar story of being attacked and disarmed, the men reacted with alarm and anger. After some violent discussion, it was**

decided they would send out more sentries, in pairs this time. Now that they were warned, they would be more careful.

“Any volunteers?”

Several times that night, Jo Erin had slipped out back to check Aimee’s progress. The self-appointed guardians of the shack knew no more than Jo Erin did, but the sounds coming from the little shack told their own tale. Cries and moans that had been sporadic at first had grown in frequency and volume. The baby would come soon, but it was not likely that Susan would be able to leave immediately afterward.

Jo Erin was tempted just to let the sentries go. If the miners had warning of the troops’ arrival, they could launch a surprise attack and start the fighting in the canyon outside the town. That would allow more time for Aimee’s labors to end and to get Susan out of town. But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t allow federal troops to be killed for what was probably no reason. The doctor was with the women. They were surrounded by guards. There was nothing Jo Erin could do to help them.

“I’ll go,” she said.

“Me too,” Billy said only a heartbeat later. He watched Jo Erin with steady black eyes. “I’ll be your partner, Joe.”

Damn. Any other man would be better, but Jo Erin merely nodded.

A dozen other men volunteered as well and were partnered off. Instructions were given, and the men filed silently out of Lou’s to find their posts in the mountainside above the canyon. The rain had stopped, but the trees still dripped. Jo Erin turned up her collar.

Billy was silent during their walk, but Jo Erin could feel that he was tense and watchful. It would be difficult to take him off guard. When they reached their post near the No Tail Mine, Billy finally spoke.

“You watch from those trees,” he said, “and I’ll watch from here.”

Where he could keep an eye on Jo Erin.

“I won’t be able to see you from there,” Jo Erin said. “Someone could get the drop on you.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Union man. Nobody’s going to get the drop on me.”

“Our instructions were to—”

“I don’t give a shit what our instructions were. I’m not letting you anywhere near my back. Get over to those trees.”



Jo Erin hesitated, wondering if she should still play ignorant or if it was time to show her hand. “No, I don’t think so,” she finally said. “I don’t want you at my back either. How about we both watch from here?”

They faced each other about four feet apart, distrust charging the air. “We’ll both watch from here,” Jo Erin repeated. She settled her back against a tree where she had a clear view of the bottom of the canyon and a sideways view of Billy.

She was worried. Once again she faced the possibility of killing Billy, and it wasn’t a comfortable place to be. She was nearly certain that Billy was responsible for killing Mitchell, whether he’d actually pulled the trigger or not. That would be for the law to settle, though, once this mining war was all over. It was not Jo Erin’s job to bring Billy to justice, but she would stop him from killing anyone else, if she could.

Billy settled against a tree of his own, facing Jo Erin directly and giving up any pretense of watching the road. He pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit a chunk off, never taking his eyes off her. After a moment of chewing he said, “Guess you’ll be missing those dancing girls, eh?”

“What?”

“Guess you won’t have no one to tell your secrets to anymore.”

The bastard knew about Susan.

“Which one is it?” Billy asked. “Flaire? I seen you dance with her a time or two. Or maybe that fancy Susan. You like her well enough.”

Jo Erin relaxed briefly. Billy didn’t know anything for certain, and Susan would be out of the way soon enough.

“Yeah,” Billy said. “It’s gotta be Susan, now I come to think about it. You and her came to town almost the same time, didn’t you? What are you, a Pinkerton man?”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Billy,” Jo Erin said, thinking fast. She couldn’t let Billy go on with that sort of talk. She could get a bullet in the back if rumors like that got around, and Susan too. “I’m just a miner, same as you. I—look out!”

It was an ancient trick, but it still worked. Billy looked over his shoulder at the imaginary threat, and Jo Erin lunged, whipping Billy’s head with the back of her gun. He slumped to the ground. She holstered the gun, tossed Billy’s shotgun down the canyon, and headed toward town. To hell with the sentries. To hell with Aimee, too. The militia could take care of itself. That’s what they were trained to do, and Aimee had a doctor with her. Jo Erin had to grab Susan and get out of town, before it was too late.

She ran most of the way, but when she neared Lou's she stopped and caught her breath. She couldn't go into the hurdy gurdy. The men there knew she was a sentry and would wonder at her return without Billy. What she wanted wasn't in there anyway.

She walked around Lou's to the back. Everything was silent. The guard at the top of the stairs by Aimee's shack nodded when he recognized her. He didn't know she was supposed to be on sentry duty. On the bottom step of the staircase sat Dex, his head in his hands. Jo Erin realized she hadn't seen Dex all night.

"Dex?"

Dex looked up. "Oh, hey there, Joe." The lantern above Lou's back door cast exhausted shadows on Dex's face.

"Where have you been?"

Dex jerked his head toward the shack. "Up there. Jesus God, Joe, I never saw nothing like that in my life."

"She had the baby?"

"Yeah." Dex grinned. "It's a boy. Tiniest little thing you ever saw, but the doctor said he was big. That's what gave Aimee so much trouble." Dex's grin faded. "I swear, Joe, I will never get a woman pregnant as long as I live. I couldn't ever see my woman... It ain't worth it."

"Is Aimee all right?"

"She's alive. Doctor's still with her. There was," Dex swallowed, "a lot of blood."

"Why were you there, anyway?"

"I never wanted to go up there," Dex said. "Susan made me. Just for a minute, she said. Hell, I'll never trust her again. Then the doctor wouldn't let me leave. Said he needed me." Dex sighed heavily. "Longest damn night of my life."

"Is Susan still there?"

Dex frowned. "Susan ain't up there."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. She wasn't up there all night."

Jo Erin's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean? You said she made you go to Aimee."

Dex nodded. "Yeah, she did, but that was hours ago. Then she went and got the doctor. He came, but she never did. I thought she was down here, being a coward or something."

Jo Erin shook her head, feeling numb. "No. No she's not here."

Dex frowned. "She must of got on the train, then."

"The train?" Jo Erin's heart settled back into a normal rhythm.

"It hadn't left yet?"

"No. I heard it leave a few minutes after she left here. She must of just got the doctor and then got on the train."

"Yes," Jo Erin said, feeling a mixture of relief and regret. "She must have."

It was the smart thing to do. But, damn, if Jo Erin had known Susan was safely out of town all this time, she'd have headed for Wallace herself hours ago. Soon it would be dawn. The militia would arrive and the mining war would start in earnest. Jo Erin wanted no part of it. She'd had a busy night and she was exhausted. She would go to Wallace and hire a room. After a few hours' sleep, she would start her search. With any luck, Susan would still be in Wallace.

She clapped Dex on the shoulder once, and started walking.

## Chapter Eight

**LOTTIE TRIED TO** open her eyes. The left one seemed to be swollen shut, and opening the right caused a painful pulling of the skin over the left. She closed them again and groaned.

How could she have been so stupid? She'd been a whore more than half her life, but she'd never been so careless as to go off with a strange man all by herself like that. Men could be violent anywhere, but in a whorehouse at least a girl had the security of other whores around, and other customers. Sometimes they protected a girl.

She tried to sit up, but pain nearly made her faint. Broken rib, she guessed. Maybe more than one. She rolled and hung her head over the side of the bed. She was going to

vomit. Her ribs were broken and she was going to vomit, and she was so terrified of the pain she began sobbing helplessly before the retching even began. When it did, the pain ricocheted through her body in excruciating waves, and it was some minutes before she noticed the blood mixed with the vomit on the floor. She probed her mouth and sighed with relief when she discovered the blood coming from a hole where a tooth had been. A girl didn't die from losing a tooth.

Crying only made her hurt worse, so she stopped. Using her arms as levers, she sat up and took stock of her injuries. She was naked, which simplified things. At first glance, she looked like one big bruise, but on closer inspection she could tell them apart. Her midsection was the worst. She braced herself, took a deep breath, and let it out. It hurt, but that was to be expected. The lungs worked, and that was what mattered. She knew a girl once who'd had a broken rib puncture her lung and she had died.

At least he hadn't cut her. Lottie almost laughed. As if another scar could make a difference. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. The room spun and she dropped back onto the bed, whimpering when it jarred her sore ribs. After a moment, she tried again, slower. When she was somewhat steady on her feet, she looked around. Her satchel sat open in the middle of the floor, and her clothing was strewn everywhere. Moving slowly, she searched the room.

Her purse was gone. The son of a bitch. She picked up a pair of drawers from the floor and pulled them on. There was no way she could wear her corset, but she pulled a ruffled corset cover over her shoulders. Pulling her dress over her head and fastening the buttons nearly sapped her of what remained of her strength. By the time she finished, she trembled all over.

She sat on the bed and caught her breath. She wondered how long she would be allowed to remain in the room. She longed to lie back down on the bed and go to sleep, but there was one thing she had to do first.

She spied her jacket under the bed and spent an excruciating ten minutes retrieving it. She sat on the bed and checked the pockets. Her train ticket was still there. Next to it, neatly folded, were the letter Susan had written to Jennie Lynn and the wanted poster Lottie had filched from the police station.

The serene gaze of Susan Bantry stared up at Lottie, and Lottie smiled back with swollen, bleeding lips, ignoring the pain. Ten thousand dollars. It would all be hers. She returned the papers to the pocket.

She was beat up, but she wasn't beaten yet. All she needed was a little rest first. She lay back on the bed, clutching the jacket to her like a baby with a blanket, and fell asleep.

**IT TURNED OUT Susan wasn't alone after all.**

**She discovered it just minutes after Davisson took the light away, as she stood still as a statue in the blackness, unable to believe what was happening to her. Something brushed her skirt.**

**She screamed and threw herself at the wall of the pit, clawing at the rocks, heedless of the damage she did to her hands. The wall was rough and slightly angled. Outcroppings jutted, and she was able to clutch them with her fingers and brace her toes against them, but she could make it up no more than one or two feet before she slid back down again. The incline was too slight, and the juts in the walls didn't stick out far enough to let her keep her grip.**

**She stood in the pit and tried to catch her breath. Something furry brushed her hand.**

**"Get away from me. Get away!" She tried again to scramble up the wall, but still without success.**

**She gave up sooner the second time. Throwing herself at the wall would not work.**

**She tried to quell her panic. Panic would not get her out of the pit. Panic would not get her out of the mine.**

**"The rats are not the problem," she said out loud. She'd been exposed to rats before. Even her horrid experiences with rats in her childhood were caused, not by the rats, but by her brothers. Rats were timid creatures. She'd heard that somewhere. And she had nothing they could want.**

**"Stay away from me," she said firmly. "This is my pit."**

**She couldn't climb out, but perhaps she could jump. She patted the wall as high as she could reach, but she couldn't touch the top. She gave a little hop and still couldn't reach. The blackness made it difficult to gauge the angle of the wall. She launched herself up as high as she could and waved her arms toward the edge, but she felt nothing. Her first jump was too cautious.**

**She launched herself again, up and forward this time, but she jumped too far and banged her face hard against the wall. It was too dark for her even to see stars from the blow, but she felt tears stream from her eyes. Jumping was not going to work. In any case, the floor was strewn with broken rocks. Landing blind on the loose rubble made her worry she would twist an ankle or worse.**

**"God damn you, Dave Davisson." Her words echoed off the walls of the pit. She hoped they scared the rats away. She was the baby bird trapped in the bucket, she realized, but she would not allow herself to be ground into paste.**

There was water in the pit, only a couple of inches, but the bottom of her travel skirt soaked it up and grew heavy with it. She unfastened her belt and draped it over her neck. She unbuttoned the wool skirt and stepped out of it, trying to keep what was still dry out of the water. Hoping she would be able to find it again once she made her way out of the pit, she scrunched it into a ball and threw it over her head toward what she hoped was dry ground. Her aim was off. She heard the cloth flap and felt the breeze it made as it wafted past her. She grabbed for it but missed. She heard a gentle splash as the skirt landed in the water.

Oh well. It hardly mattered. She fastened her belt again around her waist and leaned wearily against the rocky wall.

My name is Susan, she thought.

They'd nearly named her Milly. She liked to remind herself of that in times of hardship. Milly was a weak name. If she'd been named Milly, she would have been a weak woman. Milly would never have become Elias's mistress, and she certainly would not have killed him. She would have been defeated and old while she was still young. She would have married a narrow, cruel man like her father or her brothers. She would have died young, like her mother.

Of course, she still might die young, despite her name.

"No," she said aloud. Milly was a woman who would let herself die in this black pit. Susan was not.

"My name is Susan." It comforted her to hear her own voice. It sounded strong and confident. It was Susan talking, and Susan was strong.

She shivered. It was not cold in the mine, but her feet were chilled from standing in the water. She slid her feet slowly along the floor seeking a large rock or a pile of rubble upon which she could stand out of the water. She didn't find one, but the search gave her an idea.

She moved back to what she thought of as her spot on the wall. Even though it had nearly knocked her out, she was familiar with it, and in the blackness of the pit that tiny comfort was worth something. She used her feet to kick all the rocks within reach into a pile by the wall. She bent and felt the pile carefully so she would know it again. Hands stretched out before her like a blind woman, she walked until her feet kicked her sodden skirt. She fished it out of the water and spread it flat as best she could. She gathered rocks and placed them on the skirt. When she had as many as she could drag, she pulled the skirt back toward her little pile. She heaped her new rocks with the old, and the mound grew.

She made another trip with the skirt, and another. Her clothes became drenched and the jagged rocks tore at her hands, but hope gave her strength.

Finally, breathless and trembling, she stood beside a bank of rubble as high as her knees. She wrapped the skirt around the pile of rocks, thankful for once that women's skirts required such an immense length of cloth. She tucked the edges of the skirt under the bottom of the rock pile to give it some stability. Satisfied that it was as sturdy as she could make it, she stepped on top of it. The rocks shifted beneath her weight, but not much. The incline of the wall helped. The weight of the rocks leaned into it and made the pile more stable than it might otherwise have been. As long as she didn't break an ankle, she'd be all right.

She balanced at the top of the bank and reached up. Her fingers touched the lip of the pit. Just barely, but they touched. One good jump and she could haul herself out. She bent at the knees and pushed off. The rubble kicked out from beneath her and she pitched forward hard. Her face smashed into the wall, and she felt her nose crunch. She landed on her knees in the water, and a thick stream of warm blood poured from her nose down her chin.

She stood and quickly unbuttoned her blouse, whipped it off, and held it to her nose, her head tilted back, to staunch the bleeding. She let the tears drip from her eyes into her ears, unheeded. She wanted to be brave. She was not a woman to give up easily, but she was in a difficult spot.

Had Jo Erin noticed yet that she was missing? Was Davisson watching, trying to ferret out whether Jo Erin or Dex was the Pinkerton agent? It was funny to think Davisson suspected Dex. Dex was not half as smart as Jo Erin. He could never have managed to save all those men in the mill, or the men on the train for that matter, like Jo Erin did.

Of course, Jo Erin couldn't have done it either, if Susan hadn't helped. Perhaps all Pinkerton agents should work in pairs. That way, if one went missing, the other could search for her until she found her. If one was stuck in a pit in the bottom of a mine, for instance.

Her nose stopped bleeding finally. Susan touched it. It was tender, but she didn't think it was broken. She would not be throwing herself at any walls again, though.

She knotted her sodden, bloody blouse into a ball and tossed it out of the pit. It landed with a thunk, and Susan realized it had struck something besides rock.

**The ladder!**

Davisson had removed it, but he had not taken it away. From the sound of it, the ladder was not far from the edge of the pit. It was too far for Susan to reach, but maybe there was another way.

Energized, Susan gathered her hair, which had fallen from its pins. With trembling hands, she plaited it into a thick braid, which she tucked down the back of her chemise. She removed her belt again and draped it around her neck. Her petticoat followed. Finally, she

unhooked her corset, removed it, and stood in nothing but her chemise, drawers, shoes, and stockings.

The corset was of fine quality. In addition to the bones that gave it its shape, it had steel hooks and curved steel bands on both sides of the front hooks, and one in the back as well. If there had been light, she could have seen the tiny pink rose pattern woven into the black silk.

By feel, she tied one petticoat leg around the center of the corset and knotted it tightly. She let the corset dangle in the water and attached the other end of the petticoat with her belt. The belt was made of ribbed silk elastic. A decorative brass buckle adorned the front, but the real buckle that latched the belt was in the back. The prong of the buckle was sharp enough to poke through the thin muslin of her petticoat. She created a hole and threaded the belt through it.

She tugged at each link of her manufactured rope. It was sturdy enough, she decided.

She patted the wall until she again found her spot. She held onto the belt and swung the corset as high and far as she could. It landed on solid ground. She dragged it toward her. It slid on the ground bringing nothing with it but pebbles. She changed her aim. Again, nothing but rocks. She changed her aim once more, still with no luck. Her rope was not long enough.

Sighing, she draped the rope around her shoulder. Leaning against the wall, she removed her shoes, unhooked her stockings from their garters, and unpinned the garters from her drawers. At this rate, she would be completely naked before she got out of this hole. She put her shoes back on to protect her feet and attached the garter belt to her outer belt. It took only a moment of fumbling in the dark to realize that the garters themselves were too short and clumsy to be knotted, and the hooks were not strong enough for anything but holding up stockings. She dropped them in the water. The stockings themselves, though, were a good quality silk. They knotted easily and could be trusted to be strong. She tied them, one after the other, to the belt.

She tossed the corset over the edge of the pit and heard a thunk. It hit the ladder! She pulled, and the corset came smoothly back to her. She had hit the ladder, but she hadn't hooked it. She threw again. It hit the ladder again. She pulled, and something caught.

Carefully, as if reeling in a fish, she pulled. The corset remained stuck, the rope held, and she heard the ladder scrape along the ground.

She held her breath and reeled the rope in further. The ladder scraped some more. She pulled again.

Too hard. The rope went limp in her hand, and a stream of silk and elastic tumbled down on her. The corset remained above, with the ladder.



Susan groaned. She was so close. Her plan had worked, but only a little. She was already practically naked. What else could she use?

Her shoes. She bent to unhook a shoe, then straightened, having changed her mind. The belt buckle was not heavy enough to catch the ladder and pull it toward her, but she could use it to gauge how far away the ladder still was before she removed her shoes.

She tossed the belt up, and it struck wood. The ladder was right above her. Susan raised her hands above her head, jumped slightly, and touched wood. With a sob, she jumped again, grabbed a rung, and pulled the ladder into the pit. She scrambled up.

She was out.

She lay flat on her back, trying to catch her breath. Sweat poured from her face. She reached shaking hands up to wipe away the moisture. She was unsure how much of what she wiped away was sweat, how much was water, and how much was blood.

It didn't matter. She was in complete darkness, bleeding and bruised, nearly naked and sopping wet. She was trapped in a mine, hundreds of feet below the ground, and she couldn't even move without the risk of falling into another pit or a shaft. No one knew where she was except the man who had put her there, and the rats. Her situation was nearly hopeless.

But for the moment, all she felt was triumph. Susan had climbed out of the pit.

ON THE OTHER hand, Jo Erin thought, it was possible that Susan had not boarded the train. The doctor seemed to be the last person to have seen her. What could it hurt just to wait a bit and talk to him?

After leaving Dex, Jo Erin climbed up behind Aimee's shack. She ignored the stairs and made as little noise as possible. Aimee's guards, though not particularly vigilant, were earnest. If they saw someone lurking in the shadows, they'd likely shoot without giving it much thought and say they were sorry afterward. She found a relatively dry spot where she could see the front door of the shack without being seen. She leaned against a tree and settled in to watch.

