

## Chapter Sixteen

Smitty's , 8:40 a.m.

Emma took her time down the steps as her new footwear was heavy and she was skeptical of the shaky steps. Herc was saddling up his horse alone. The others were heard talking in the foundry nearby. The voices rose as Emma and Herc wandered into the dim building.

Herc tugged her sleeve. "For now, I think it's best if you keep as silent as you can. We ain't told Smitty as to your true nature, so the less said, the better."

"What if he speaks to me directly?"

He paused and stroked his newly bald chin. "Keep it brief and speak it low."

Emma had a surge of unease. She was attired so as to fool the casual onlooker, but no one thought about her womanly words, voice or manner.

Silas, Romeo and the fat captain, Smitty, were gathered around the near corner at the back of the building. There was a genuinely heated debate brewing. The center of the parlay was what was to be done with Pie, who was still bound and hanging upside-down by the hook. His face was purpled and his eyes appeared about to pop right out of his head and commence rolling about the shop floor.

Despite his position, he displayed vigorous signs of life as he thrashed wildly and swung back and forth, hitting his head against one of the forges in a regular rhythm as he went one way and back again. It reminded Emma of a raccoon that once tangled itself up in her mother's knitting yarn. With no one around to help. it eventually strangled. Her mother never knit one or purled two again.

Smitty did not notice the two new audience members, and ranted hotly in a thick Scottish brogue. "I dinna care wha he stole or whom he stole it from, ye canna hang a man like a ham in my shop without first askin' me! This is na good for business. He's gonna run up and down the levee tellin' people Cap'n Smitty is a kidnapper."

Though the forges were cold this Sunday morning, Smitty had a highly crimson face and sweat poured freely from his brow. His shaggy, full grey beard dripped with it.

Silas attempted reason. "Smitty, I guarantee he will not be sayin' a word about this to anyone. What would he tell the police? 'You see, officer, I got knocked the hell out whilst I was absconding with another man's horses?' He does not have a leg to stand on here."

Herc and Romeo laughed.

"Besides, once we get a good length downriver, Romeo will cut him down and stress how prudent his silence would be . . ." Silas added.

Herc broke in, "I ain't so sure discussing our itinerary in front of our little pendulum here is a good idea."

"Agreed," Silas said as he motioned for them to retire to the courtyard out back. Dee Dee stayed behind. As Romeo closed the doors behind them, Pie gave out one last muted plea.

"Let us not dwell on this whole Pie business," Herc said. "Ain't one person gonna listen to that old river rat anyhow. What we need to discuss is how far you're gonna take us."

"I dunno, now," Smitty said wiping the moisture from the back of his neck but leaving the cascade of sweat on his face, "I get a sickly feeling ye are not tellin' me the whole tale here. Why are ye so eager to scurry off? Why not take one a the passenger

boats? Nay, I get a feelin' there's some shifty sand under me feet. What have ye boys done now and who is this bit of kindling ye've got in tow?" His eyes scoured Emma like he was scraping mussels from the hull of his ship. "I don't like the looks of him."

"None of that is your concern, Smitty," Silas whispered. "You have done a good lot for us in the past, but we've done you many times better. Need I remind you of Haskell and the fire on his boat? You could've been swingin' on a rope out over the Missip' if Herc and I had not run that diversion . . ."

"Now why do ye always feel the need to bring up that old opera? Ye know I was grateful to ye and I've done all I can to pay ye back! I simply feel if I'm stickin' me neck out, I should be duly compensated. Ye've got an undercurrent yer not tellin' me about . . ."

Romeo who spoke up. "Boss, you had a deal. Don't go and be breakin' it, 'cause I can't see myself workin' for no man what don't keep his word . . ."

"Ach, now *ye* are gonna strong-arm me?"

Romeo shrugged.

Smitty sighed, took out an already damp handkerchief and finally wiped his face. "How far are ye hoping to get?"

"Natchez," Silas said.

"Nay," Smitty countered, "I go as far as Memphis."

"Vicksburg," Herc said.

"Nay, Memphis."