She was awakened by gunfire and war whoops. She rose immediately to her feet and put her hand on her gun. The sun had risen. She had an easy view of Lou's Hurdy Gurdy and the road through the canyon. Apparently the militia had been spotted. Men streamed from Lou's, wasting their ammunition by firing into the air, and charged down the canyon. They made no attempt to conceal their approach. The militia would not be taken by surprise after all. Aimee's guards abandoned their posts and followed the rest. If any of

them had glanced to the right on their charge down the mountain, they would have spotted Jo Erin in the trees, but none of them did.

When they were gone, Jo Erin scrambled down the slope to the shack and banged on the front door. It was opened by a scowling old man with a shotgun, which he pointed at Jo Erin's midsection.

"What do you want? We got a sick woman and a baby in here."

"I know. I'm looking for the woman who brought you here, Susan."

"Nobody brought me here," the doctor said.

"The woman who came to get you last night," Jo Erin said, "when Aimee started having her baby."

"The woman who came to get me never showed up here. I was supposed to follow her, but she disappeared."

"Did she get on the train?"

"I don't know what she did. I only know I needed her here and she didn't show up. Frankly, I don't care whether she got on the train or not."

A weak voice came from behind the doctor. "Something's wrong."

The doctor tilted his head back as if to hear better, but his eyes and his aim did not waver from Jo Erin. "What is it?" Jo Erin rose on her toes to peek over the doctor into the room. Aimee lay on the bed, pale as her sheets. In the crook of her arm lay a baby.

"Suze wouldn't of gone off and left me," Aimee said. "She wouldn't of done that."

Jo Erin tried not to panic. Aimee could be wrong about Susan. She didn't have all the facts. She didn't know that Susan was wanted for murder. Once she'd gotten the doctor, Susan might very well have boarded the train.

"She didn't get on the train," the doctor said suddenly. "She couldn't have. The train left before she came and got me."

Jo Erin stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Do I look stupid to you, boy? The train left just before she came in. I heard it. There's no way she could have been on it."

The panic flooded Jo Erin's veins. Susan had disappeared. She'd been missing all night.

**“What happened after she left you?” Jo Erin asked. “Where did she go?”**

**“She just went out the front door, by the tunnel. I told her to go on ahead, I’d follow her here, but she never showed up.”**

**“Find her, Joe,” Aimee said, her voice faint. “Something’s wrong.”**

**Jo Erin nodded. “I will. I’ll find her.” She backed away from the shack.**

**Susan didn’t leave on the train, and she wouldn’t have left Aimee alone with the baby coming, not if she could help it. She was prevented somehow from returning to Aimee. Jo Erin could think of only two reasons for someone to take Susan. Either her identity had been discovered and she’d been captured for the reward money, or she was suspected of being a spy.**

**Thanking God she hadn’t killed him, Jo Erin set off running to see if Billy still lay where she’d pistol whipped him.**

**It took much longer to reach the No Tail Mine this time. The miners had attacked the federal troops, causing them to scatter into the mountainside. Skirmishes were taking place all over the mountains, and Jo Erin had to make her way around them without being seen. If she was caught by a militiaman, she would be arrested. If she was caught by a Union man, she’d most likely just be shot. When she finally did reach the spot, Billy was no longer there.**

**He couldn’t have gone far, not in the time she’d been gone. He’d have a brutal headache, and he had no gun. Jo Erin scouted the area, moving silently through the trees from smoky battle to smoky battle, bypassing numerous opportunities to take sides in the mining war. She had no time for that. She had to find Billy. She had to find Susan.**

**Finally, she came upon a militiaman lying still and silent behind a fallen log, his rifle aimed steadily at a large trembling bush. Jo Erin waited silently as well for whoever was in the bush to show himself. After a moment, the bush gave a great shake and Billy crept out from behind it. Before the militiaman could react, Jo Erin fired her gun for the first time in the battle. The rifle flew from the militiaman’s hand and landed several feet away. The militiaman leaped to his feet, but Jo Erin reached him before he’d even straightened and swung the butt of her gun at his head.**

**Jo Erin stepped over the unconscious soldier and walked toward Billy.**

**“You sorry son of a bitch,” Billy said. His hands were empty. He hadn’t found his gun. “If you’re gonna kill me, just do it.”**

**“I don’t want to kill you, Billy,” Jo Erin said. “Don’t make me have to. Where is she?”**

**“Who? What are you talking about?”**

**“Don’t play dumb with me. You brought it up yourself. The dancing girls. Where’s Susan?”**

**“You’re out of your God damned mind. The girls are gone, you jackass.”**

**“Not all of them.” Jo Erin fired a shot into the ground an inch from Billy’s foot. “Where’s Susan?”**

**Billy jumped. “Jesus Christ! I don’t know, I tell you. Think, man. When would I have had time to take your dancing girl?”**

**His words rang true. Billy couldn’t have taken Susan. But he knew something.**

**“You have a spy in the Mine Owners Group,” Jo Erin said. “Who is it?”**

**“Go to hell,” Billy said, and turned and walked away.**

**Jo Erin shot him in the leg.**

**Billy dropped to the ground, screaming.**

**Jo Erin stood over him and asked again, “Who is it?”**

**“Jesus Christ, you lost your mind!”**

**Jo Erin aimed at Billy’s other leg. “Who’s the spy?”**

**“Don’t! Don’t shoot! It’s Davisson. Davisson, for God’s sake.”**

**Jo Erin holstered her gun and turned away. “If you’re telling the truth,” she said, “I’ll send back help.”**

**“THROW OUT THE lifeline.” Ping, ping, ping. “Throw out the lifeline.” Ping, ping, ping.**

**Lottie opened her good eye. Jesus Christ. It was like she was back at Jennie Lynn’s with the constant ringing of the bells. She was relieved to find she wasn’t, but Jesus Christ.**

**Lottie rearranged herself painfully on the hard wooden bench. That damned singing was driving her insane. Ping. Ping. Ping. Was it getting louder? Her head throbbed with each rap of the baton as if it was her skull being struck, rather than the little brass triangle.**

Just about the only thing that didn't hurt, for once, were her breasts. Seems like they'd finally dried up. The little bit of Howie she'd still had was gone.

**"Ping! Ping!"**

The damn bell was getting louder.

**"Have you eaten, my child?"**

Before her stood a woman clad in a dark blue dress with yellow braid and a black straw bonnet trimmed with wide red ribbons, the uniform of the Salvation Army.

**"I'm not a child." Lottie closed her eyes.**

**"You are a child of God, my dear. Have you eaten?"**

She hadn't, not since yesterday, but she could eat after she got the ten thousand dollar reward.

**"If you have time to step down the street with me," the woman said, "we'll give you a hot meal in our Salvation Kitchen."**

**"No." Lottie didn't open her eyes. The next train to Wallace didn't leave for two hours, but nothing on earth would induce her to leave this bench until then. She'd already lost two days. The train ticket was the only thing she had left. It wasn't just a ticket out of town, it was a ticket out of this miserable way of life. Once she had that reward money, she'd never have to whore again.**

**"My child, do you enjoy making your living the way you do?"**

Lottie looked up. Had the woman read her mind?

**"I am Sister Samuela." She sat down on the end of Lottie's bench and laid the brass triangle and baton beside her. "I saw you here the other day, my child. I saw you leave with that man. I can see what he did to you."**

Lottie cradled her satchel on her lap and stared at her dangling feet.

**"Jesus doesn't want you to be treated like that, my dear."**

Lottie gave a short laugh. **"Sister Sam," she said, "I am a whore. Jesus doesn't give a two-cent piece about me."**

The woman only smiled. **"Oh, but he does. Jesus loves you. It was for people like you that he died, you know. He did that to save you, if you will only let yourself be saved."**

Lottie frowned, ignoring the pain it caused her swollen eye. “Look, Sister, I don’t feel like being saved today. Why don’t you go save somebody else and leave me alone? I got a train to catch.”

The woman nodded, retrieved her instrument, and stood. “All right. Good bye, my child,” she said. “And God bless you.”

Bless me, Lottie thought. She didn’t feel particularly blessed. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to doze sitting up, propping herself up with her satchel to ease the strain on her ribs.

Some moments later she felt someone sit next to her. She stiffened and opened her eyes. It was Sister Samuela.

“I’ve brought you some soup.” The woman held out a tin pail. “Since you couldn’t come to our kitchen.”

Lottie took the pail and lifted the lid. Chicken soup. It smelled delicious, and she realized she was hungrier than she’d thought. She took the spoon Sister Samuela offered, started eating, and didn’t stop until she’d emptied the pail. She dropped the spoon inside and handed it back. Sister Samuela took the pail, replaced the lid, and stood up to leave.

Lottie stopped her. “Why did you do that?”

“Why did I bring you the soup?”

Lottie nodded.

“Jesus told me to.” Sister Samuela sat back down. “I told you, my child, Jesus loves you. Not just your soul, although that is important. He loves your body, too. He doesn’t want it to be hungry. He doesn’t want it to be beaten. He doesn’t want it to be misused.”

“You mean, Jesus doesn’t want me to be a whore any more.”

“That’s right, my child.”

“I don’t want to be a whore any more, either.”

Sister Samuela smiled and seemed to blink back tears. “Bless you. Bless you, my child. You have taken the first step toward the Lord. You have turned your back on the abomination of your body and your evil way of life.”

Lottie frowned. It was true enough that her scarred body was an abomination, but it didn’t seem very Christian of Sister Sam to say so. And her way of life had never seemed particularly evil to Lottie. Before the small pox, before Howie died, being a prostitute in

Jennie Lynn's house hadn't been all that bad. It was certainly better than trying to make it on her own.

Sister Samuela placed a gloved hand on Lottie's arm. "We can help you, my child. We at the Salvation Army are prepared to rescue girls like you. We have a place where you can stay. It's not fancy, but you'll soon learn that the luxuries of this life pale when compared to the promises of the next. It's a safe place, and you can stay there while we train you for your new life."

"Train me?"

"Yes. Jesus has a plan for you, my child, for a better life. We have training programs for all sorts of careers. Seamstress, house maid, sickroom nurse, all sorts of things. We'll find a job suitable for you."

Lottie frowned again. It sounded an awful lot like the work she'd been doing at Jennie Lynn's ever since she recovered from the pox. She supposed it was better than starving, but her belly was now full. And she did have another option. She put her hand into the pocket of her jacket and fingered the creased wanted poster.

She smiled. Ten thousand dollars.

"Thank you, Sister Sam," she said, "but I think Jesus just might have something else planned for me."

SOMETHING IN HER hair roused her. Susan put up a hand and flung the rat away. She sat up and scuttled backward.

"Stay away from me! This is my spot."

She'd just moved from her spot, though. She felt a moment of panic, afraid to move. Where was the pit? The blackness was so complete it felt as if weights were pressing against her eyes. How could she have been so careless? What if she had moved in the wrong direction and fallen into the pit again? Or a different one? If there was one pit in the mine, there must be others.

"The rats are not the problem," she reminded herself. The mine was the problem. The rats were just an annoyance. "You are just an annoyance."

She made her voice loud. If she made enough noise, maybe the rats would stay away. They hadn't bothered her when she was making that racket in the pit. She only felt them when she was still and quiet. Light might keep rats away too. Weren't rats afraid of light?

**“There must be candles down here somewhere.” She would chatter all the way out of the mine if that’s what she had to do to keep the rats away. They might only be an annoyance, but they were a particularly unpleasant annoyance.**

**She patted her hands on the solid ground before her. As long as she felt her way before she moved, she would not fall. She crept forward, wincing as her hands and knees encountered sharp rubble. The smallest finger on her right hand throbbed. She felt it and found it swollen and misshaped. She must have broken it in one of her assaults on the wall, though she hadn’t felt it at the time. Her hand touched a smooth band of steel embedded in the rock, and she remembered the little railroad track that ran from the shaft. That was good. It would lead her out of here. She kept one hand on the rail and patted the ground ahead of her with the other. She had no sense of direction in the darkness. If she let go of the rail, she feared she might never find it again.**

**“I’ve been working on the railroad,” she sang. Her voice was thin, and she forced herself to sing louder. “All the livelong day. I’ve been working on the railroad...” It seemed to work. The rats didn’t bother her when she sang. “Just to pass the time away.” When she finished that song, she started another.**

**The tunnel had seemed long enough the first time she’d traversed it, with Davisson’s candle the only illumination. Now it seemed infinite. Her only connection with reality was the thin band of steel, slippery beneath her fingers. Her only goal was to trace it to its end.**

**Her hair fell from its loose braid, slipped out of her collar, and fell over her face. She let it hang. It wasn’t blocking her sight, after all, since it was too dark to see. The thin material of her drawers soon wore away at her knees, and the skin broke soon after that. She wondered if she was leaving bloody knee prints behind her. Did rats like blood?**

**She’d forgotten the wheeled bucket that rested on the rails until she hit its steel wall with the top of her head. She sat back on her heels, hand to her head. When the pain had subsided, she cautiously felt her way around the car and continued her blind journey.**

**She could think of no more songs, so she started counting aloud. She wished she knew some poems she could recite. She’d learned some in school when she was a child, but that was long ago. She’d left school when she was eleven, and her education since that time had been sporadic at best. Elias used to bring her newspapers so she**

**could read the articles about him. She would keep the papers and read the rest of it when he was gone. She grew fond of novels, and he would bring her books too, but she’d never bothered to memorize anything she read.**

**“One hundred and forty-seven,” she said, and her hand dropped into nothing. Her chin fell forward and struck the ground. She had reached the shaft. She reared back and threw herself flat on the ground. Her tongue stung and she tasted blood. Like a blind snake, she squirmed backward until she’d put a safe distance between her and the shaft. She sat up, blotted her mouth with the back of a shaking hand, and tried to still her thudding heart.**



**She pictured her body tumbling forward down the shaft, turning head over heels into nothingness for long minutes, before she landed with a splat. Would she still be conscious when she landed? Alive even? Or would her body have struck the sides of the shaft so violently on the way down that she would already be dead before landing? That would be preferable, she decided. Better than suffering the awareness during the tumble down of how the journey would surely end.**

**“Stop it,” she said. “My name is Susan.” But her voice trembled. “My name is Susan!” There, that was better. She took a deep breath and assessed her situation.**

**She had seen, on first stepping from the cage that brought them down the shaft, a few barrels and boxes of supplies along the sides of the tunnel. She had paid no attention to them then, but they interested her a great deal now. She needed light. Clothing would be nice too, as would food, but light was essential to keep her sanity. She was not worried about water. The sound of dripping was constant in the mine. She knew she could find water.**

**The difficulty lay in exploring the tunnel so near the open shaft without falling in. The thought terrified her so much she sat without moving for perhaps thirty minutes. Finally she roused herself. She knew what she had to do. She simply had to steel her nerves enough to do it. Touch the rail, pat the ground, crawl in one direction, and count. She crawled to the left, counting each creeping step, one, two, three, four, always patting the ground carefully before moving. She crawled, counting, until she reached the wall. She turned around and crawled back to the rail, one, two, three, four, counting until she reached the rail in the same number of moves. She crawled in the same manner to the wall on the other side of rail. One, two, three, four. When she had no luck, she shuffled back a few feet on the rail and tried again, first to the left of the rail and then to the right.**

**She found a stack of tools first, shovels and picks. They might come in handy if Davisson came back, but for the moment, she moved on. The next thing she touched felt like a pile of rags. She sorted it out and discovered the pile of rags was actually a large jacket. Without hesitation, she pulled it on over her damp chemise and stuck her hands in the pockets.**

**She touched a candle. A stub, really, no more than two inches long. In the other pocket was a tiny wooden box. She pulled her legs beneath her and sat cross-legged, creating a catch basin in case she were to drop anything. She drew the box from the pocket. Her fingers trembled, and she fumbled awkwardly with the box. She forced herself to move slowly. She could not afford to make mistakes. She slid the top of the box to the side and dipped a finger inside. Tiny sticks. Matches. She removed one, slid the lid closed, and turned the box over. She struck the end of the match against the bottom of the box.**

**Light as bright as the sun flared before her. With a sob of pure joy, she lit the candle. She grinned. She was out of the pit, and she had light. With perseverance, she decided, there was nothing she couldn't do.**

Her investigation into the other supplies was greatly simplified by the addition of light. Within minutes, she sat in the glow of the candle surrounded by riches. An iron ring candle holder and three more candle stubs. A keg of water with a ladle attached by a string. Tools. There was no food, but should she desire it, she had access to dynamite, blasting caps, and fuses.

The shaft still yawned menacingly, but it didn't terrify her as it had when she was blind. She rose to her feet and carried her candle over to it. Holding the candle high, she peered up into the blackness. The shaft was not empty. Steel rungs were bolted into one wall, each about twelve inches apart. An emergency route for escaping the mine, she supposed. If the cage was not running, or a miner was left below by mistake, a person could climb out.

Susan swallowed, cowed at the idea of stepping into the hollow shaft to grasp one of the rungs. She didn't know if she had the nerve to do it, despite the strength of her name. She didn't generally fear heights, but the shaft...

She was very tired. Her hands and knees throbbed, and her shoes were wet. She would be in a better condition to climb if she rested first. She stepped far from the shaft and placed her candle in the iron ring. She removed her shoes to give them a chance to dry. She curled up in the coat, rested her head on her arm, and slept. She would trust the light to keep the rats away.

## Chapter Nine

**DAN AVERY STOOD** above the hotel tunnel at the third floor window that commanded the best view of the canyon. He could hear gunfire, but the curve of the canyon and the density of the trees blocked his view.

Men were fighting battles to the death down there. Real battles. Real death. Visions of Roman gladiators, jousting knights, even of his Uncle Rob in the war between the states flitted through his head. Envy churned in his belly. That's what men were meant to do, risk their lives for a cause they believed in.

Some of the scabs had defected when the shooting started, not to escape the fighting, but to join it. It didn't matter to them that they didn't have to fight. It didn't matter to them who won. They just wanted to play. Avery knew how they felt.

Most of the men, though, remained huddled on the lower two floors of the hotel, relying on the federal troops to capture the rebel miners and let the scabs get to work. The Mine Owners Group kept to the third floor.

Avery sighed and turned from the window. He'd better go report to Wilton. He'd be wondering where Avery was. He could just imagine the sneers of the owners if they knew Avery would rather be fighting with the miners than conferring, safe and sound, with the Mine Owners Group about how to beat them.

He stepped into the hall and headed toward Wilton's door at the end. A sound in the room to his right caught his attention. Wasn't everyone in Wilton's room?

The door opened, and Avery discovered he was going to get to play after all.

The barrel of a gun pressed hard against his temple, and an arm encircled his neck. A warm mouth at his ear spoke in a harsh whisper. "Where's Davisson?"

Avery tried to speak, but only managed a high pitched squeak. The arm around his neck tightened.

"Where's Davisson?"

"I don't know." Avery's voice shook. He'd just made a disappointing discovery. Having one's life in danger is not nearly as glamorous as dreaming about it. "I don't know."

The arm jerked. "Move."

He was pushed down the hall.

"Where are the others?"

Avery pointed, and the man shoved him toward Wilton's room. The man turned the knob and used Avery as a battering ram. The door crashed against the wall, and the members of the Mine Owners

Group jumped to their feet.

"What the hell?"

"Hold still!" Avery's captor yelled. "Where's Davisson?"