Silas took off his hat and riffled his hair. "Helena, then. It ain't but a short chug past Memphis."

"Nay. I have a contract to scuttle the Keller Lee. Two boilers and her engine parts. She caught fire on the foredeck and sunk nose first. Most of the equipment is just

pokin' up pretty as ye please there ready to be plucked—least that's the word on the water. If I dinna get there first, Parker and his outfit will get the haul. Truth be told, if I dinna get rolling soon, I will be hard-pressed to stay afloat at all. The Keller Lee is this side of Memphis.”

”Alright, Memphis it is,” Silas said, once again shaking hands with the fat man on spindly legs.

”I'm gonna see to the load off and re-wooding, boss,” Romeo told Smitty, ”You all should be ready in 'bout three-quarters to an hour.”

He swung the door open and stepped into the shop where he stopped abruptly and said, ”Dee Dee! Whatchu doin'?”

Emma and Silas raced shoulder to shoulder and crowded in to see the commotion. Dee Dee was kneeling next to Pie's head. She had a cup of water in one hand and crackers in the other.

”I'm just givin' him some water and such,” she said, looking up contritely at her father. ”He been hangin' up here all night and mornin'. He may be a thief, but they even feed thieves in jail . . .”

Romeo relaxed and even grinned sweetly. ”A'right, but he so much as snap like a turtle at you, you put that rag and rope back on him. Matter of fact, put it back on soon's you done, y'hear?”

”Yes, poppa.”

Most meandered off to their chores of preparation, but Emma stayed and knelt next to Dee Dee and the hanging man. ”That was very sweet of you, Dee Dee.”

”Oh, I know you would have thought of it soon enough.”

Pie tried to speak, but a spray of cracker dust was all he produced.

"I ain't never seen a man eat up-side down afore," Dee Dee mused. "I wonder if it goes on up or if it stays down in his throat."

"I suppose you will find out soon enough."

"You look good in them clothes, Miss—I mean, Sir," Dee Dee said, taking in Emma's disguise.

"I fear that will be the extent of my charade."

"Oh, it ain't hard to pull the wool over people's eyes—especially men. I been doin' it for years now. They see what they wanna see and that's about all. If it ain't in skirts and frills, they don't rise up much."

"That's true. I just hope one day you will be able to be on the outside who you truly are on the inside."

Pie took on a confused look between bites and swallows.

"I don't think that has nothin' to do with the clothes you wear, does it?"

"You are indeed a wonder, Dee Dee. I wish more grown-ups saw things the way you do."

Dee Dee straightened at the compliment, yet something on her mind weighed her right back down. "I hope you all are gonna be alright. Maybe you could stay here with us?"

Emma smiled and ran her hand across Dee Dee's head. "You are sweet to worry, but I have a plan."

Dee Dee ate one of the crackers and bits of the dust flew from her lips as she blurted out, "I know! Poppa told me you all is headed all the way out to Prescott, in Arizona—"

Though Dee Dee was proud of knowing of the plan, Emma panicked and quickly slapped her palm over Dee Dee's mouth, causing her to choke on the crackers.

Emma apologized and patted her gently on the back. She stared at Pie, searching him for some sign he had heard Dee Dee's words. He only closed his eyes and blinked tighter when crumbs fell from his mouth and brushed his eyelashes. She decided he was too intent on his crackers to be listening.

To be safe, though, Emma took Dee Dee by the arm and led her out into the courtyard.

Once out of Pie's hearing, she explained the rest of her plan. "Yes, we are headed to Arizona. My grandfather has a mine there near Prescott and once I reach him, he will be able to protect me."

"He sounds like a good man." Dee Dee replied, staring down absently at her hands as she brushed them off. "I wish I knew more of my family. Still, my Poppa is more than enough family for me most times."

"I am glad I met your father. I am sorry to say I actually have never met my Grandpa."

"Then how you know he's gonna keep you safe once you all get there?" Concern deepened the crease in her brow. "You got a long ways to go and it could be worse than what you runnin' from."

Emma shook her head and laughed. She stared into the horse stalls and watched Shot's tail flick at flies. Ezra Bean was leaning out over the roof, intently watching the tail swish about. "Nothing could be worse than what I'm running from. Still, the first thing we have to do is get downriver unnoticed. That is why the men have decided to disguise me."

Dee Dee took Emma in again, more slowly. "What you gonna go by?"

"I do not understand."

"You all's *name*. You can't have nobody callin' you by your regular name. That's gonna be a right dead give away. Poppa called me Dee Dee 'cause it's close to my real name and he don't slip up in front of other people that way."

"Oh my. I never thought of that. What would you suggest?"

"Emma is real close to Emmet, so that should be a name you would recognize. Even if they was to slip up, you still close enough for it to make you turn and say, 'Yes? May I help you with somethin?'"

Emma laughed, but Dee Dee gave her a teacher's glare, for she was dead serious.

"Very well, Emmet it is."

"I'm gonna help you with your theatrics now," Dee Dee said as she went back inside the foundry and slipped Pie's gag back on. He was still trying to chew and she gave him a gentle pat on the head which he tried to avoid by jerking his head out of her reach.

Dee Dee smiled at him and crossed once again out into the courtyard. Silas and Herc were loading the mule with their supplies.

"Now when you walk," Dee Dee instructed, "you gotta take longer strides. Yeah, that's good. Now bow your legs out a little too."

Emma's clumsy strut brought muted chuckles from the men, but they nodded encouragement.

"You gotta stride like your farts don't stink and you the boss of the bosses."

Emma had no idea what this meant, but endeavored to please her instructor. After a few moments of comical preening about, Dee Dee was laughing, jumping and clapping. "Yes, Sir! You is the cock of the walk!"

The courtyard echoed with laughter and then it was back to work.

## Chapter Seventeen

The St. Louis Insane Asylum, 9:10 a.m.

Alexis rode on, hoping Estelle would see the light and contact her with worthwhile information. Estelle informed her that the women were gone and the only person at the Colson house was most likely Theodore. She turned her horse around and trotted to her next stop.

Though it was early yet and a Sunday as well, Alexis decided to try and forge some good from the slag of the day. She approached the long, low brick wall of the St. Louis Insane Asylum and mused as to the ease even a person of addled facility or infirmity could simply climb right over at any point along the way.

She found the entrance at the midpoint and turned in. The trees lining the drive were full of greenery and spring flowers of pink and pale blue and white. The tranquil scene was gilded by finches and cowbirds weaving and dipping in graceful aerobatics from branch to branch all down the promenade.

She knew this was a contrived facade shielding the outside observer from the true despair and despondency swirling inside. The path split and circled around a once lovely fountain, but no water flowed and a green muck had taken over.

She had been to the asylum before to question a patient about a land fraud case. She hoped this trip was more enlightening and less draining. The poor man she visited on that occasion had his spirit crushed by his greedy offspring. He was so sedated that she could not even coax his own name from his lips, let alone gain details about the family estate.



Alexis dismounted and looped the reins around the horn of the saddle allowing her horse to graze freely on the pristine lawn.

The staircase held four wide steps leading to the tall, white-columned portico. An imposing Colonial Revival structure, it was a tall, five story brick building flanked by two long wings of four floors. The whole illusion was topped off with the austere cast iron dome, seen from most any avenue far and wide, a constant reminder to cherish one's good fortune and sanity.

Inside the reception area, the stage magic was even more poignant with a long, low, black desk nestled in the curve of the light grey marble staircase rising on either side and above it. Exotic ferns, Greek nudes and urns were placed in every pocket and niche. Three fine chairs in black leather upholstery were situated just far enough from the desk to deter casual conversation between visitors and staff.

The woman in a white uniform seated behind the desk did not look up from her roost until Alexis had stood before her for a moment and then finally cleared her throat.

"Yes? May I help you?" Barely taking a glance, though showing poorly veiled irritation at being torn from her work. In this case, her work was reading the newspaper. The front page sported a drawing of a local celebrity that bore a striking resemblance to Alexis.

"I am here to speak to a patient. Mrs. Theodore Colson."