"What the hell is this?" Spencer asked.

Avery heard the click of the hammer being pulled back on the gun. "I'll kill him," the voice at his ear said. "Where's Davisson?"

**“Jesus Christ!” Cheviot said. “You’re out of your mind. You’ll never get away with it.”**

**“Maybe not, but this boy will still be dead. Where’s Davisson?”**

**“How the hell should we know?”**

**Avery pulled his head as far away from the gun’s barrel as he could get it, as if that would slow down a bullet, and his neck ached.**

**“Oh for God’s sake,” Wilton said calmly from his big chair. “Give him Davisson.”**

**“Jim,” Spencer said. “Are you mad? He’ll kill him.”**

**“So, he’ll save us the trouble,” Wilton said. “Go ahead and tell him, Avery.”**

**“Tell him what?” Cheviot asked. “We don’t know where the hell he is.”**

**“Wait a minute.” Spencer turned to Wilton. “Are you saying Davisson’s the spy?”**

**“Jim? Is it true? Davisson?”**

**“Where is he?” the intruder yelled, apparently sharing Avery’s feeling that they had lost sight of what was important here.**

**“We don’t know where he is,” Cheviot repeated.**

**“Avery does,” Wilton said. “Go ahead, Dan, tell him.”**

**Every member of the Mine Owners Group stared at Avery with varying degrees of surprise. Avery felt his captor’s arm tighten around his neck as he realized that his hostage had known all along.**

**“You little bastard,” his captor said. “Where is he?”**

**“Don’t be a hero, Avery,” Wilton said.**

**“He went up the mountain,” Avery said. “To the mine.”**

**He was pulled from the room and the door slammed behind them. He was dragged down the hall toward the room that faced the town. He was shoved inside, the door closed, and he was alone.**

**Avery rubbed his neck. He supposed the man was climbing out the window on the mountain side, getting away and going after Davisson. Avery could follow him. Maybe he still had a chance to be a hero.**

He didn't do it. Instead, he turned around and rejoined the Mine Owners Group.

Cheviot, as usual, was speaking. "You sure it's Davisson? I thought Avery was the spy."

"Dan?" Wilton raised his eyebrows. "Why would you think that? Dan's the only one of you I knew couldn't be the spy. He's my nephew, after all. I suspected Davisson, though, so I had Dan keep an eye on him." Wilton ignored the astonished looks from the members of the group and turned to Avery. "Don't try to be a hero next time, Dan. Your mother will kill me if anything happens to you."

**JO ERIN RAN UP** the stairs toward the head of the mine shaft, her heart pounding in her throat. Why the mine? What could the mine have to do with Susan? She burst into the shaft house and saw that her worst fears were realized. The cage was gone. Davisson had gone down into the mine.

She rushed to the shaft opening, looked down, and saw black nothingness, four feet square, with the thick cable supporting the cage vanishing down its center.

A steel ladder was mounted on the inside of the shaft. She could climb down into the mine to where the cage was stopped. It might be hundreds of feet down. A fall would kill her, but that wasn't all. The cage could come up at any moment, speeding at hundreds of feet per minute. If she were caught on the ladder when it came up, she'd be pulverized against the wall of the shaft.

She hesitated. It was clear that Davisson had gone down into the mine. He'd headed this way, and there was no other reason for the cage to be gone. All work at the mine had stopped, and the shaft house and the mine were vacant. But just because Davisson was down there didn't mean Susan was. Maybe he had some other reason to go into the mine, and he'd put Susan somewhere else. Somewhere above ground. Jo Erin could wait here for Davisson to return, then get him to reveal where he'd put her.

It was no good. The possibility that Davisson had Susan down in the mine was too real and too terrible for Jo Erin to ignore. Susan might have been down there all night. She might be injured. She might be dying. She might be dead. At the very least, she must be incredibly frightened.

She had no choice. Boxes of supplies were stacked along one wall of the shaft house. Jo Erin located one with candles and another with matches. With trembling fingers, she attached a candle holder to her hat, inserted a candle, and lit it. She grabbed a handful of extra candles and slipped them into her pocket along with a box of matches. She wiped her hands on her jacket, grasped the bar at the side of the shaft, and swung a leg over. She paused there, trying to slow her pulse. It's just a ladder, she reminded herself. A ladder is

no different when it's hundreds of feet above the ground than it is two feet up. She'd climbed dozens of ladders in the past and never fallen off one of them. There was no reason to think she would fall off this one. She closed off thoughts of the cage and thought only of Susan.

She swung her other leg over, reached for a rung, and descended into the shaft.

Be quick, she reminded herself. The sooner she got off the ladder, the less likely it was that the cage would catch her. Not too quick, though. She paused a moment to wipe her hands again, one at a time. Not so quick that she risked slipping.

Light from above vanished almost instantly, and she was left with no illumination but the flickering of the candle in her hat. Its light was so feeble and erratic, it was almost worse than no light at all, but she didn't have the nerve to put it out and face complete blackness.

Did Susan have light?

Nice and steady, not too fast. She'd been too careful for too many years to lose her life due to rushing down a ladder. But not too slow either. Susan was down there, with Davisson.

Finally, one hundred feet down, she reached the first level. She stepped off the ladder onto the station floor and caught her breath. There was no sign of the cage, and no sound of human voices, only Jo Erin's breathing and the steady drip of water, which she'd grown accustomed to. She had no time to waste. She stepped back onto the ladder and descended again.

Another hundred feet to the second level. Still no cage and no sound from below. How far down did Davisson go? Jo Erin had never been lower than the fourth level, but she knew the shaft went several levels further than that. She'd climb all the way to hell if she had to in order to find Susan. She hoped she wouldn't have to.

There was nothing at the third level either, and she kept moving.

Finally, just before she reached the fourth level, her foot struck a solid surface. She looked down. Her foot rested on the sloping roof of the cage. For a moment, she froze, reluctant to go on. She still heard nothing, but the cage was here. Davisson had to be on this level.

Lowering herself with her hands, she slid over the opening at the top of the cage and landed on the ground. Still the only light came from the candle in Jo Erin's cap, but it was enough to illuminate the scene. Davisson lay on the station floor. A puddle of blackness surrounded his head. There was no sign of Susan.

Jo Erin dropped to her knee beside Davisson and felt his neck for a pulse. His skin was warm and, after a moment, she was able to tell he was alive. She rose to her feet.

“Susan!” Her voice rang through the silent drift. “Susan!”

She heard a sound, but it could have been rats. She shouted again. “Sukey!”

A small voice came from the darkness, beyond the reach of the candle. “Jo Erin?”

“Susan.” Jo Erin’s legs nearly buckled from the relief. She grabbed another candle from her pocket, lit it from her cap, and held it high. She took a step forward. “Where are you?”

She heard movement, and Susan entered the light. Her hair hung loose and tangled over her shoulders, blood smeared her face, and her eyes were huge and dark. She wore nothing but a miner’s coat and her drawers, filthy with blood and dirt. She held a shovel in one hand.

“I think I killed him.” Her voice shook.

“No,” Jo Erin said. “He’s not dead.” She stepped forward slowly, afraid of what had happened to Susan in the mine that night, afraid of what made her appear so brittle.

Susan stared as Jo Erin approached, as if not sure she was real. Her eyes seemed to grow larger as Jo Erin closed the distance between them. When Jo Erin stopped before her, Susan closed her eyes and leaned forward.

Jo Erin wrapped her arms around Susan and tried to hold as much of her as she could, while trying to keep the candle steady. Susan grew heavy against her chest, as if she were falling asleep right there, standing up. Jo Erin closed her eyes as well. For a long moment, they stood, leaning against each other, just holding.

Susan spoke first. “I hoped you would come.”

“I’m sorry it took me so long.” Jo Erin rubbed her cheek against Susan’s hair. “I didn’t know you were missing for the longest time. I thought you were with Aimee.”

Susan raised her head. “Did she have the baby?”

Jo Erin loosened her hold and looked into Susan’s gray face. She seemed shorter than usual. Jo Erin looked down and saw bare feet. “Yes. Where are your shoes?”

“They were wet, so I took them off. Are they okay?”

“I think so. I didn’t stay when I learned you weren’t there.”

**“Is it a boy or a girl?”**

**“I don’t know.” Jo Erin gave a little laugh at the urgency of the question, given their situation. “What happened, Sukey?”**

**Susan pulled out of Jo Erin’s arms and looked around. “Can you hold the light up? My shoes are here somewhere.”**

**Jo Erin raised the candle, which expanded the pool of light on the floor.**

**“There they are.” Susan moved to a spot beside the water barrel and sat on the ground. The shadowy shape of Davisson lying on the ground was barely visible behind her. She pulled on her shoes. They were the new ones she had purchased in Wallace, with the silk bows and curved heels. They were battered now, the bows limp and the leather scraped and sodden, but they still looked absurdly fashionable in the mine.**

**Jo Erin dropped down opposite Susan, where she could keep an eye on Davisson’s still form. She tipped the candle to create a puddle of wax on the floor and fixed the candle in it, between them. “Susan, what happened?”**

**“He put me in a pit,” Susan said. Her voice was small, like she didn’t have energy to put behind it, but it was steady. “There’s a pit at the end of this tunnel. He pulled the ladder up and left me in it. What time is it? It feels like it’s been a long time.”**

**“It’s Thursday morning,” Jo Erin said. “I’m sorry it took me so long. I didn’t know...”**

**“It took me a while to get out, but I did it.” Susan held her hands out in front of her, palms up and fingers spread.**

**Jo Erin took Susan’s hands, brought them closer to the candle, and examined them. They were covered in cuts and scrapes. One fingernail was missing, and the little finger on her right hand looked broken.**

**“I didn’t have any light,” Susan said, “until I got down here to this end. It was difficult getting out of the pit in the dark. And crawling. There are rats.” Her voice trembled, finally, as did her fingers. She withdrew them from Jo Erin’s hands. “When I got here, I found the candles and the matches. I slept a bit. Then Dave came down again, and I hit him with a shovel. I didn’t mean to kill him.”**

**“You didn’t kill him,” Jo Erin said. “Did he say why?”**

**“He knows about you. Except he thinks maybe you’re Dex.”**

**Jo Erin looked at the still form at the edge of their tiny pool of light. “What does Dex have to do with anything?”**



**“He knows one of you told me about blowing up the mill. He took me to try to flush you out. You or Dex. He thought, whichever of you it was, would come looking for me.”**

**Jo Erin felt wrenched with guilt. Even Davisson had expected Jo Erin to notice Susan was missing. “He doesn’t know who you are?”**

**“He doesn’t seem to.”**

**“Why didn’t you tell him it was me?”**

**Susan gave Jo Erin a familiar look, the one she used when Jo Erin said something stupid, and said nothing.**

**Jo Erin took a deep breath, grabbed the candle from its makeshift holder, and stood up. “We need to get out of here.”**

**Susan rose quickly, as if afraid she would be left behind, and scooted close to Jo Erin. “How?”**

**Jo Erin took her arm. They moved to the cage, stepping carefully around Davisson, and Jo Erin peered inside. Davisson had ridden down in the cage, but if there was a way to run it from the inside, she didn’t know what it was. Not that she would dare to try it anyway. She’d learned enough to know that men didn’t die from a falling cage. There were safety catches that would automatically stop a falling cage from crashing. Men did die, however, from an inexpertly hoisted cage. Cages moved at such rapid speeds that, if they weren’t slowed in time, they would crash into the hoist wheels at the top, crushing the riders.**

**Jo Erin fingered a rope that hung along the edge of the shaft.**

**“What’s that?” Susan asked.**

**“It’s connected to a bell in the shaft house. It tells the hoist man to raise the cage.”**

**“You mean, I could have just pulled that rope to get help?”**

**“No,” Jo Erin said. “There has to be someone up top to run the hoist. It makes the cage go up and down. Right now, there’s no one to hear the bell. Nobody’s working the hoist, because of the strike.”**

**“How did Davisson bring it down?”**

**Jo Erin stared at Susan, stunned. “I don’t know.” She tried to picture the shaft room. She hadn’t seen anyone in it, but she hadn’t been looking for anyone. Her mind was fixed on the thought that Davisson was in the mine with Susan. Had someone been in the shaft room all along, watching her as she climbed into the shaft? An accomplice? She dropped**

the rope as if it burned. "He couldn't have done it," Jo Erin said. "Not by himself. Did you see anyone else when he brought you down here? Was anyone else in the shaft room?"

"I don't know. I wasn't able to look around."

It made Jo Erin weak to think of the fear Susan must have felt being dragged into the mine, but this was no time for weakness. She had to be strong to get them out of there.

"He's working with someone, then," Jo Erin said. It was more important than ever that they get out of the mine, the sooner the better. She looked at Susan's feet. "Can you climb in those things?"

Susan stared at Jo Erin a moment and glanced uneasily at the shaft. "Is that how we...?"

"Yes."

Susan pressed her lips together grimly and nodded.

"Good girl," Jo Erin said softly. "What about your hands? Squeeze my fingers."

Susan's grip was strong, aside from the broken pinky. "I can do it," she said.

Satisfied, Jo Erin looked next at Davisson. They couldn't leave him lying there like that. He could wake up at any moment and pull the rope to signal his accomplice to raise the cage. If she had a rope, she could tie him up first. If she had a rope, she would tie Susan to her when they climbed the ladder. It terrified her to think that the only thing holding Susan onto that ladder would be her sore hands and her silly, high-heeled shoes.

"I made a rope," Susan said, reading her mind. "It's back at the pit."

"Show me."

Jo Erin checked Davisson to make sure he was still unconscious and took Susan's arm again. She remembered how long the drift had seemed when she'd first followed Dex to the stope and when she'd had to push the cart filled with ore back to the shaft. She couldn't even imagine how long it must have seemed to Susan, crawling along it in pitch darkness.

"It's a lot easier with light," Susan said, twisting Jo Erin's heart.

There were several inches of water in the bottom of the stope, and a ladder was propped up inside it.

"The rope's down there," Susan said. "I dropped it after I got the ladder."

Susan held the candle while Jo Erin climbed down and fished for the rope. She found a large piece of cloth first, so heavy with water she could barely lift it. "What's this?"

"My skirt. I couldn't climb in it, so I took it off."

"Do you want it?"

Susan shook her head, and Jo Erin dropped it. She snagged a length of silk next and climbed back up the ladder.

"This is your rope?"

"Yes. My belt, my stockings, and my petticoat."

Jo Erin laughed. "That explains your costume, then."

Susan looked at herself. "I must be a sight."

"I was worried Davisson might have..."

"No, he didn't touch me," Susan said, "except to put me in this pit. I did this to myself trying to get out of it."

"You made a fine rope."

Susan bent and lifted something from the ground.

"What's that?"

"My corset. I would have been sad to lose it." She held it up so Jo Erin could see.

"Pretty," Jo Erin said, though she didn't see how they could safely carry a corset up the ladder with them.

They returned to the shaft. Davisson had not moved. Jo Erin knelt beside him and used Susan's stockings to tie his hands and the belt to bind his feet. When she rose, she saw that Susan had solved the problem of the corset.

She had removed the miner's coat and put the corset on over her thin chemise. Her breasts plumped out above it and her bloody, tattered drawers billowed below. Her hair hung half over her face as she bent her head to try to attach the lowest hook of the corset, just above her pelvis, with her sore fingers.

Jo Erin had never seen anything so beautiful. Without a word, she gently removed Susan's fingers from the corset. She took the lowest hook and looped it through the eye. As she did so, the back of her fingers brushed the front of Susan's drawers. A bristle of hair

poked through the thin muslin, and Jo Erin felt a surge of lust stronger than any she had ever felt in her life.

She heard a gasp and looked up. Susan watched her with eyes dark and wary.

Jo Erin rose and touched Susan's cheek. It was bruised and scraped, and dark circles ringed her eyes. It was wrong to dare it, with Susan in such a fragile state, but Jo Erin couldn't help it. What if they didn't make it out of the mine alive? What if this was their last chance?

Jo Erin leaned forward and kissed her. Susan's lips trembled, or perhaps it was Jo Erin's lips that trembled. She gathered Susan to her and deepened the kiss. Susan's breasts pressed against her, and she pulled Susan's hips in to press against her own. She imagined never being able to kiss Susan again and tried to put every feeling she had for her into the passion of this one kiss. It was only when Susan whimpered that she finally stopped and raised her head.

They were both breathless.

"I'm sorry," Jo Erin said. "I just want you to know, in case we don't—"

"Shh." Susan pressed a finger to Jo Erin's lips. "I know."

There was much Jo Erin wanted to say, but there was no time. She ran her finger along the curve of the corset above Susan's left breast. "Are you going to be able to climb in this thing?"

"Yes. It's a traveling corset. It's not too tight."

"All right then." She turned to the shaft. "I want you to go first. It's a hundred feet between levels. The rungs are a foot apart. That's a hundred steps. We'll rest when we get to the next level. Do you want the coat?"

"No," Susan said. "It's too big. It'll just be in my way."

"All right. Can you help me move this box?"

They pushed one of the larger boxes over to the edge of the shaft and climbed onto it. It would be easier taking that first step this time than it had been climbing into the shaft, since they would have the cage beneath their feet

Jo Erin made a cup with her hands. "Step in."

Susan hesitated.

"Don't worry," Jo Erin said. "I'm strong enough. I've been mucking."

Susan put her foot in Jo Erin's hands, and Jo Erin boosted her to the top of the cage. Her head disappeared into the shaft, then her arms, and she slung a leg up. Jo Erin pushed up on the other foot and felt the moment Susan caught the first rung. She disappeared into the blackness.

"I'm up." Susan peered down from the roof of the cage. "It's your turn. I'll help you."

"I'm too heavy."

"You're not the only one who's strong. It's okay. I've got hold of the rung."

Jo Erin jumped up and wrapped her arms over the top edge of the cage. She tried to sling a leg up as well but started to slip. She felt

Susan grab her under the arm and pull. Jo Erin clutched Susan's arm.

"I've got you," Susan said. "Try again."

Jo Erin gave a great heave with her right leg and got it up over the edge. From there, with Susan's help, she was able to pull herself up and roll onto the roof of the cage.

They stood on the roof of the cage and looked up. They could see no more than a couple feet above them. The candle on Jo Erin's cap had blown out when she jumped. The only light came from the fourth level.

"We left the candle," Susan said.

"It'll burn itself out," Jo Erin said. She took a match from her pocket and lit the candle in her cap. "We couldn't have carried it anyway. Ready?"

"Ready." Susan turned and started climbing.

**THE DEVIL WAS** getting in Lottie's way.

She had finally managed to reach Wallace, and now there were no trains to Needles Eye. There likely wouldn't be, the station master said, for a day or so. There was a war on, and the federal militia had commandeered the train for its own use.

Lottie wanted to fulfill Jesus' plan for her, she truly did, but you'd think if he really wanted her to capture Miss Susan Bantry, he wouldn't put all these damned obstacles in her way. It had to be the devil.

Sister Sam would be surprised to learn how much Lottie had taken her words to heart. Sister Sam had brought Lottie strength when she needed it the most, in the form of soup and inspiring words. Jesus had a plan for a better life for her, and that plan, Lottie knew, was in the form of ten thousand dollars.

“What’s another way to get to Needles Eye?” Lottie asked.

“No other way,” the station master said. “Used to be you could take a buggy or a horse, but they’ve barricaded the road.”