"I'm afraid there are no visiting hours without a doctor's appointment and especially on a Sunday, as no doctor is available." Apparently, Alexis' likeness in the paper was not good enough for the secretary, for she rolled her eyes from the woman before her and came to rest right on the image with no reaction.

”So no care is given on Sundays?” Alexis asked. She knew it was the wrong tack, yet this woman’s demeanor chaffed upon her highly.

”That is not what I said.” She placed both hands flat on the paper, fingers splayed and knuckles whitening. She stared at the paper, hoping Alexis would get the hint and disappear.

”By informing me no doctors are present on Sundays, I am left to wonder if the patients just run amok.”

”The patients are being well cared for. Not that it is any of your concern, but the full staff of nurses and orderlies are here to see to their every need. The doctors work extremely hard and are deserving of a day of rest.”

”Can a patient be admitted on a Sunday?”

”Yes, under special circumstances, with a doctor present, a patient in need of emergency care *can* be admitted on a Sunday,” she delivered slowly, in case Alexis might be a simpleton.

”Good. We have that established. Now, I am here to see Mrs. Theodore Colson, who was admitted just this morning. I am in the employ of her husband and am here under his orders to speak to her. You have already told me a physician must be present to have her admitted, so may I please speak with him?”

This being circled around in her own words must have tightened her throat, for the receptionist only blinked and worked her jaw silently.

”I apologize. We have gotten off poorly. My client, Mr. Colson directed me here to—”

”I am not deaf. I heard your words very clearly, but you must have a doctor present to speak to any patient.”

”You may not be deaf, but your brain function forces me to wonder as to whether you might actually be a patient suffering from idiocy.”

She was finally rattled sufficiently to loosen her gaze from the paper and up to Alexis. Her eyes flared and her nostrils turned white as she snipped, ”Madam! There is no need to speak to me—”

”Understand *me*, Madam, the safety of Mr. And Mrs. Colson’s daughter is at stake and the longer you bully me with your bureaucracy and bluster, the more dangerous her situation becomes. Do you want to answer to the parents or the authorities when they discover your ineptitude led to the young woman’s harm?”

Alexis knew she was using a sledgehammer when a gentle nudge would suffice, yet she could not endure this woman’s facile nature.

”Please, be seated there,” the woman said after a pause, pointing to the distant chairs. She rose stiffly under the burden Alexis placed upon her. ”I will see if the doctor is still on the premises. It was, after all, quite some time ago when Mrs. Colson was admitted.”

Despite Alexis’ bluff about Theodore sending her, the nurse conceded the hand and went to a door in a recess around the grand staircase. She heard the woman talking to someone in the other room and soon a lumbering man in orderly whites emerged. He glared at Alexis and ascended the staircase to the second floor.

As he climbed the steps, Alexis noticed an area on the back and top of his head had been shaved. In the center of what looked to be a nice contusion indeed, she saw a network of black sutures. A minor puzzlement, she wondered if he may not be an employee, but actually a patient who had received some barbaric surgical treatment.

The receptionist and Alexis waited in tepid silence. According to her calculations, she sat for a full quarter hour until a young doctor descended the stairs led by the goonish orderly.

The doctor was impeccably groomed with light brown hair parted down the middle of his skull and sported a perfect mustache, so sharply trimmed Alexis imagined it could serve as a straight edge rule. His calf-length smock was pristinely white and had the look of being tailored to provide the illusion the man had broad shoulders. When he extended his hand to shake hers, she noticed no wedding band and a manicure that put her own nails to shame.

”Good morning,” he greeted with a smile, his lips slyly parting, revealing a breathtaking display of pearled beads, hypnotic in their symmetry. ”I am Doctor Cuttrow. I’m sorry, but my associates didn’t get your name . . .”

”So nice to meet you, doctor. My name is Alexis Free. I work for Theodore Colson and I would like to speak with his wife, Elizabeth.”

Still holding her hand firmly, he motioned toward the front doors, ”Please, perhaps we should discuss this out in the glorious sunshine? It would truly be a shame to waste such a day.”