Roads were for the weak. The way to hell was paved with roads, wasn’t it? “How far is it from here?”

“Seven miles. Too far to walk.”

Oh no it wasn’t. Not when you had Jesus guiding your way.

Jesus had already found a way to let Lottie know that Susan was still in Needles Eye. When she’d stepped off the train in Wallace, she’d run into a group of dancing girls who were eager to get on it, refugees from the Needles Eye war. She tore the picture out of the wanted poster—she was not about to share the reward—and showed it to the girls. They all agreed that Susan had been in Needles Eye right before the war broke out, and she wasn’t on the train that evacuated the women. She had to still be there.

Lottie’s insides felt better, so she must not have broken a rib after all. She was hungry again, but she could walk seven miles on an empty stomach.

“Thank you.” Lottie picked up her bag, which hardly weighed a thing, since it was nearly empty, and headed for the road to Needles Eye.

The barricade was easy to spot. The soldiers had put up a makeshift gate at the end of the bridge to the road leading up the mountain. It didn’t look sturdy enough to keep anyone from breaching it, but a handful of men with rifles stood guard and refused to let anyone pass. They couldn’t guard the entire mountain, though.

Lottie wandered along the southern side of the creek at the edge of town and looked for a spot where she could cross. She couldn’t be the only person who needed to get on or off the mountain. A half mile out of town, she found it. The creek was about ten feet wide, and the water was rapid, but it was shallow. Someone had placed large rocks in the water, and damp footprints on top of them confirmed that others had chosen this spot to bypass the barricade as well.

She stepped without hesitation onto the first rock. The worst that could happen is that she would get wet. Her fearlessness, or Jesus perhaps, made her steps steady, and she was very soon on the other side. She crept through the woods, several feet into the trees where

she wouldn't be spotted, but close enough to the creek that she didn't lose sight of it, and started her trek up the mountain.

Walking in the trees was more difficult than she'd thought. The ground was uneven, and she had to look before making each step. Seven miles walking on a road might not seem too far to walk, but in the rough terrain of the forest, it could take her all night. She made her way back toward the road. When she spotted the barricade, she worked her way north several hundred feet until she was out of sight of the soldiers and stepped out onto the road.

She was sore, hungry, and tired, and the road was all uphill, but she almost felt like whistling. Every step she took brought her closer to the fulfillment of the Lord's plan for her. Every step she took brought her closer to ten thousand dollars.

"GO NICE AND slow." Jo Erin's voice sounded strange, loud and muffled at the same time, echoing from the walls that surrounded them. "Make sure your grip is secure on one rung before moving on to the next."

Susan didn't need the reminder. The first few rungs were the easiest. There was still light from the candle they'd left burning, and Susan knew that if she fell, she would land on top of the cage and escape serious harm. With each rung she climbed, though, the darkness grew deeper, until the only light was the thin wavering bit that reached her from the candle on Jo Erin's hat. She wished they'd thought to put a candle on her head too.

It was too dark to see the rungs, and she had to find them by feel alone. Fortunately, her shoes seemed almost made for climbing ladders. The curved heel acted as a hook. It grabbed the bar of the rung and held her foot securely in place. A hundred rungs was a lot, though. Already her shoulders and legs could feel the strain, and her broken finger throbbed every time she grabbed a rung with her right hand. If each hand grabbed every other rung, she would have to grab fifty rungs with that hand before they reached the next level. She wished she had counted the rungs when she started climbing so she would have some idea of how far she had to go, but she hadn't thought of it. She hadn't thought of much of anything at that moment, except for the kiss.

She knew why Jo Erin had kissed her. There was a chance they wouldn't make it out of the mine alive. They both knew that. It might have been their last chance to kiss. It might be their last chance for anything.

"I had to kill him," Susan said.

"He's not dead," Jo Erin said. "I checked."

**“I’m talking about Elias.” Susan’s echoing voice seemed disconnected from her. It was almost like someone else was talking. Almost like someone else had killed Elias. “I had to kill him.”**

**Jo Erin didn’t say anything for five full rungs. “Why?” she finally asked.**

**“The day before, did you see it in the papers?” Susan asked. “The deal he made with the President?”**

**“I read about it.”**

**“He put all that gold in the Treasury. Everyone thought he was a hero, that he rescued the country.”**

**“He wasn’t a hero to me,” Jo Erin said.**

**A breathy laugh escaped Susan. “Nor to me,” she said. “But what no one knew, except for me and one or two others, is that he’s the one who caused the problem in the first place.” Her voice trembled slightly. She was growing breathless, only in part because of the climb. She had never spoken of this aspect of Elias to anyone. She was glad she couldn’t see Jo Erin’s face as she revealed the dirty secret.**

**“You shouldn’t talk,” Jo Erin said. “Save your breath for the climb.”**

**“What if I don’t get another chance?”**

**Jo Erin didn’t answer.**

**“He created that first run on the Treasury,” Susan said. “Remember the Panic of eighteen ninety-three?”**

**“I remember,” Jo Erin said. “Bad weather. Drought. Farms failed.”**

**“Do you remember what followed? The banks failed next, workers lost their jobs. Families went hungry. Do you remember that part of it?” Susan remembered it all too well. She’d felt no need herself, since she was under Elias’s protection by then, but she’d worried about Donald’s children, her nephews and her little niece. Children on their street died of starvation that year. Susan knew better than to offer help to Donald directly, but she’d managed to send work and food his way, without his knowing. But she couldn’t help everyone.**

**“I remember,” Jo Erin said. “But Noonan didn’t cause the weather.”**

**“No,” Susan said, “but he took advantage of it. When the value of gold dropped, he bought up all of it he could. He could buy a lot of gold, even then. He used agents and no**



one knew. He created that run on gold. When the price was up, he sold it again. He made money. But that's not why he did it."

Her sentences grew shorter, with longer pauses between to catch her breath. "He was mad for power." Susan's hands were damp from sweat. "Stop a minute."

"What's wrong?"

"My hands are slippery."

"Wrap your arm through a rung to hold on. Wipe your hands on your drawers."

Susan did as Jo Erin said, and used the moment to catch her breath and her thoughts.

"We must be almost to the third level," Jo Erin said. "Feel for a change in the air. There should be a little breeze when we reach it."

Susan grabbed for the next rung and resumed the climb. "When things calmed down, he bought gold again. Created another run on the Treasury. Worse, this time, since he could afford to buy more gold. He waited for the price to rise and sold it again."

She waited for Jo Erin to speak, but she heard nothing from below but the rhythmic sound of boots striking rungs.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you, Jo Erin?"

"It sounds like he was a canny businessman."

Susan's heart sank. She had to make Jo Erin see that Elias was so much more than that. "He knew how to make money. But a canny businessman would know when to stop." She chose her next words carefully. Jo Erin was an intelligent woman, but few people truly understood the workings of the economy on the scale it was exercised by Elias Noonan. It had taken Susan years of observing to understand it herself.

"The last time he bought gold, he bought too much. He created a run that didn't stop. The Treasury was nearly empty. Finally, the President asked Elias for help."

"The President? Cleveland?" Jo Erin was surprised enough that even the walls of the shaft couldn't muffle the emotion in her voice.

"Yes." Susan attempted a laugh, but it came out a harsh bark. "He knew Elias was the only one with enough gold to help. He needed Elias to show the rest of the country that he had faith in the Treasury. If Elias would put his gold in the Treasury, maybe the rest of the country would too."

"He did that," Jo Erin said. "Fifty million dollars in gold. Right before—"

**“Yes. Right before I killed him.”**

Her words dropped into the hollow shaft and echoed there. She silently urged Jo Erin to say something, but she didn't.

Susan noticed a change in the air. **“I think I feel air moving.”**

**“Stop there. Hug tight to the ladder. I'm coming up behind you.”**

Susan looped her arm through the rung and waited. The light reached her first, and she felt the brush of Jo Erin's arms on the outsides of her legs.

**“Yes, we're there. See the rung to the left of your hand?”**

The light from Jo Erin's candle was just bright enough that she could make out the rungs closest to her. **“Yes.”**

**“That's for your foot. The floor of the third level is right beside it. There's another rung to the left where your hands will be. Go ahead and climb up to it.”**

Jo Erin lowered herself so that Susan could climb again. Four rungs more and she could grasp the rung on her left. She looked down. Jo Erin's candle was right below her feet. She could see the other rung and the solid floor of the third level just inches away. She stepped to the left one step, and one step more, and she was there.

A moment later, Jo Erin joined her.

**“Thank God.”** Jo Erin slumped with relief at being on solid ground again.

Susan wasn't able to relax quite yet. **“Do you have another candle?”** Jo Erin pulled one from her pocket and lit it from the candle on her cap. Two candles still didn't give off much light, but it was enough to see Jo Erin's face, if she'd been looking Susan's way. She wasn't.

**“I hope there's still water in this barrel,”** Jo Erin said. She lifted the lid and dipped in a cup on a long handle hanging beside it. **“Yes, indeed, it's our lucky day. Come have a drink.”**

Susan took the cup, drank, and handed it back. **“Do you understand, Jo Erin?”** She was unable to keep her voice steady. **“Do you see why I had to kill him?”**

Jo Erin dipped the cup again, took a drink, and hung the ladle on its hook. She continued to avoid Susan's eyes. **“I'm not sure.”**

**“He was going to do it again.”** It was so important that Jo Erin understand and believe her, that she not condemn her for what she did. **“The very next morning. He boasted about**

it. He had enough bonds that he could empty the Treasury all on his own, and he was going to do it.”

Jo Erin met Susan’s eyes. Her expression was grim. “It was only money.”

“No, it wasn’t. Don’t you see, Jo Erin? Gold only gives value to money if people believe it does. If people knew that one man had the power to empty the Treasury, our paper money would be worthless. If Elias emptied the Treasury of gold, he would own this country. The Panic of 1893 would be nothing compared to what would happen then. Elias would control the government. He would control the country.”

Jo Erin looked unconvinced. “Why you?”

“I was the only one who could,” Susan said. “I was the only one he trusted to let get close to him.”

Jo Erin bent to the water barrel and fiddled with the lid. Finally she turned back around and looked into Susan’s eyes. Her own were troubled. “Murder is a mortal sin. Don’t you worry about going to hell?”

“Of course. I hope God is more merciful than that, but if he isn’t,” Susan shrugged, “I had to do it anyway.” “Was it easier this time? Killing?” So that was it. Jo Erin was worried Susan had turned into a serial killer. Susan shook her head. “You seem to be forgetting something, Jo Erin. I’m not the one who killed Everard. You are.”

## Chapter Ten

IF GROVER CLEVELAND had realized, when he ran for sheriff of Buffalo in 1870, that one of his official duties would be that of hangman, he probably wouldn’t have run. Of course, if he hadn’t served as sheriff, it’s doubtful he would have been elected mayor ten years later, or governor of New York the year after that, and finally, President of the United States.

He didn’t know it, however, and so he ran, was elected, and found himself facing the least pleasant of his duties in September of 1872. The ruffian on the scaffold had murdered his own mother and so deserved to die, but Cleveland was not pleased to learn that his own hand would be the one to release the trap door beneath the condemned man’s feet. It was a task that caused him many a sleepless night.

What if something went wrong? Always a cautious man, he made sure of the details before the fateful day. He learned that the weight of the prisoner was calculated, along with the length of the rope and the placement of the knot so that, if properly executed, the condemned man would die instantly. He learned that, more often than not, that was the case. He also learned the gruesome details of what happened when it was not.

It was not necessary for Cleveland to actually watch the prisoner die, so he placed himself so that he could release the trap door without seeing the fellow drop. He was told it was a smooth hanging.

Pulling the lever on a condemned man was bad enough. Fortunately, Cleveland had never been placed in a position to decide who was to die. There were juries for that sort of thing in the United States, thank the Lord. Even the President did not have the authority to order an execution.

One would have to be either mad or incredibly brave to realize someone had to die and then decide to be the one to carry it out. Oh, it took no courage to kill, he knew that. Anyone could kill, given hot blood and provocation enough. But to decide to kill a person in cold blood, that was another matter.

The woman who killed Noonan was not mad. She was, therefore, incredibly brave.

The execution of 1872 was not his only hanging, merely the first, but he had never executed a woman. Hangings of men were so common that the science of them was nearly perfected. Hangings of women were rare. What if an amateur hangman, when hanging a woman, used the same calculations as those for a man? Would it be botched? Would the poor woman dangle helplessly for fifteen or twenty minutes, slowly strangling to death, writhing at the end of the rope? Would she, as he had heard of in some cases, actually be decapitated by the force of the fall? A woman's neck was not as strong as a man's. Would the hangman think of that?

Cleveland thought of it continuously.

Emotions concerning Noonan and his death still ran high, especially among the general population who didn't understand the damage that could be done by a man of Noonan's power. What if some overzealous bounty hunter or vigilante got hold of that young woman, someone who didn't read the information carefully enough to note the WANTED ALIVE language? What if, in some reckless pursuit of justice, the woman was cruelly hanged? Such things still happened, especially out West.

He wished he could announce to the world what she had done. He wished he could tell them that the woman they sought was actually responsible for rescuing the United States—and Cleveland's presidency—from ruin. But to do so would destroy the good she had done with her selfless act. The economic recovery, still in its infancy, was due largely to what the country perceived as Noonan's belief in it. If Noonan had faith in the economy, then the

average citizen did too. After his death, their faith in him only grew. To announce now what Noonan had intended to do would be devastating.

Even worse, Cleveland might not be believed. He had no proof of Noonan's intentions. The only other person who might know of them was the woman wanted for Noonan's murder, his mistress. Not a very credible witness in the eyes of the world, even if she could be found. An unsupported claim that Noonan, who was not alive to defend himself, was a madman and a scoundrel would provide enough ammunition for Cleveland's political foes to bring down the entire Democratic party.

Perhaps she would never be found. Nearly a month had passed since Noonan's death and the woman's disappearance. He almost hoped that the man Pinkerton sent would return having found no trace of her. Of course, that would leave Cleveland with nightmares for the rest of his life of seeing the woman hang.

No. What he really wished for was that the Pinkerton man would find her, arrest her, and bring her back to New York. The best hope for that young woman was a Presidential pardon. He could do that, and he didn't need to explain his reason for doing so. She would be freed of all wrongdoing, as if no crime had been committed. In order to be pardoned, though, she first had to be convicted of the crime. And for that to happen, she had to be found.

EVERARD WAS JO ERIN'S first kill and her last. Despite the many opportunities that had come her way as a Pinkerton agent to kill, legally and for good reason, she had refrained, sometimes to the criticism of her fellow agents. It was Pinkerton who had taught her to kill, after all.

She'd just completed her training that day when Patrick brought her home to dinner at the Bantry house. Donald and Patrick were busy young men, working, courting, and eager to start their lives. They both planned to leave the Bantry home in the next few weeks. Patrick was ready to seek his fortune out west, and Donald was getting married. Only Everard would remain at home with Susan and their ailing father.

Everard was a year younger than Susan, and he had always been small for his age. He didn't grow to Susan's height until he was in his mid-teens. He'd always enjoyed tormenting Susan, but he didn't have the nerve to lay hands on her himself. Instead, he used smaller and weaker victims. Animals, mostly, like the rat he'd nailed to the board that time. He'd torture the poor creatures until Susan was wild with agony for them, sometimes to the point where she put them out of their misery to protect them from further cruelty. Everard would laugh out loud when that happened.

Everard's cruelty was something well-known to Jo Erin and the other children who'd grown up with him, but Jo Erin was older, bigger, and stronger than he, and so she'd never been one of his victims. The younger neighborhood children learned to stay out of Everard's sight, but it wasn't until she'd grown older that Jo Erin realized the horror that signified.

By the time Jo Erin came over to dinner that night, Everard was seventeen years old, and he had finally caught up to his brothers in size. He was as tall as Jo Erin, and broader in the shoulders. If Everard still enjoyed torturing the smaller and the weaker, Jo Erin had realized suddenly, Susan was now in that category.

It was possible that Everard had outgrown his cruel tendencies by then. Jo Erin sat down to dinner prepared to think the best of the Bantry boys, including Everard. It wasn't long, however, before she saw that Everard's savagery had not lessened in the last few years. His attacks that night were not physical, but they were cruel nonetheless.

He first went after Susan. He peppered the conversation with rude comments about her plainness, her ugly clothes, and her inability to attach a beau. Susan didn't respond and her expression did not change, but she flushed occasionally, so that Everard knew he'd hurt her, which made him laugh and probe the sore spot further. Patrick and Donald chattered on about their girls and their plans, demanding Jo Erin's attention like little boys, which suggested that Everard's behavior was nothing out of the ordinary at the Bantry dinner table.

Da spent as much time coughing as eating, and he spoke little. When he did, it was to Susan. He would ask her to fill his glass, to cut his meat, to take away his phlegm filled napkin and bring a clean one. Susan would go to the kitchen to fetch something for Da, and Everard would switch his attentions to the sick old man. Now that he was weak and gray with the disease that would end his life, Da was a perfect victim. Patrick and Donald paid no more attention to Everard's taunting of his father's weakness than they had to his torment of Susan. They were too used to Everard to realize how evil he was.

After dinner, Patrick spread out his brochures, town plots, and railroad maps across the floor of the front room. He read portions of the advertising brochures aloud and boasted about the fortune he would make out West. Donald scoffed, and an argument broke out among the brothers. Jo Erin quietly excused herself and found Susan in the kitchen.

Da had gone to bed, and Susan stood alone at the sink wiping dishes and stacking them on a nearby shelf. She turned when Jo Erin entered.

"Hello, Susan."

"Hello, Jo Erin." Susan draped the towel over the edge of the sink, removed her apron, and rested a hip against the counter. "You look very fine in your new clothes."

**“Thank you.”**

**Susan’s dress was old, the material faded and thin, and it was too small for her, tight across the bodice and short in the sleeves. At first glance, she appeared to match Everard’s description of her as plain, and her clothes were certainly ugly. One had only to look at Susan’s face, though, to realize how wrong the description was. Her chin was firm, her mouth full and red, and she had just enough natural smudging around her dark gray eyes to emphasize her perfect complexion. She was beautiful.**

**“I’m sorry we couldn’t talk more at dinner,” Jo Erin said.**

**Susan wiped her hands on her skirt and said nothing.**

**“Is he always like that?” Jo Erin asked. “Everard?”**

**“He behaved himself tonight,” Susan said, “because you were here.”**

**“What are you going to do? When Patrick and Donald leave, I mean?”**

**“What can I do?”**

**Jo Erin crossed the room and stood before to Susan. “You can’t stay here alone with him.”**

**“I can’t leave Da.”**

**“I think,” Jo Erin said, “your Da may not need you much longer.”**

**Susan looked down and licked her lips. “I know that. But I can’t leave him as long as he does. Besides,” she glanced back up, “where would I go?”**

**The sweep of her lashes as she looked up weakened Jo Erin. Without conscious thought, she raised her hand and cupped Susan’s cheek. She watched her hand move and was appalled at her own action, but she seemed to have no control. She expected Susan to push her away, to act disgusted, or at least surprised, but she didn’t. Instead, she leaned her face into Jo Erin’s palm, as if it were a hug, released a sigh, and closed her eyes.**

**Jo Erin’s gut clenched. “Susan,” she whispered.**

**Susan looked up, ready to listen, but Jo Erin didn’t know what to say. She wanted to offer Susan love, protection, a home, but how could she? They were both women. They could have no future together, at least not yet. Jo Erin was scheduled to leave on her first Pinkerton job the next day. She had no idea how long it would last, but it would be months, probably, and she couldn’t return until the job was done. That was part of the agreement Pinkerton insisted upon.**

The job was too important to give up. It was her chance—maybe her only chance—to create a future for herself so that maybe, someday, she would be able to offer love and protection to a woman. To Susan. If she backed out of her contract now, she would have nothing to offer. Less than nothing, in fact, since she would have to pay back the advance that had purchased the fancy suit, the haircut, the spats.

Besides, she didn't want to back out.

It was too difficult to explain, too difficult to think about even, with Susan looking up at her with those smoky eyes, waiting for her next words. Instead, Jo Erin leaned down and pressed a kiss on Susan's lips.

That was when Everard walked in.

If it had been anyone else, they could have explained it away, convinced him he hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen, that it was just a friendly woman's kiss or that Jo Erin was just checking for a cinder in Susan's eye.

But it was Everard, and there was no mistaking the gleam in his eye when he realized he had found a new way to hurt Susan.

“So that's it.” Everard nearly danced with delight. “Now I know why you dress so ugly. You don't want to catch a fellow at all.”

They stared at him in horror, and their reaction fed his glee.

“You're a God damn pussy licker,” Everard crowed. “You're looking for a tom!”

Jo Erin was across the room in an instant and tackled Everard onto the floor. Even at seventeen, Everard was stronger than Jo Erin, but Jo Erin had just received special training from the Pinkerton Agency. They wrestled for only a moment. It appeared at first that Jo

Erin would lose. She was on the ground, Everard above her with his fist at her throat. But she recalled her training and used her legs to wrap around him and flip him over. She was above him then, her hands at his neck, when there was a loud snap. Everard slumped and was silent.

Whether she meant to kill him, Jo Erin still didn't know, but she had never regretted it.

At least, she hadn't regretted it until she learned that Susan was wanted for killing Elias Noonan.

Had it been too easy?



Jo Erin recalled once when she was perhaps five or six years old, crouching in the dirt watching a hill of busy ants. One of the ants left the group and crawled toward Jo Erin's foot. With a bit of fear mixed with deliberate curiosity, she pressed her thumb hard upon the ant. She lifted her thumb and saw that the ant was stuck to it, dead. Her bravery and power surprised her. Another ant ventured near, and she did it again, with the same result. It was easier the second time. In amazement, almost as if she were dreaming, Jo Erin spent the next several minutes killing ants one by one with her thumb, until she grew bored with the game and found something else to do. Sometime later she realized it was unfair of her to kill the ants simply because she had the power to do so. She never forgot, though, how much easier it was to kill them, after the first one.

Guilt haunted Jo Erin. Did Susan find it easy to kill Noonan because killing Everard had been so simple? Even though Susan didn't do the actual killing, she'd helped Jo Erin dispose of Everard's body. They had decided together that hiding Everard's death was the right thing to do, that to do otherwise would only hurt Da and possibly ruin Jo Erin's chance to work for Pinkerton.

It was a simple matter to sew stones into Everard's clothes and drop him off the pier. Bodies washed up on nearby shores frequently, but by the time they did, they were unrecognizable. Together they concocted a story to explain Everard's disappearance. The next day, Susan told Da and her brothers that Everard had headed out West on his own that night, intending to beat Patrick to his fortune. Jo Erin left for her first Pinkerton assignment. No one ever suspected a thing.

Perhaps no one had wanted to.

LOTTIE KEPT HER eye out for a good branch to use as a walking stick. She'd tried a few already, but the sturdy ones were too big around for her little hand to grasp comfortably for very long. The sticks that fit her hand snapped too easily when she put any weight on them.

She was pretty sure she was more than halfway to Needles Eye, but she was not in as positive a mood as she was when she started the journey. Her ribs had started hurting again and they throbbed with every step. Her head soon pounded in rhythm with her steps as well, and she grew weaker by the minute from hunger.

"A nice walking stick, Jesus, would be just the thing right now," she said aloud.

"Hey!"

Lottie dove for the side of the road and ducked behind a tree.

She shouldn't have spoken aloud. She'd forgotten there was a war going on. Her journey had been silent so far, except for birds singing in the trees. She'd never been in a war, but she had the impression they were supposed to be noisier and busier than this one was. The voice from the trees reminded her there were armed men out there.

"Help me."

It was a man's voice, but it didn't sound dangerous. She knew men better than most, despite her mistake with that man at the train station. This man sounded weak and desperate.

"Please, ma'am."

It was coming from the other side of the road. Lottie crossed over and peered in the direction the voice had come from.

"I'm right here."

A movement in the low shrubbery caught her eye. A thick man with greasy hair and several days' worth of black whiskers sat on the ground, his back leaning against a tree. His right leg was bloody, and he cradled a rifle in his lap. He was looking directly at Lottie. She half expected him to raise the rifle and shoot her, but he didn't.

"I can't walk," he said. "Son of a bitch said he'd send back help, but he didn't."

Lottie blinked.

"Oh, pardon my language, ma'am." He grimaced. "Heard you mention Jesus. Guess the Lord sent you. An angel."

Lottie smiled and stepped forward. "Yes, I'm a strong believer in the Lord," she said. "Let me help you stand."

He appeared doubtful. "You're not big enough. Maybe you should just go get help."

"You'd be surprised how strong I can be," she said, offering her shoulder, "when Jesus is helping me."

"All right." He grabbed the barrel of the rifle with one hand, the stock propped against the ground, and reached for Lottie with the other. She lowered her shoulder to let him drape an arm over it and stood straight. With Lottie on one side of him, his rifle crutch on the other, and the tree supporting his back, he was able to raise himself to stand on his good leg. His face was gray, and he leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes.

"Let me hold this for you," Lottie said. She slipped the rifle from his slack hand.

**“Hey.” His eyes flew open and he grabbed for the rifle, but she had already stepped out of his reach. “I need that to walk, ma’am.”**

**“Me too,” Lottie said. She turned and walked toward the road.**

**“Bring it back here!”**

**She heard him try to take a step, groan, and fall heavily to the ground, but she did not turn around.**

**“You God damned bitch!”**

**Lottie reached the road. She pressed the butt of the rifle into the road. The barrel fit into her fist perfectly.**

**Yes, she was a great believer in the Lord. She had asked Jesus for a walking stick, and he instantly provided her with one, and a weapon as well. She was developing a powerful respect for religion. Perhaps, after she turned Susan Bantry in to the law and collected her ten thousand dollars, she might even go to church.**

**SUSAN DIDN'T KNOW she was counting aloud until she stopped.**

**“Keep counting,” Jo Erin said.**

**“Why?”**

**“Just do it.”**

**“I’ve lost count.”**

**“Fifty-one.”**

**More than half way from the second level to the first, but barely. They had climbed from the third level to the second in silence, each lost in her own thoughts.**

**“Fifty-two,” Susan counted. “Fifty-three. Fifty-four.”**

**Each rung seemed farther away than the one before. The pain from her broken finger now radiated through the rest of her hand, and her arms trembled with fatigue. She pushed up with her legs and used her hands only to secure herself to the ladder rather than pulling, trying to give her weary arms a rest.**

**“Fifty-five. Fifty-six.” Still more than forty rungs to the next level, and then a hundred more before they reached the top. She didn’t know if she could do it. Listening to the damning silence from the woman below her, she wasn’t sure she even wanted to.**

**Jo Erin had hardly spoken since Susan told her why she’d killed Noonan. She shouldn’t have expected Jo Erin to understand. To Jo Erin—to most people—Noonan’s plan must sound like nothing more than a ruthless business deal. Few people understood the devastation that would be wrought upon the country if he’d been allowed to go through with it, but Susan was one of those people. She couldn’t let him empty the Treasury, so she’d stopped him the only way she knew. Her soul might burn in hell for it, but if she were faced with the same decision today, she would do it again.**

**It was hard, though, to have Jo Erin think her a cold-blooded killer.**

**“Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine. Seventy.”**

**It was a hundred feet from the fourth level to the third, and a hundred from the third to the second. Add seventy to that, and they were two hundred and seventy feet above the roof the cage. How long would it take to drop two hundred and seventy feet? It seemed to take them hours to climb up that far, but she suspected the drop down would take only seconds. Would she feel pain upon landing? Any pain would be nearly instantaneous, but those few seconds dropping might feel like forever.**

**Jo Erin knew her better than anyone, even though they’d barely seen each other in over eight years. They hadn’t been particularly close friends, even then. Susan didn’t let people get close, generally. But she and Jo Erin had always had that special connection, which was made stronger, like it or not, by Everard.**

**They never did talk about the brief kiss they’d shared before Everard interrupted them. They’d been busy enough disposing of the body that night and planning their cover-up story. The next day, Jo Erin was gone. By the time she returned from her Pinkerton assignment, Da had died and Susan had already moved into Elias’s city lodgings. She never forgot the kiss, though, and she knew Jo Erin didn’t either. It wasn’t something that could be forgotten. Jo Erin, a woman, had kissed Susan like a man, and Susan had let her.**

**“Eighty-three,” Jo Erin said.**

**Susan had stopped counting again. “Eighty-four,” she said. She couldn’t let herself fall, she realized. She would be bound to hit Jo Erin on the way down, knocking her off the ladder as well. It hurt that Jo Erin doubted her reason for killing Elias, but knocking her off the ladder was not a fair way to ease her suffering. “Eight-five.” She raised her right leg to feel for the next rung and pushed up with her left.**

**“Eighty-s—”**

The heel on Susan's left shoe snapped. Her foot slid off into nothingness. The other foot had not yet found the next rung. Both legs dropped and she screamed. Her sore fingers slipped, their grip too weak to hold her to the ladder.

**"Sukey!"**

She managed to sling one arm around the outer rail. She clung to the side, dangling by one arm, and kicked out to find a rail. The steel cable that held the cage brushed against her back.

**"Jo Erin!"**

**"I'm here. I've got you."**

There was no light. Jo Erin had moved so quickly, her candle blew out, but she was there. Susan felt an arm wrap around her waist and guide her back to the ladder.

**"You won't fall." Jo Erin's words were confident, but her voice shook. "I've got you."**

Susan found the rungs again. She set her feet on one and grabbed another with both hands. Jo Erin stood one step below, her arms braced on both sides of Susan, her front pressed against Susan's back. She could feel Jo Erin's heartbeat as well as her own, the thrum rapid and loud. It was a comfort to feel Jo Erin behind her, though it was a false assurance. If Susan leaned backward, they would both fall off.

She leaned her forehead into the rung before her and sobbed. **"I don't want to die."**

**"You're not going to die." Jo Erin pressed herself more firmly against Susan. "I'm not going to lose you now."**

Susan raised her head. The blackness was absolute. She could feel mucus dripping from her nose, but she didn't dare move a hand to wipe it. She was afraid to move at all. But through her terror she felt a wave of relief at Jo Erin's words. It seemed Jo Erin didn't thoroughly despise her after all.

**"Only fourteen steps to the next level," Jo Erin said. "Are you ready?"**

Susan shook her head, though Jo Erin couldn't see it. **"I can't move."**

**"You can. You have to. It's only fourteen more steps."**

Susan gave another sob. **"My shoe. It broke. My foot will slip."**

**"No, it won't. You can climb in bare feet if you need to. Fourteen steps."**

Susan wiggled her left toes. The shoe still fit snugly. She rubbed the bottom of the shoe against the rung. Jo Erin was right. She didn't need the heel to climb. She was a fool to have relied on the heels to secure her feet to the rung in the first place, and she would not make that mistake again.

She forced herself to calm down. She had no choice. They couldn't remain on the ladder. Finally, her heartbeat slowed, and she no longer heard the blood roaring in her ears. "I'm all right," she said. "I can climb."

"Good girl." Jo Erin lowered herself down the ladder.

Susan's back felt cool where Jo Erin had pressed against her. Fourteen steps. She could do it. More slowly than ever, Susan stepped from one rung to the next. She tested each foot to make certain it was secure before lifting the other, and waited until both feet were stable before releasing a hand to reach for the next rung.

"Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight. Eighty-nine."

Suddenly the blood roared loud in her ears again, and she wondered if she was going to faint. Then she realized the noise was not in her head.

Jo Erin heard it too.

"Climb, Susan! Climb!"

She couldn't see it, but she could feel the wisp of air caused by the steel cable whipping up behind her.

All thoughts of broken heels and tired arms and falling down the shaft left her. She scrambled up the ladder at a pace that had been unthinkable on any of the two hundred and ninety steps below her. She had to climb quickly. Jo Erin was behind her. How horrible would it be if Susan escaped the hurtling cage only to have Jo Erin caught by it?

"Stop!" Jo Erin shouted. "You're there. Jump!"

She couldn't see a thing, but she trusted Jo Erin. The cage was upon them. There was no time to lose. She flung herself sideways into the blackness and landed, hard, on the rocky surface of Level One. Seconds later, Jo Erin landed on top of her.

A blast of air followed, as the cage barreled past them.

Jo Erin rolled off her. Susan felt fingers touch her face, her arms, her bodice. "Susan. Are you all right?"

Susan tested her limbs. She ached all over, but she didn't think any of her hurts were new. She started to laugh.

**“Susan?”**

**The hands left her. She heard a rustle and a scratch and there was light. Jo Erin held the match close to Susan’s face. The shadowed frown on Jo Erin’s face made Susan laugh even harder.**

**“Susan, are you all right?”**

**“Oh, I’m marvelously fine, Jo Erin.” She sat up. “Either the Lord or the devil is preserving us for something. I begin to think we can’t be killed.”**

**From the look on Jo Erin’s face, she was not so certain, but she didn’t bother to argue. She lit the candle on her cap, rose to her feet, and moved toward the supplies. A rat scurried away as she approached.**

**Susan rose on legs that still trembled and joined Jo Erin at the water barrel.  
“Remember the rat?”**

**Jo Erin handed her the ladle. “I remember.”**

**“Everard was mad.” Susan drank and handed the ladle back.**

**“I know.”**

**“Was that Dave? In the cage?”**

**“I don’t see how it could have been. You can’t run the cage from inside.” She looked up, as if she could see through the rock that separated them from the surface. “There must be someone up there.”**

**“Maybe it’s someone who will help us. We can pull the cord, and they’ll send the cage down for us.”**

**“Maybe.” Jo Erin gazed at Susan, the shadows cast by the candle giving her a haunted look. “Or maybe it’s the same person who sent the cage down in the first place, with you and Davisson in it.”**

**In a move that would have been flirtatious another time, Susan reached into Jo Erin’s pocket and drew out a candle. She held the wick to the flame above Jo Erin’s head and brought it down before her. With the shadows removed, Jo Erin’s expression was instantly less grim.**

**“Then we can’t climb any further,” Susan said. “He could send the cage down again at any time and catch us. Besides...” Susan’s voice shook just a bit. “I don’t think I can do it.”**

Jo Erin ran the back of her fingers along Susan's cheek and rubbed the pad of her thumb gently underneath each eye and across her lower lip. Susan closed her eyes and let Jo Erin caress her face. She heard a sigh and opened her eyes again. Jo Erin was looking around the mine, a determined look on her face.

"This is the oldest part of the mine," Jo Erin said. "They used to mine here before they put the cage in. The men climbed up and down the ladder, but they brought the ore out through a chute."

Susan followed Jo Erin's gaze to the blackness at the back of the first level. It was frightening, but not as bad as facing the shaft. "Let's look for it." Holding hands, they walked deeper into the mine, their candles forming a moving pool of light.

They found the chute within minutes. The entrance was blocked by a wooden gate, but it was easy to remove. It was designed to prevent accidental falls, not to lock people in.

Jo Erin took Susan's candle and held it out as far as she could into the chute. It was about three feet high, four feet wide, and sloped at a forty-five degree angle, but it was impossible to see how far it went or where it led. Walking down it was out of the question. It was made for ore, not people.

Jo Erin pulled back and looked a question at Susan. Susan answered by sitting down on the edge of the chute. She draped her feet over the top and raised her hand to Jo Erin. "We'll go together."

Jo Erin dropped beside her.

With Susan's left arm twined in Jo Erin's right, they braced themselves against the sides of the chute with their feet and started a slow sliding crawl down the chute.

It was not a long descent after all, and the end took them by surprise. A drop of three feet toppled them sprawling on the rocky ground below, snuffing the candles once more.

The familiar rustle and scratch was followed by a lit match again. Jo Erin lit the candle in her cap and reached for the other.

She stopped. "What's wrong?"

Susan sat with her hand curled to her chest, and tears dripped from her eyes. She had landed on her broken finger and it screamed in pain, but that was not the only cause of her tears. She wept because they were still not out of the mine. They had simply landed in another section.

How long had she been trapped in this nightmare? Fifteen hours? Eighteen? Twenty-four? It was too long. She was exhausted, she was hungry, she was scared, and she was in



pain. It seemed as if she had been trapped in the mine for years. She felt her spirit breaking.

Jo Erin sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her. Susan dropped her head on Jo Erin's shoulder. A moment later she felt herself pulled into Jo Erin's lap, just like on that moonlight night when Jo Erin had showed up drunk at her window. Susan let herself relax into Jo Erin's embrace, and she wept. Moments later, her tears turned into watery chuckles.

"What's funny?" Jo Erin whispered.

"Me, in your lap," Susan said, "with scarcely anything on. It seems to be a habit with us."

Jo Erin gave a breathy laugh and stroked her hands along Susan's back and thigh. "It's a wonderful habit."

Susan raised her hand to Jo Erin's face, touched her chin, and crawled her fingers to the back of her neck. She drew Jo Erin's face to hers until their lips met. The kiss at first was tender, but as the beat of Susan's heart increased and Jo Erin's breathing sped up, it deepened and grew hard. Their tongues stroked, and Jo Erin's hands roamed farther. Susan felt fingers stroke across the top her corset and along the bottom, close to her suddenly throbbing nerves. She groaned, settled her bottom more securely in the well of Jo Erin's lap, and let her legs fall apart. Why not? They might never get out of the mine alive. She wanted Jo Erin's love at least once before she died.

Jo Erin accepted the invitation immediately. She slid her hand into the slit of Susan's drawers. Susan felt fingers thread briefly through her private hair, felt them stroke her hot flesh, coaxing wetness. Long fingers slipped inside her.

Susan groaned again. She wrenched her mouth from Jo Erin's so she could gasp for air and spread her legs wider as her insides clenched Jo Erin's fingers. The pain in her own hand was forgotten. The only throbbing Susan felt was in her groin. It radiated through her entire body, as Jo Erin pushed and pulled inside her.

Suddenly Susan was clutched from the inside. Every nerve in her body barreled to her center as she throbbed against Jo Erin's fingers again and again. Her body was nothing except where Jo Erin's fingers stroked. There, it was everything.

When it was over, Susan collapsed, a rag doll draped across Jo Erin's lap. She looked up at Jo Erin's face, still illuminated by the candle on her cap, and was shocked to see tears snaking down the grime on Jo Erin's cheeks.

Susan reached up and wiped Jo Erin's tears with her fingers. "Why are you crying?"

**“I’m not.” She sniffed and smiled at the tear-clogged sound of her own voice. “I mean, I didn’t know I was. I’m happy.”**

**Susan had just veered from laughter to tears to sexual joy within a few minutes, so she felt in no position to question the volatility of Jo Erin’s feelings. She merely pointed out, “We’re still trapped in this godforsaken mine.”**

**“Yes.” Jo Erin sniffed again, wiped her nose with her sleeve, and looked around as if surprised. “I suppose we should try to get out.”**

**Susan laughed. She put her hands on Jo Erin’s shoulders and pushed herself to her feet.**

**Jo Erin rose as well. She finally lit the second candle and handed it to Susan. “We didn’t drop back to the second level,” she said. “It wasn’t far enough. The rest of the chute has to be close.” Again they held hands and walked.**

**Susan’s steps dragged. Whatever energy she’d had left was used up in their love-making. She leaned heavily against Jo Erin and let her head droop. She didn’t watch where they walked and even closed her eyes now and then. She was so used to the blackness of the mine, it hardly mattered whether her eyes were open or closed.**

**She didn’t know she was falling asleep until she felt Jo Erin shake her. “Stay awake, Susan. Just a little bit more.”**

**Susan nodded and opened her eyes. She no longer held the candle. She wondered when she had dropped it. Suddenly, she raised her head. “Do you smell that?”**

**“What?”**

**“The air. I smell fresh air.”**

**Jo Erin raised her head and breathed deeply. She frowned and breathed deeply again. “It’s close. Come on.”**

**A few more steps, and they saw light shining from below. It was another chute, similar to the one before, but this one had light streaming up from the bottom. Susan dropped to the edge and reached for Jo Erin.**

**“Let me go first,” Jo Erin said.**

**“No, let’s go together, like last time.”**

**“There’s still a mining war going on,” Jo Erin said. “We don’t know what’s out there.”**

**“Then I should go first. I’m no part of the war. I’ll be safer than you.”**

**“Not dressed like that, you won’t.”**

**“I’m getting out,” Susan said firmly. “Come with me, or I’m going alone.” Jo Erin dropped down and joined her.**

**Moments later they surfaced, blinking and squinting, into bright, midday sunshine. The clouds had blown away and the sky was fresh and blue. There was no sign of a mining war and no sound at all but the chirping of birds. The air was hot and still.**

**Summer had finally come to the north Idaho mountains.**

**IN THE CLEAR daylight, Jo Erin could see on Susan’s pale face what the darkness of the mine had hidden. Exhausted gray circles ringed her eyes, her nose was swollen and scraped, and her cheeks were marked with bruises.**

**“Do you know where we are?” Susan asked.**

**Jo Erin tried to speak as if her heart hadn’t just turned over in her chest. “This is where we got the dynamite to blow up the mill. You followed us here.”**

**Susan scanned the hillside. “You’re right. Aimee’s is that way. Let’s go.”**

**“Wait. Slow down, love. We don’t want to run into trouble. You’re barely dressed.”**

**Susan glanced down at herself and bit her lip. “Maybe I should have kept the jacket.”**

**Jo Erin didn’t think the jacket would have made much difference. Not only were Susan’s thin drawers bloody and tattered, but they only reached to the bottom of her knees. Below them, her legs were bare. Any man who saw her in them wouldn’t think above her hips. They would be as aware as Jo Erin was that there was a slit in the bottom of those drawers, and that Susan was bare as a baby underneath.**

**Being scared was nothing new to Jo Erin. She’d been scared pretty much continuously since she received her first Pinkerton assignment. After all, Pinkerton agents were always in danger. They were hated wherever they went and constantly faced danger if they were exposed, and Jo Erin lived with the double fear of being exposed as a woman. She’d been scared for most of the last eight years, but that sort of fear had an edge of excitement to it. It was part of the challenge of the job, part of the fun.**

**That sort of fear was nothing compared to the fear she felt now. She had to get Susan off this mountain.**

A jacket would provide scant protection, but it was better than nothing. Jo Erin removed hers, held it out, and Susan slipped her arms into the sleeves. “We have to stay in the trees, and be quiet. Watch for miners and soldiers. If we’re caught, they’re likely to shoot me and do worse to you.”

But the hills were strangely quiet, and they saw no one as they made their slow way to Aimee’s shack. Susan was eager and wanted to hurry, but she was also weak from fatigue and hunger, and her steps were further slowed by the broken shoe. Jo Erin was tempted to steal into town and find some food for them, but she didn’t want to leave Susan alone on the mountain. They could eat later.

When they finally reached Aimee’s shack, there were no guards in sight. Still, Jo Erin held Susan back and drew her gun before rapping on the door.

It was opened by the doctor, who again held his shotgun ready.

“What do you want?”

Susan stepped forward. “Doctor, it’s me.”

“About time,” the doctor said, seemingly untroubled by Susan’s condition or state of dress. He backed into the room, set the shotgun on the table, and immediately began putting his medical tools into his bag.

Susan came into the shack and moved toward the bed. “Is she all right?”

“There’s nothing more I can do. It’s up to you now.”

“No.” Jo Erin blocked the door. “You can’t leave. We’re not staying.”

“Get out of my way, boy. I have to go. There’s a war on out there, you know. I’ve spent too much time here already. I only stayed as long as I did because, well, she had a hard time.”

“I know there’s a war on. That’s why we’re leaving.”

The doctor gave Jo Erin a contemptuous look. “You going to force me to stay, boy? Shoot me if I don’t? Get out of my way.”

They were the same height. The doctor stood before Jo Erin and glared at her, their noses nearly touching. Jo Erin ground her teeth. The man was right. She couldn’t keep him there against his will. She stepped aside, and the doctor left.

She turned and watched Susan sit on the bed beside Aimee, who was sound asleep. She lifted a corner of the blanket that swaddled Aimee’s infant and smiled at Jo Erin. “It’s a boy.” She leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes. She was worn out.

Jo Erin picked up the shotgun the doctor had left. “Can you fire this thing, Susan?”

Susan opened her eyes, glanced at the shotgun, and gave Jo Erin a wary look. “Why?”

“I need to go to the hotel and get my things,” Jo Erin said. “And I need to get us some food.”

“Can’t we get food at Lou’s? Do you really need your things?”

“We can’t be seen at Lou’s. And I need my bag. There’s information about you in it. If someone finds it...”

A conscious look came to Susan’s eyes, as if she’d just recalled that she was wanted by the law. She nodded. “I can use a shotgun.”

“Good. Don’t leave, and don’t let anyone in. Come lock the door behind me. When I get back, I’ll whistle like this.” She demonstrated.

Susan rose and joined her at the door. Jo Erin glanced at Aimee to make sure she was still asleep. She wrapped her arms around Susan and kissed the top of her head.

“Get dressed while I’m gone. We need to get out of this town.”

She waited until she heard Susan turn the lock on the closed door, then turned and ran toward the hotel. She stuck to the trees and avoided the town as much as possible. She was tempted to go to the mine to see if she could catch Davisson’s accomplice, but she forced herself to put the thought from her mind. That was the thinking of a Pinkerton agent, and Jo Erin was through with being a Pinkerton.

She had the key to her hotel room in her pocket, but she didn’t dare go in via the front door. The back of the hotel butted up against the side of the mountain. There was no access to the lower floors from the back, but there was a back door near the top of the hotel that was never locked. Jo Erin slipped from the trees, ran to the door, and turned the latch. It didn’t budge.

Damn. It was the war. The whole town was on edge. The hotel proprietors—and any remaining guests no doubt—didn’t want armed miners sneaking away through the hotel. Well, Jo Erin was an armed miner, but she was also a guest. She was entitled to access her own room.

She looked up. The hotel was four stories high from the front, but only the top two stories were accessible from the back. More than one tree loomed over the rear of the hotel, with branches that looked strong enough to hold a slender miner.

**She accumulated a few new scrapes, but she made her way up a thick fir and onto a branch that stretched over the hotel. She dropped onto the roof. The door there was not locked.**

**The skittish guests must have all been staying in their rooms, for Jo Erin made her way down to her floor without seeing anyone. Once there, she slipped into her room and locked the door behind her. She leaned against the door and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.**

**It was time to say good bye to Joe Burke.**

## **Chapter Eleven**

**SUSAN WAS RUNNING out of clothes. With her travel skirt at the bottom of the mine and her evening gown no longer fit for anything but the hurdy gurdy, her only remaining outfit was the white dress she had worn on the Fourth of July. Before she donned it, however, she must wash.**

**There was a pitcher of water in the room, but it would not be enough. Jo Erin said not to leave, but she needed water. After a wary glance at Aimee and the little bundle beside her, Susan picked up the bucket and the shotgun and ventured out to the pump. The air was eerily quiet, as if even the birds knew there was a war going on, but where was the gunfire? Where were the men? Where was the war?**

**She filled the bucket, returned to the shack, and locked the door. She looked at herself in the small mirror and quickly turned away. She had never looked so horrid in her life, not even after the night she and Jo Erin had disposed of Everard's body.**

**Her nose was swollen and scraped, her eyes were bruised, and there was dirt and blood everywhere. She gingerly scrubbed her face and her hands. Her nose was still tender, and her finger was definitely broken. It was purple, swollen, and slightly crooked, but she was relieved to see no fresh blood oozing up from the cuts on her hands. At least she wouldn't stain the white dress.**

**She eased the ruined shoes from her feet. She was surprised to see blisters that had burst and bled. She hadn't even felt them. She removed her torn drawers and saw scrapes she didn't know she had. Spot cleaning was pointless. She finally stripped naked and washed all over.**

After drying herself off, she dressed in the finest of her underclothes, as if the softness of the fabric could ease her soreness. Wary of bloodstains, she carefully pulled a pair of soft kid gloves over her sore hands before buttoning the dress. She donned her only remaining footwear, her heavy leather boots. They were full leather halfway to her knees, far too warm for summer wear, and they looked odd with the white summer dress, but she had nothing else.

Finally, she prepared to tackle her hair. Before she could do so, however, she heard a small sound from the bed.

“Aimee?”

It was not Aimee, however, but the baby. Susan gathered the swaddled infant in her arms, pulled a corner of the blanket aside, and smiled at the round, red, wrinkled face that grimaced back at her.

“Hello, little one,” she said. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

The infant didn’t seem to share her good will. It opened its tiny mouth and gave a surprisingly forceful wail.

“Hush. You’ll wake Mama.”

That may have been what he intended because he wailed even louder at her words, and Aimee stirred. “Suze?” she said weakly. “Give him to me.”

Susan sat on the bed beside Aimee and placed the crying baby gently onto her chest.

“Do you think he’s hungry?” Aimee asked.

“I don’t know. Have you fed him yet?”

“No.” She looked up at Susan, distressed. “I don’t know what to do. Do you?”

“Only in a general sense,” Susan said. “But you’d better give it a try.”

It took a bit of work, but eventually the baby helped by figuring it out himself. Aimee closed her eyes and lay back while the baby suckled.

Susan watched a moment, and felt her own stomach rumble. She was starving. Where was Jo Erin?

A rattle at the door erased all thoughts of food. She’d not heard Jo Erin’s whistle. She snatched up the shotgun and aimed it at the flimsy door.

“Aimee? Let me in. It’s Zeke.”

Aimee's eyes flew open. "Zeke! Oh, let him in."

Jo Erin had said not to let anyone in, but she couldn't have meant Zeke. Susan unlocked the door.

Zeke pushed in and looked anxiously past her to Aimee. He crossed the room in three long strides and knelt beside her. "Aimee. Are you all right?"

"Oh, Zeke, I'm so glad you finally came." Weak tears trickled from Aimee's eyes. "Where have you been?"

"I just found out, darlin'. I would have been here for you." He kissed her and wiped her tears with his thumb. He watched the baby nuzzling at her breast and smiled. "A boy?"

Aimee nodded.

"You give him a name yet?"

"No. I waited for you."

He kissed her again.

Susan was troubled. "Where have you been all this time, Zeke?"

He looked at Susan as if noticing her for the first time. If he was surprised to see her, he didn't show it. "I was working, doll."

"The mine is shut down," she said. "Where were you working?"

He smiled. "There's a war on. Didn't you hear?"

"I heard about it, but it's hard to believe. It seems awfully quiet out there. Where is the fighting?"

"In the woods," Zeke said vaguely. "Down near Wallace, I..."

He shrugged and turned back to Aimee.

Something wasn't right. For someone who had been fighting a war all night, Zeke seemed surprisingly clean and well-rested, and he didn't know anything more about the fighting than she did.

"Where have you been, Zeke?" she asked again.

"I told you," he said without turning around. "There's a war on."



Susan nodded. "Which side are you on?"

He looked over his shoulder at that, and a hard look came to his eyes. Susan raised the shotgun and aimed it at him. "Who are you working for?"

He rose, and his smile was gone. "That's a shotgun, doll," he said. "If you shoot me, you'll hit Aimee and the baby too."

Susan kept her aim steady. What he said was true. She couldn't shoot him, but she couldn't put the gun down either.

He took a step toward her, hand still outstretched. "Give me the gun." She stepped back, but he followed. "Give me the gun, doll. You won't shoot."

"But I will." A tall woman in a green dress stood in the doorway. A large Colt in her right hand was aimed squarely at Zeke's chest.

"I can't miss with this gun," the woman said. "Not at this range. Step away from the bed."

"What the hell?" Zeke didn't move.

The woman cocked the gun with her thumb. "I will shoot you. Raise your hands and move away from the bed."

Zeke narrowed his eyes but raised his hands and took a step toward Susan.

"Not that way," the woman said sharply. "Step back. Lean your back against that wall."

Zeke took a backwards step. Suddenly he stopped, laughed, and lowered his hands. "Hell. You make a fine woman, Joe Burke. You nearly had me fooled."

"Put your hands back up," Jo Erin said sharply. "And step back."

"Clever disguise," Zeke said, but he raised his hands again and took another step back. "You don't want to shoot me, Burke. I'm not your enemy. I'm a Pinkerton man, same as you."

"If you know I'm a Pinkerton, then you know I won't miss." Jo Erin advanced into the room. She didn't take her eyes off Zeke, but she said to Susan, "I thought I told you not to let anyone in."

"I didn't think you meant Zeke," Susan said. She could hardly take her eyes off Jo Erin. The transformation from miner to fashionable woman was complete and perfect. She was tall and slender in a green suit trimmed with matching piping and a ruffled flounce at

the bottom of the skirt. She had golden hair with a hat trimmed in feathers and silk roses. A pleated silk purse draped from her wrist.

It didn't hinder her steady aim of the Colt.

"Turn around," Jo Erin said. "Put your hands up against the wall."

Zeke did as directed, but continued to talk. "Aren't you listening to me, Burke? We're on the same side, you and me. I'm with Pinkerton, I tell you."

"Pinkerton men don't have sides," Jo Erin said. "Susan, check his pockets. Don't get between me and him. Go around me."

Susan set the shotgun on the table and approached Zeke. She patted the sides of his coat, slipped a hand into one pocket, and lifted out a small revolver.

"Careful with that, doll," Zeke said. "It's got a sensitive trigger."

Susan stepped back and aimed the gun at Zeke.

"Okay," Jo Erin said. "Now turn around and remove your boots. Slowly."

Zeke turned and used his left foot to pry the boot off his right. "You're well trained, Burke. Who trained you? Robert or John? Couldn't have been Allan. You're too young."

"Are you Davisson's partner?"

"No." Zeke shook his head, using his stockinged foot to remove the other boot. "Davisson thinks I'm his partner. It's my job to make him think so."

"You let him take Susan into the mine. You ran the cage for him. He could have killed her down there."

"I don't think he would have. She was just his bait. You're the one he wanted." Zeke leaned his shoulder against the wall and crossed his arms across his chest, but at a gesture from Jo Erin, he raised his arms again and sighed. "I was hired to get information against Davisson. It would have blown my cover to refuse."

"You'd have let her die just to get a case against Davisson?"

A frown twitched Zeke's face. "I don't work for Susan. Or you. I work for Pinkerton, and I was hired to get evidence against Davisson. That's what I've done."

"You're crazy."

**“No, I’m a Pinkerton man. You know what that means as well as I do, Burke. We get the job done, no matter what.”**

**“What about Mitty?” Jo Erin asked. “He was a Pinkerton man too.”**

**“Mitchell was careless. It was his own fault he died. Anyway, that was the Union’s doing. Davisson wasn’t involved.”**

**“And the mill? You’d have let all those men die?”**

**“It wasn’t my job to stop them. Besides, I was watching you. I knew you’d figure something out.”**

**Jo Erin shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You want Davisson to kill someone, don’t you?”**

**“I just need to get enough evidence to hang him. That’s what I was hired to do.” Zeke sighed as if bored by the conversation. “You can put the gun away, Burke. I’m not the criminal here. There’s nothing you can do to me.”**

**It was Jo Erin’s turn to sigh. She looked as if she wanted to shoot Zeke, but instead she lowered her gun. She glanced at Susan. “Is your bag packed?”**

**Susan was startled. “What about Zeke? And Aimee and the baby?”**

**“Zeke will take care of Aimee,” Jo Erin said. “He’s right, there’s nothing I can do to him. But there’s nothing he can do to us either. Is this your bag?”**

**“Yes. Wait.” Susan had been packed since before leaving to get the doctor the day before, but she’d pulled things out when she was changing. She handed Zeke’s gun to Jo Erin, grabbed the rest of her things, stuffed them in her travel bag, and latched it. “Ready.”**

**Zeke looked up from pulling on his boot. “My gun?”**

**Jo Erin considered a moment and set it on the table. “Say good bye to Needles Eye, Susan. We’re getting out of town.”**

**OH, NO YOU don’t, Lottie thought wearily. She lifted the rifle to her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, she turned the knob, gripped the rifle tighter, and kicked the door open.**

**“Hold it right there, Miss Susan Bantry.”**

**There were four people in the room. Three of them stared at her open mouthed with astonishment. The fourth, barely recognizable as the Aimee she'd known at Jennie Lynn's, lay on the bed with her eyes closed.**

**Susan was the first to speak. "Lottie?"**

**The stupid bitch was dressed like she was going to a party. No party for you, dear Miss Susan. Just a little informal reception at the Wallace jail. No need to dress up at all.**

**The wispy wail of an infant curled into the room. At first Lottie thought it was a ghost wail, and her nipples prickled. Then she realized it came from the bed. She laughed. There were more than four people in the room after all.**

**"That explains a lot," Lottie said. "I wondered why Aimee was so willing to come out to this godforsaken hole."**

**"What happened to you?" Susan asked. "You're hurt."**

**"Well, don't that beat all? A cold-blooded murderess worried about me."**

**The other woman in the room edged closer to Susan, frowned, and put a protective hand on her arm. What was a lady like her doing in this shithole of a town? And why did she give a God damn about Susan?**

**The big bearded man leaned back against the wall, crossed his arms, and grinned.**

**The baby's wails grew louder, and Lottie frowned. Nobody else acted like they even heard it. How could anyone concentrate with that going on?**

**She waved the rifle at Susan. "You're coming with me."**

**"No." The woman in green stepped forward. "I found her first."**

**"Stay back!" Lottie shouted, and the woman froze. "You may have found her, but the Lord kept her here for me. I don't know much about rifles. If you make me nervous, I might just shoot you all by accident." The baby's cries increased in vigor. "Aimee, will you shut up that baby?"**

**"What do you want with Susan?" the man asked.**

**"Same as you, I expect," Lottie said. "I want ten thousand dollars."**

**The man uncrossed his arms, stood straight up, and glared at the woman in green. "You son of a bitch."**

Funny thing to call a woman. Lottie glanced again at the woman in green. She looked kind of familiar. Lottie knew her from somewhere. Almost she could say where from, but the baby wouldn't stop crying. It was louder now. Couldn't anybody else hear it?

"The reward is for alive only," the woman in green said. "If you shoot her, you'll get nothing."

Was that what the wanted poster said? Lottie couldn't remember. She'd ripped the poster in two when she was showing Susan's photo around, but she still had the half with the words on it in her pocket. She couldn't reach for it, though, without dropping her aim on Susan, which she was not fool enough to do. The Lord had brought her here. He'd been guiding her steps the whole way. He wouldn't misguide her now. She tried to think what to do, but the baby wouldn't stop crying.

"Aimee!" Lottie's fingers shook on the cold steel, but she didn't remove her aim from Susan. Her nipples ached worse than they had since Howie died. "Why don't she quiet that baby?"

The man glanced at the bed. "Aimee?"

There was no answer. He took a slow step forward, then lunged at the bed and collapsed to his knees. "Aimee. Aimee!" He grabbed her shoulders and shook. Her head fell back, and the baby rolled from her lifeless arms. "No. No, Aimee!" He put his arms around her, dropped his head to her still breast, and wailed.

The baby's howls continued unabated. Lottie thought she would go mad. "Somebody take care of that God damned baby!"

The grieving man at Aimee's side sobbed on, unaware. Susan started toward the bed, but the woman in green pulled her back.

Lottie's vision began to blur, and finally she looked at the bed. The newborn had rolled from its cloth wrapping and lay naked underneath the dead woman. It was a boy. The man held Aimee up now, clutched to his chest, but when he put her down, he would lay her right on top of the infant. He didn't even notice it was there. None of them did.

The baby wailed as if it knew its life was in danger, and nobody was doing anything about it.

Lottie felt dampness on the front of her dress. She glanced down. Her breasts were leaking milk.

Suddenly it was clear. The Lord had guided Lottie's steps to this little shack in this godforsaken mining town, but it wasn't so she could capture Susan Bantry. To hell with Susan Bantry. The Lord had other plans for Lottie.

Lottie dropped the rifle and rushed to the bed. She reached around the crying man to snatch the infant from underneath Aimee. She cradled it in her arms and crooned, unaware of the tears that fell down her own face.

She didn't notice for some minutes that Susan and the other woman had left the shack. When she did notice, she carried the baby to the door and looked down the canyon. They were gone.

She glanced at the babe in her arms and smiled, her bruised and scarred face beautiful in the glow of the afternoon sun.

## Chapter Twelve

IT WASN'T EASY walking through the forest in women's clothes. Jo Erin's shoes were sturdy enough, and she was glad to see Susan's were too, but their skirts got in the way. They both had bags to weigh them down as well, and they were exhausted. So they walked in the middle of the road.

"Stop a minute," Jo Erin said when they'd put some distance between themselves and the town. "I have some food."

Their bags were soft, too pliable to sit on. Jo Erin suggested they sit on the ground to eat.

"I can't sit on the ground," Susan said. "I'm wearing white."

"You can sit on my lap," Jo Erin said, feeling brave. She wondered if Susan might regret in the light of day what they had done in the dark of the mine.

Susan blushed, but she met Jo Erin's eyes directly and smiled slightly. "I can stand and eat."

It was late afternoon, and they were ravenous. Jo Erin had not eaten since that morning, but it had been more than twenty-four hours since Susan had taken a bite. They stood in the shade at the side of the road, leaned against a tree, and ate the bread and cheese Jo Erin had pilfered from the hotel kitchen. When they were finished, Jo Erin hiked up her skirts and knelt at the creek to make a cup with her hands so they could drink. When they were ready, she lifted her own bag and reached for Susan's.

**“No, don’t,” Susan said. “You have your own bag. It would look odd for one woman to carry both bags. You have to think like a woman now.”**

**“All right, but let me carry the heavier one. I’m stronger than you. I’ve been—”**

**“I know. You’ve been mucking.” Her smile was tired, but flirtatious.**

**It turned out Jo Erin’s bag was heavier anyway, so they each carried their own bags.**

**“I’m sorry for Aimee,” Susan said after a bit. “And Zeke. He was good to me.”**

**“No, he wasn’t,” Jo Erin said. “He let Davisson take you into the mine. He ran the cage. He did nothing to stop it.”**

**“It wasn’t his job,” Susan said. She gave Jo Erin a curious look. “Are all Pinkerton agents so single-minded about their jobs?”**

**“They train us that way,” Jo Erin said. “We’re not supposed to have an opinion about our mission. That would get in the way if we ever had to work for the other side. But we’re not taught to give up our consciences. Zeke is wrong.”**

**“What about you?” Susan asked. “Do you have an opinion about your mission?”**

**Jo Erin looked over, but Susan kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead. She looked pensive. Did she really think Jo Erin would turn her in to Pinkerton? It had never been in Jo Erin’s plans to do that. How could she, when Susan could so easily turn around and name Jo Erin a murderer as well? But after what happened in the mine—no, before that even. Ever since that night in the moonlight, when Jo Erin was drunk and Susan was so beautiful, Jo Erin knew then that she would die before she’d let Susan be taken in by the law.**

**“You’re more important to me than any mission, Susan,” she finally said.**

**Susan looked at her and smiled, but still looked troubled. “What about your job?”**

**“I’m giving it up. I can’t turn you in, and I can’t be a real Pinkerton and not turn you in, so…” Jo Erin shrugged. “Besides, it gets harder to pass for a man as I get older. People will wonder why I don’t have whiskers.”**

**“You are a good looking woman,” Susan said.**

**Jo Erin was embarrassed. “My nose is too large,” she said. “And my face is too broad for a lady’s.”**

**“No. You have a sweet boyish look when you dress like a man, but as a woman, you’re very striking. You have a commanding presence. Like a queen.”**

**Jo Erin laughed, but she was pleased.**

**They walked on in silence. Soon they reached the road near where Jo Erin had shot Billy. She'd meant to send help back for him but had forgotten all about it. He must have made it out all right. It was only a flesh wound, after all.**

**A while later, Susan spoke again. "I never did anything like that before. What we did in the mine, I mean."**

**Jo Erin felt the need to be careful. "You mean, when you were in my lap?"**

**"Yes." She didn't look at Jo Erin. "There was Elias, of course, but I've never...with a woman. Have you?"**

**"Yes, I have," Jo Erin said. She didn't want to say too much, but she needed to know. "Are you...averse to it?"**

**"No, not averse, no." More softly she said, "I always did wonder."**

**Jo Erin's heart sped up. "The night Everard died?"**

**Susan's glance was quick and self-conscious. "Yes."**

**Jo Erin didn't want to disrupt the direction of Susan's thoughts, but she had to know. "Susan, why did you go to Noonan?"**

**Susan's face hardened. "What would you have had me do, Jo Erin?" Her words were clipped. "Would you have had me marry a man like Donald and have six children around my skirts already? Or a man like Everard, perhaps?"**

**"No! No, but if you had waited for me..."**

**Susan stopped in the road, dropped her bag, and turned to face Jo Erin. Her eyes blazed. "When I went to Elias, I was eighteen years old, but I felt thirty. I'd been keeping house for Da and the boys for seven years by then, since I was eleven years old. Eleven, Jo Erin. By the time Da died, I was so tired. I couldn't do it any longer. I couldn't marry a man like my brothers and live that sort of life until I died young like Ma did. I couldn't go be a Pinkerton agent like you. What would you have had me do? Because, Jo Erin..." Her eyes flooded with tears, but the blaze did not go out, "Jo Erin, you weren't there. You weren't there!"**

**Jo Erin dropped her bag and reached for Susan, but Susan pushed her away. Jo Erin let her, at first. She was ashamed. How could she have resented Susan for being happy when she was with Elias? Until she went to Elias, Susan had never been happy, at least not since her ma died. Jo Erin was just jealous that Elias got to be the one who made her happy. Jo Erin selfishly wanted that pleasure all to herself.**



She reached for Susan again, and this time she was not resisted. Susan crumpled and sobbed against her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Sukey,” Jo Erin said, her lips in Susan’s hair. “I’m so sorry. I should have been there. I knew you needed me. I knew it. But I was selfish. I wanted to be a Pinkerton agent. I just hoped you would wait for me. I’ve been selfish all along.”

“I couldn’t wait,” Susan whispered through her tears. “I couldn’t wait.”

“I know, my love. I know.” By then, tears dripped from Jo Erin’s eyes as well. “I’m so, so sorry. I should have been there for you.”

“Elias was there,” Susan said, as her tears subsided. “He was always there. He was born in our neighborhood, you know. He liked to go back there.”

“I didn’t know.”

Susan pulled back and searched her purse for a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “I was fourteen years old when I first met him. It was at a newspaper stand. That’s where I usually saw him. He offered to give me a home. I was so ignorant. I thought he wanted to adopt me.”

Jo Erin bit her lip. It was a good thing that Noonan was already dead, she decided, or she would have to return to New York and kill him herself.

“I refused him anyway,” Susan said. “It never occurred to me that I could leave Da and the boys on their own. Elias didn’t press me. We met every few months, by chance, I thought, though I found out later that wasn’t true. When Elias wanted something, he got it. He was always kind to me, though. When Da died, and you were gone, I thought, why not? I went to him, and he gave me a home.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” Jo Erin said, and she meant it with all her heart.

They picked up their bags and walked in silence for a time. At some point, Jo Erin took Susan’s bag from her, and Susan seemed not to notice.

Finally they stood on a bluff overlooking Wallace. A number of large white tents glowed in the dark at the southern edge of town, and armed soldiers guarded a hastily constructed fence that surrounded them. Jo Erin understood now why they had seen and heard nothing of the war on their journey down the canyon.

The coming of the militia had seemed a joke to the miners. What were they going to do, they’d taunted, arrest the whole Miners’ Union? It seemed, however, that it was no joke after all. The whole Miners’ Union had, indeed, been arrested, or as many of them as could be caught, and they were currently being housed in a jail made of tents.

**“They’ve blocked the bridge into town,” Susan said.**

**Jo Erin looked where Susan pointed and saw a manned barricade. “I wish you weren’t wearing white,” she said. “We could sneak around it in the dark.”**

**“We don’t need to sneak,” Susan said. “Do you really think they won’t let two women get off this mountain? You have to think like a woman, Jo Erin.”**

**Susan was right. The militia wouldn’t recognize Jo Erin as a miner, and it was too dark for the men who might recognize her to see her from their tented prison. They walked straight down the road toward the barricade. The soldiers saw them coming, but Susan’s white dress was as effective as a surrender flag. The soldiers met them, shone their lanterns in their faces, and saw two weary weepy women who only wanted to reach the safety of Wallace. They were allowed to pass with no difficulty.**

**It was not so easy to hire a room. Many rooms were available, but only for men. Most of them advertised “Girl included.” Their first two requests to rent a room were interpreted as offers to be the “girl included” in the room.**

**Finally they found a building on a side street with a modest sign that read “Woman’s Hotel.” They were able to obtain a tiny room on the second floor with a single bed.**

**They left their bags in the room and went out again to find food. A nearby restaurant sold them a bucket of stew and a loaf of bread. They took it back to the room, sat on the bed, and feasted with more haste than manners. Worn out, they undressed, fell back into the crumbs, and slept, scarcely aware that they were wrapped in each other’s arms.**

**SUSAN WOKE AT dawn. A gray light filtered through the window. She lay on her side, and she could feel Jo Erin asleep behind her.**

**She pulled herself away from the warmth of Jo Erin’s body, muffling a groan. She had not slept long, but it was long enough for the aches to settle in. Every inch of her was sore. She rolled onto her back and the pain of it took her breath away. When her breathing had calmed, she cautiously raised herself up to one elbow and looked at her sleeping companion.**

**Jo Erin lay on her back with one arm slung over her head and the other resting on her waist. She wore a man’s nightshirt, but there was no way Jo Erin could be mistaken for a man when she was sleeping, even with her short hair. Her face softened and she looked more than ever like the girl Susan remembered. The top of the nightshirt was open. Where it gaped, Susan could see the curve of a breast.**

Susan didn't know if she was a woman who, like Jo Erin, was born to love other women. She only knew she loved Jo Erin. The sight of Jo Erin lying so peacefully asleep moved her with feelings of love, but the sight of Jo Erin's breast stirred something else in her.

How did Jo Erin make love to a woman? How did a woman make love to Jo Erin?

Jo Erin had touched Susan in the mine, but that had been Susan's doing, really. She'd felt the distance between them grow after she explained why she'd killed Elias, and she'd been desperate to make it go away. When Jo Erin stroked Susan's body while she lay in her lap, half dressed, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to invite more. What Jo Erin did to her then felt surprisingly natural. Far more natural than the things Elias had done to her, and more pleasant too, but Susan suspected there was still more to lovemaking between women than that.

Breasts for example. Susan had never touched any breast but her own.

She pinched a corner of the loose cloth of the nightshirt near Jo Erin's breast and lifted it aside so that the breast was fully revealed. It was small, flatter than Susan's but plumper than a man's. The nipple in the center was pink and perfectly round, much smaller and lighter than Susan's large brown nipples.

Susan touched the tip of the nipple with a finger. The outer pink contracted and the center poked up, erect. Susan bit her lip. She stroked her finger lightly around the edges and noticed that the chest beneath her touch was rising and falling more quickly than it had been a moment before.

She glanced up. Jo Erin's eyes were open and they were fixed on Susan's face. Susan pulled her hand away. Jo Erin grabbed it and pulled it back to her breast.

"Don't stop," Jo Erin whispered.

Susan's hand landed on the full breast, not just the nipple. She curled her fingers on it. The breast was firm but soft at the same time. She'd never felt anything like it, and nothing had ever felt so good. Certainly nothing on Elias's body.

Susan stroked Jo Erin's breast. She pressed it with her fingers and flicked the nipple gently with her thumb. She watched Jo Erin to see her reaction. Jo Erin gasped and her breathing grew unsteady, but she didn't move. She lay still, one arm still curved over her head, and watched Susan's face. Waiting, Susan knew, to see what she would do next.

Susan unbuttoned the next two buttons on the nightshirt and spread it open at the top. The left breast was now revealed as well. Mindful of her sore finger, Susan explored both breasts. She realized she was smiling and gave a little laugh.

"Now I know why Elias enjoyed this so much."

A small rumble came from Jo Erin's throat. Susan guessed at what she wanted. She untied the lace at her own throat and let the collar of her nightdress fall open, exposing her own chest. Jo Erin's eyes burned but she still would not move, so Susan took the hand that lay on Jo Erin's waist and lifted it to her breast.

Jo Erin sat up. Her breasts were larger than they appeared when she lay flat. Susan cupped them where they drooped from Jo Erin's chest. They were beautiful. It was a shame Jo Erin had to hide them when she dressed like a man.

Susan was so intrigued by Jo Erin's breasts that she hardly noticed Jo Erin caressing hers until she leaned forward and wrapped her mouth around Susan's nipple. Jo Erin's tongue stroked it. She wrapped her lips around it and sucked gently.

"Oh." Susan felt a tug in her groin and she caught her breath. She arched her back and pressed her breast against Jo Erin's tongue. "Oh," she said again. Elias had clutched her breasts when they made love, but he had never taken this sort of interest in them. He had never kissed her anywhere but on the lips, or the forehead. His interest primarily had been in his own organ, and in thrusting it into her. The feeling she had now, with Jo Erin's mouth on her, was lovemaking of a different sort. Susan's entire body tingled.

Susan placed her hands on both sides of Jo Erin's head and pulled her up. As much as she enjoyed the sensations Jo Erin was causing, there was something Susan wanted more. She pressed Jo Erin back on the bed. She leaned over Jo Erin's chest, cradled one breast gently in her hands, leaned down, and lapped at the nipple. Jo Erin gasped, and Susan smiled. She licked the nipple again and ran her tongue all around it, then latched onto it with her mouth, as Jo Erin had done with hers, and sucked. Jo Erin arched her chest, and Susan widened her mouth and took in more. Jo Erin's breast was so small, Susan could fit nearly the entire thing in her mouth. Nothing had ever felt so wonderful against her lips and tongue. She devoured the breast as if she were starving.

As Susan suckled, she felt Jo Erin take one of her hands and move it lower. Susan looked up. Jo Erin had pulled up her nightshirt. She was bare everywhere but where the nightshirt bunched at the waist. She pressed Susan's hand down further.

"Touch me," Jo Erin gasped.

Susan had never touched a woman before. She had barely even touched herself. But Jo Erin's attentions to her in the mine gave her an idea what to do. She moved her fingers. Jo Erin released Susan's hand and let her legs drop open. Susan abandoned Jo Erin's breast and slid down the bed. A more experienced woman, she suspected, would have been able to do both at once, but Susan didn't think she should attempt it.

She ran her fingers through Jo Erin's curls. Her hair there was lighter than Susan's, and finer. She moved her fingers farther and felt Jo Erin's private folds. They were slick and wet and smooth. She slipped a finger inside, and Jo Erin whimpered.

Susan glanced up. Jo Erin's eyes were closed. She grimaced as if in pain and made a small movement with her hips. Susan pressed the finger in farther and was surprised to feel movement against it. The slick walls inside Jo Erin pulsed against her finger. She slipped a second finger in so that the fit was tighter, and the pulsing grew stronger. Jo Erin pressed her hips against Susan's hand, as if to push the fingers farther in. Susan pressed harder, drew her hand back slightly, and pressed again, stroking the inside of Jo Erin as she did so. Jo Erin groaned. Her insides clutched at Susan's fingers as if trying to suck them all the way into her.

Jo Erin brought her hand to a point just above where Susan's fingers entered her.

"Touch me here," she said.

Susan kept her two fingers inside and used her other hand to touch the tiny pink bulb at the top of Jo Erin's opening. Jo Erin gasped and nodded. Susan stroked the inside Jo Erin with one hand and the outside with the other and watched.

Jo Erin clutched the sides of the bed with her hands. Her legs clenched, her hips thrust against Susan's hand, and her face turned red. She bit her lip and rocked her head back and forth against the pillow and made a sound like a weak tea kettle. Finally, she stopped moving, at least on the outside, and made no sound. She grew completely still and stiff, while the inside of her clenched at Susan's fingers as if they were all that kept her alive.

Jo Erin groaned loudly. A long moment later she released her breath, relaxed her muscles, and opened her eyes. Ripples of movement still caressed Susan's fingers, but less urgently. She stroked again and Jo Erin gave a weak thrust of her hips, but the moment was over. Susan withdrew her fingers.

Jo Erin held her arms out and Susan crawled up to her. Jo Erin pulled her on top of her, wrapped her tightly to her chest, and kissed her.

"I usually start with kisses," Jo Erin said. "I apologize for my hurry, but I'm not usually awakened so pleasantly."

Susan flushed and hid her face in Jo Erin's neck. "It was my fault," she said. "I was too bold."

"No, you weren't. I would have you wake me like that every morning."

Susan smiled. "Perhaps not in so small a bed."

"Perhaps not." Jo Erin took a great breath and pulled herself to her side, rolling Susan with her. One more heave, and Susan was on her back with Jo Erin looking down on her. "But this one will do." She lowered her head and kissed Susan.

Susan tried not to compare Jo Erin with Elias, but she couldn't help it. They were the only lovers she'd had. Where Elias's kisses were firm and forceful, Jo Erin's were gentle and tender, and her face was soft and smooth instead of scratchy with whiskers. Instead of feeling crushed by Elias's body after he was spent, Susan felt only comforted by the solid blanket of Jo Erin's body on hers.

Comforted and aroused, she amended. As Jo Erin kissed, she pressed her mound against Susan's and let her thigh slip between Susan's legs. Susan still wore her nightgown, though it was open to the waist, and the cloth at her groin grew wet from her fluids.

Jo Erin raised her head. "I want to love you all over," she said. "Will you let me?"

Susan nodded, though she wasn't certain what Jo Erin meant. She trusted that it would be good and was willing.

Jo Erin rose, slid out of her nightshirt, and pulled Susan's nightgown down her hips and off. She wore nothing else. Susan resisted the urge to cover herself as Jo Erin stood beside the bed and gazed at her. Jo Erin was tall and slender, her belly flat where Susan's was rounded, her shoulders broader and her hips narrower. Susan reached out and ran a finger along a tiny shadow on Jo Erin's torso, apparently created by the small flare of a muscle. She had nothing like it, nor had Elias.

Jo Erin crawled back on the bed, pressed one knee into the mattress on each side of Susan's waist, and lowered herself onto Susan's hips. Their bare pelvises touched, and Susan trembled.

Jo Erin took Susan's hands and pressed them into the pillow above her head. "I'm going to love you all over," she said. She kissed Susan on the lips, the jaw, the ear, the neck. She released Susan's hand and lowered her mouth to Susan's chest and her breasts. Now and then Jo Erin would thrust her hips, as if to remind Susan that they were still bare and still together. As if Susan could forget the fire that burned where they touched.

Jo Erin raised Susan's breasts one at a time and kissed the shadowed areas beneath them. She could kiss no lower on Susan's body unless she removed her hips from Susan's. Just as Susan thought it, Jo Erin rose up onto her knees, crawled backward, and lowered herself again to press kisses against Susan's belly. Jo Erin's breasts rested against Susan's mound. Susan wondered if their placement was accidental, but then Jo Erin raised her chest and deliberately ran one nipple, then the other, along the top of Susan's hairline. It was not accidental.

Susan trembled. If Jo Erin would dare to caress Susan's most private hairline with her breasts, what would she not do? How far would her kisses go?

As if in answer, Jo Erin moved lower still. She kissed where her nipples had been, gentle nibbles at the edges of Susan's hair.

**“Relax, my love,” Jo Erin whispered. She slid her hands between Susan’s knees, and only then did Susan realize that her legs were pressed tightly together. “I only want to love you.” She pushed gently, and Susan opened her legs.**

**Jo Erin gazed at Susan’s opening as if looking at a miracle. Susan gripped the pillow over her head and shocked herself by whimpering out loud. Seeing Jo Erin look at her like that, at the one part of her body she’d never even seen herself, was almost more than she could bear. She prepared herself for Jo Erin’s fingers to follow her gaze, but they didn’t. Instead, Jo Erin wrapped her hands around Susan’s hips, lifted her like she was a chalice, and kissed her.**

**Susan brought the pillow around to muffle her moans, so she didn’t see what Jo Erin did next. She only knew by the feel that Jo Erin touched her with her tongue. She licked and kissed and sucked at Susan as if she were a sweet, concentrating most on the top of Susan’s opening where she was most sensitive. Waves of feelings rocked Susan’s body. She bit the pillow so she wouldn’t scream. The sensations were greater than anything she had felt before, far greater than any feeling Elias had brought forth in her. Finally, Jo Erin brought her to a point where she exploded from inside. She thrust her hips to capture every sensation. Jo Erin held her to her mouth, hard, until Susan collapsed limp in Jo Erin’s hands.**

**She trembled still, but it was from exhaustion. Jo Erin crawled to the top of the bed and took the pillow from Susan’s face.**

**“Are you all right, love?” Jo Erin asked.**

**Susan nodded. “I never felt anything like that before. I didn’t know feelings like that existed.”**

**“Me neither.”**

**“What? You’ve never...?”**

**“Oh, I’ve done it before. But it was never like that. It’s different, with you.”**

**Jo Erin dropped her head beside Susan’s on the pillow and yawned.**

**Susan closed her eyes too. Moments later, they were both sound asleep.**

**JO ERIN WOKE several hours later. Bright sunshine filtered through the curtains, making the dust that floated through the air glisten.**

Instantly, she knew she was alone. She sat up and confirmed it. Susan was gone.

She felt the blood drain from her face. There was no point wondering if Susan had gone to the toilet or to get something to eat. Her bag was gone as well.

Jo Erin leaped from the bed and stood, dazed. She didn't know what to do next. Her stomach was heavy as if she'd swallowed lead, and her head swam. She dropped back on the bed, dizzy.

How could Susan have left? Jo Erin had never had a night like that before, never felt so much passion and love with a woman. Susan felt it too, Jo Erin was certain of it. But Susan had never made love to a woman before. Was she frightened by the intimacy or the worry of being discovered in a relationship with another woman? She wouldn't be the first woman to run in fear from another woman's love, but Jo Erin could have sworn Susan was different.

Jo Erin cursed herself. How could she have slept through Susan dressing and packing and slipping out the door? She was a Pinkerton agent, for God's sake, and she was generally a light sleeper. She had to be, to survive.

She stood up again and felt foolish suddenly for being naked. She grabbed her nightshirt from the floor and pulled it on. She checked the bowl and pitcher. The pitcher was still full of water, and the bowl was dry. Susan hadn't washed. She hadn't wanted to make any noise.

Jo Erin peered out the window. The swirling dust motes she'd seen when she first woke up suggested recent movement. Susan couldn't have been gone long. Maybe she could still catch her.

The makeshift prison still squatted at the edge of town. The sun blazed on the white tents, creating a blinding light. Someone had thought to rig some canopies over part of the barrack to provide shade for the prisoners. A train whistle made Jo Erin look the other way. A train was leaving town, heading west toward Spokane. Jo Erin's heart sank. No doubt Susan was on it.

She turned from the window and finally noticed the pile of coins on the table and the note underneath it. She snatched it up.

*J.E.*

*Thank you for last night. I will remember it forever. My night in the mine was the worst night of my life, but last night was the best.*



*I'm a dangerous woman for you to know, Jo Erin. I'm grateful that you're willing to sacrifice your Pinkerton career for me, but there is no need. I may have to be on the run forever, for a crime I know you don't understand, and I won't drag you with me. Tell Pinkerton you lost me. It will be the truth, and your career will be saved.*

*Sukey*

*P.S. I don't know how you're set for funds. I have sufficient for my needs, so I'm leaving you a bit.*

*P.P.S. I always loved you.*

Jo Erin looked at the coins on the table. It wasn't just coins, she saw. In addition to ten or more silver dollars, there was a stack of five dollar silver certificates, perhaps a hundred dollars in all. The money blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

Susan must have had a very fine time last night. Jo Erin had never paid more than twenty dollars for a night with a whore.

She swept her arm across the table and sent the money flying.

PRESIDENT CLEVELAND STOOD at the window of his office and watched Frankie play with her new puppy. She laughed like a child as the pup chased her, growling and nipping at her skirts. It was such a small gift and so easy to give, but it made her tremendously happy. She was grateful to him for every little kindness he showed her. She still didn't realize that he owed all gratitude to her.

The phone rang on the desk behind him and he winced. What a nasty sound it was, and now that more people were getting the damned things, it seemed to never stop ringing. Next thing you know, he'd have to hire an aid to do nothing but answer the damn telephone.

He picked up the ear piece. "Yes?"

"Robert Pinkerton is on the line, sir."

"Yes? Put him through."

"Mr. President?"

**“Yes, Pinkerton. You have news for me?”**

**“Yes, sir. Not good, I’m afraid. We lost the girl.”**

**“Lost her? What do you mean? You have to find her before you can lose her.”**

**“We did, sir. In that mining town in Idaho where they’ve had all that trouble.”**

**“Needles Eye?”**

**“Yes, sir. The agent followed her there. Unfortunately, the mining war broke out while they were there. Caused enough distraction that the girl got away.”**

**“What, so he’s given up? Can’t he just track her down again?”**

**“The agent didn’t give up, sir, but Noonan’s family is discouraged. They’ve decided to pull their support from the case.”**

**“Pull their support. What does that mean?”**

**“It means they won’t pay for the search. They said they want to put the matter behind them.”**

**“You mean it’s over? The girl’s getting away with it?”**

**“Not exactly, sir,” Pinkerton said. “There’s still a warrant for her arrest, and the reward remains in effect. The money for it was already committed, from various sources. Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. No doubt there are bounty hunters searching for her even now.”**

**Bounty hunters. Good God. Cleveland had some experience with bounty hunters, from his time as the sheriff of Buffalo. Shiftless and cruel and ignorant, they were men in the business of trading human souls for coin. They were not so ignorant that they would kill their prey when it was wanted alive. They wouldn’t kill the girl, at least, but their treatment of her between the time they found her and the time they delivered her for the reward was horrible to contemplate.**

**“Sir?” Pinkerton was waiting for a response. “I thought you’d like to know.”**

**“Yes, quite right, Pinkerton. Quite right.” The telephone cord was too short to allow Cleveland to move about the room. He couldn’t see out the window, but he could hear Frankie shrieking at the puppy’s antics. Frankie had little in common with the woman who’d killed Noonan, but for some reason he continued to draw parallels between them. Perhaps it was that they’d both rescued him, in their very different ways.**

**He imagined Frankie in the hands of a bounty hunter and made a quick decision.**

**“I’ll pay you,” Cleveland said. “Keep your agent on the case. I don’t want any bounty hunter finding her.”**

**“Yes, sir.” Pinkerton didn’t sound surprised. “It will have to be a different agent, though. That agent has quit the force. Apparently he’s decided to seek his fortune out West.”**

**Cleveland didn’t get to become President of the United States by having a faulty memory. “Didn’t you tell me he’d known the girl before?”**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**The line was silent, but the thoughts of both men buzzed through the line. He’d thought it was a stroke of luck at the time, but Pinkerton may have made a serious error when he sent that particular agent after the girl. The search had been paid for with Henry Noonan’s money, though, so Cleveland was not troubled by it.**

**“The next agent you send will be disinterested, I assume,” Cleveland said.**

**“Yes, sir,” Pinkerton said. His voice had no more expression than normal as he accepted the reprimand. “Rest assured, Mr. President, we’ll find her.”**

**“Thank you.” Cleveland replaced the earpiece and returned to stand at the window. The puppy had worn itself out. It lay panting in Frankie’s lap. Her dark head was bent over it, and he could imagine her crooning to it like a new mother to a babe. Suddenly she looked up, saw him in the window, and smiled. On the chance that she could see his expression from there, he smiled back.**

**For his own peace of mind, he hoped Pinkerton’s man would succeed this time in finding the girl. Until she was found, and pardoned, he would worry about her. For her own sake, though, he hoped the girl was never found.**

**He hoped she had the sense to go somewhere far, far away.**

## **Chapter Thirteen**

**IT WAS STILL early October, but the wind whipping off the sound had the sting of winter in it. Seattle’s winter sting, though, was mild compared to what could be expected in**

Alaska Territory. It could reach fifty degrees below zero in the winter there, and winter started early. The ship at the pier was likely the last ship to leave for the Yukon before spring.

Susan had tied an orange string to each of her possessions so that she could keep track of them as they were loaded, though loading had not yet started. The strings slapped violently at the bags and bundles. She stood close to the pile so that there would be no question about whose it was, but still she watched the crowd carefully to make sure no one walked off with one of her belongings.

The dock churned with excitement and men and horses and dogs. Most of the men clustered in groups of two, three, or four around piles of supplies different than Susan's, but no smaller. Occasionally a woman huddled next to her husband, and Susan saw one group made up entirely of women. She assumed, at first, that they were dancing girls, headed north to try their luck with the miners. Then she saw their supplies and realized they planned to search for gold themselves. Susan smiled at them and wished she were part of such a group. It was safer to journey as part of a group, but not for her.

She was careful not to meet the eyes of the men on the dock. She was a curiosity, a woman alone with her unusual stock of supplies. She didn't want to garner any more attention than she had to, not until they were underway, at least. Though more than three months had passed since Elias's death, she was still a woman wanted for murder. There was still a reward for her capture. Until she was out of Seattle, out of the country, she would not feel safe. For all she knew, Lottie still searched for her, or Zeke, or even—no, she would not think about Jo Erin.

An outfitter's wagon pulled up beside her, too close. The dock was crowded, but just as one sat no closer than necessary to a stranger in a crowded church or theater or train, the passengers were careful to space themselves about the dock so that each group had a spot to claim as its own. Perhaps because she was a woman or perhaps because her supplies were not the same as those of the miners, this wagoner felt comfortable unloading right beside her. She turned her back to the men unloading the wagon, but the wind whipped into her face from that direction. She gave up and turned back around, but stared at the horizon. From the corner of her eye, she watched the pile of supplies grow.

The Yukon government would not allow entry to anyone who did not bring along a thousand pounds of food, so the outfitters sold a standard stock of food supplies to all: bacon, flour, beans, coffee, and dried fruit. For survival, there was a stove, frying pan, utensils, tent, blankets, canvas, rope, and winter clothing. And of course there were the mining supplies—the axes, shovels, knives, nails, hammer, saw, and the all-important gold pan.

Within minutes the wagoner had unloaded the supplies and pulled away, leaving a single miner on the dock. He stood next to his supplies, as they all did, but on the side nearest Susan. She frowned at the encroachment and edged away.

**“Cold wind,” the miner said.**

**Susan looked up but did not speak.**

**“It’ll be a lot colder in the Klondike, though,” the miner said. “They say this may be the last ship of the season, before the ice freezes ships out.”**

**Susan’s heart thudded in her chest. “I—I heard that too.”**

**“It’ll be worth it, though, to beat next year’s rush. Don’t you agree?”**

**Susan nodded. It was suddenly difficult to breathe. “You— you’re planning to strike it rich, then?”**

**“I thought I’d try my luck.” The miner eyed Susan’s supplies. “What about you?”**

**“I’m going to start a kitchen,” she said, striving to keep her voice steady. “I’m guessing the men might need a place to spend their gold.”**

**“It’s a brave venture for a woman alone.”**

**“No more so than yours,” Susan said.**

**The miner took a step closer. Her cheeks were red and her eyes glistened, either from the wind or something else. In a softer voice than she had used before, she said, “Did you think I wouldn’t find you?”**

**Susan blinked back sudden tears. “I didn’t think you’d try.”**

**Jo Erin looked puzzled. “How could you think that?”**

**“I thought—” Susan stopped, glanced again at Jo Erin’s pile of mining supplies, and realized what she’d thought was terribly wrong. “You’re not with Pinkerton anymore?”**

**“I told you I was through with that.” Jo Erin stepped closer. “Why did you leave me? How could you leave me, after that night?”**

**It hurt to see the pain in Jo Erin’s eyes, to hear it in her voice, but Susan felt a thread of hope curl through her. “I thought it would be best,” she said. “I’m dangerous, Jo Erin. If you’re caught with me, you could be charged too. You didn’t ask to be saddled with that.”**

**“Didn’t ask? The hell I didn’t.” Jo Erin frowned. “Susan, I begged Pinkerton for that assignment.” She waved a hand as if shooing a fly. “I knew as soon as I was assigned your case—no, before that, when I heard you were wanted—I knew I was through with Pinkerton. I would have quit, if he didn’t give me the case, and come after you on my own. I couldn’t let someone else find you. Someone who’d turn you in.”**

**“But I—I killed Elias. I know you think I was wrong.” Susan’s voice shook. “You were disappointed in me.”**

**A look of astonishment grew over Jo Erin’s face. “Disappointed in you?” Jo Erin shook her head, as if trying to shake the words around so they would make sense. “Susan, no. I could never be disappointed in you. You have more courage than any of these men traveling to the Klondike, far more courage than me. I’m a coward next to you.”**

**“You?” It was Susan’s turn to be astonished. “You? A woman living as a man, going to the Klondike to mine for gold all alone is not a coward.”**

**“I haven’t the nerve to go as a woman. For God’s sake, Sukey, when you—” Jo Erin broke off, looked around, and lowered her voice, though no one was near enough to hear. “You knew someone had to stop Noonan, and you knew you might even go to hell for being the one to do it, but you did it. I can’t imagine the courage that took. And you were the one with the courage to decide about the mill, to risk all those men’s lives, to let Dex and Billy live. I couldn’t do it.”**

**Susan was crying by then, but she gave a watery laugh at that. “Yes, I’m still angry with you about that.”**

**“I don’t blame you.” Jo Erin reached as if to touch Susan’s cheek, but pulled back. “I know you’re brave enough to go to the Klondike all by yourself, my love, but I won’t let you. If you won’t let me go with you, I’ll follow you like a pathetic puppy. I’ll watch over you and I won’t let anyone hurt you. I’ll—”**

**“Oh, Jo Erin.” Susan threw herself into Jo Erin’s arms, which wrapped around her and held her tight. The feel of Jo Erin and the heat of her and the smell of her soaked into Susan like water into a sponge, and she knew she was no longer alone. “You don’t have to follow me. I’m sorry I left you in Wallace. I love you, Jo Erin. I’ve always loved you, ever since I was a little girl.”**

**Jo Erin dropped her head and whispered in Susan’s ear, “I was miserable when you were with Noonan, the whole eight years. Sukey, my love, you’ve always been mine. I’m never letting you go again.”**

**Susan raised her head and smiled, though tears dripped down her cheeks. “No, don’t let me go, Jo Erin. Come with me to Alaska.”**

**“My love, I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth.”**

**THE END**

## About the Author

**Kate McLachlan is the author of several lesbian fiction novels, including time-travel, mystery, and historical novels, all with a good dash of romance tossed in. She lives in Eastern Washington with her wife, Tonie, and their dogs and cats. All week long she works as an administrative law judge, but on the weekend she's off on adventures into the past, present, and future with lovers and friends, both real and imaginary.**

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## More Kate McLachlan Titles

### ***RIP Van Dyke***

**When Van is suddenly transported twenty years into the future, she is dumfounded-and furious. Jill's silly time-travel experiment wasn't supposed to actually work. But it did, and now Van is stuck in the future. 2008, that is. A future in which Van's friends and lover have all aged twenty years, but Van has not. Jill, an old woman now, promises to recreate her time-travel machine and send Van back, but Van is skeptical and decides instead to try to make a life for herself in 2008.**

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But when secret agents learn of Van's leap through time, Van faces an even tougher decision. This time one of life or death.

## *Rescue At Inspiration Point*

*Rescue at Inspiration Point* is the second book in the Rip Van Dyke time-travel series. Van is taken hostage at a local prison, and Patsy is stuck in the role of hostage negotiator. Jill sends Bennie back to 1974 to learn more about the hostage taker and his crime. "Do nothing," Jill warns. "Just observe and report back." But the instant Bennie lands, she breaks Jill's # 1 rule. As Bennie pursues her own agenda in 1974, the hostage crisis in 1988 escalates. Can Bennie rescue Van from fourteen years away? Or will her actions only make things worse?

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When Jill's latest time-travel experiment goes awry, no one but Jill is surprised. But when Amelia Earhart suddenly pops out of RIP, everyone is stunned—and delighted! Everyone except Jill, that is, especially when Amelia decides she likes the future too much to return to her own time. History without Amelia Earhart? Unthinkable! But how do you return an impetuous pilot who doesn't want to go home?

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