She knew she was being herded, but hoped to break from his cattle chute before being branded by this suave man. ”I suppose that is acceptable, but I must tell you Mr. Colson is quite adamant that I speak to his wife.”

He released his grip, but placed his hand upon her elbow, guiding her outward, ”That is actually very interesting for two reasons, Mrs.—”

”That’s Miss, doctor,” she said, pulling her elbow from his touch.

”So sorry. Miss Free. As I was saying, he did not mention you or anyone else wanting to see his wife—if anything, he gave the impression he wished her to be

completely undisturbed. That is the nature of the word, 'asylum,' after all. Rest and sanctuary from all outside oppressions. Another item which raises my interest is Mr. Colson was most definitely aware of how heavily sedated his wife was—in fact, he insisted on being present for the first injection treatments.”

He walked each step right beside and behind her, occasionally brushing against her. It rankled her, but she endured.

Sensing the direction of his comments, Alexis tried to angle to her destination instead of his. ”I spoke to him after the admitting and treatment. He hoped the effects of the medication had ebbed enough for me to speak with her.”

They stepped off the final stair and he spun on her, gripping both of her arms at the biceps, squeezing roughly. His smooth demeanor crumbled around her feet, leaving no more illusion as to his true nature. His perfect teeth and mouth formed a macabre grimace, his face and eyes puckered to a knot. Lines that were invisible before deepened to gouges framing his wild eyes. His transformation was so rapid and total, Alexis merely gaped in astonishment.

”See here, Miss Free—if that’s really your name—I know why you’re here and you’ll find no story about the person you’re looking for. Go back to your newspaper or wherever they would hire a little tramp such as yourself and tell them to desist their investigations at once. We may be a charitable institution, but where do you think much of that 'charity' comes from? I’ll tell you: from the industrious fathers of this fine city. And those fathers are lawyers and legislators that will not take kindly to intrusions of such a prying nature. I will say, I think it quite unseemly that you would use the misfortune of a good woman such as Mrs. Colson as your entree into our secrets. I have no idea how you learned she was admitted or her identity, but I will find out.”

Her natural urge was to protest or fight his grip, but she forced herself to endure the verbal and physical assault a moment longer. She felt something was transpiring. To discover it, she knew she must not shatter his illusion of control. He swiveled his head around for any unwanted attentions, but saw only the orderly standing in the doorway gingerly testing his stitches with his fingers.

The doctor's voice lowered to a whispering rage. "I have shaped my career painstakingly. This . . . this cesspool is but a short step away from my own practice and tenure at one of the better hospitals. I have worked too hard to let it be destroyed by the likes of you or that damned escapee. Do you understand me? He will be found and brought back and this whole matter will be but a trifling misunderstanding. If you are not careful, you may find yourself in a much better situation to ask all the questions you care to—from the inside!" He nodded to the asylum.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, though the pain was minimal. She wished to lure him in with his sense of dominance. "You do realize you are hurting me?"

"Good. I have found sometimes the only way in which to get through to some people is negative physical stimulation. I will release you only if you swear you will leave this be, do you understand me?" The last word was punctuated with the violent shaking of her arm.

She had hoped to learn more, but concern for some type of permanent injury took over as she quickly stomped on the doctor's foot. He released his grip and raised his leg, clasping his hands around his knee.

Alexis calmly reached out and lay her left hand over the top of his right. She enclosed her fingers around his thumb.

With blinding speed she spun herself to the right while using the hold on his thumb to twist the man's wrist down, palm facing inward. He gasped as she lifted his

arm and tucked hers underneath his, giving the outward appearance of a man casually leading a woman by the arm, when in truth, the man in question was experiencing excruciating pain.

"Walk with me," she whispered as she led him slowly away from the building. The orderly had a puzzled countenance, but stood fast as the doctor walked with her, haltingly.

Whimpers of pain leaked out of the doctor's piteous face.

"Now, you claim to be a physician, though by evidence of your bedside manner, I am left to wonder. However . . . seeing as you must be in *some* capacity a learned physician, I'm sure you are aware of your current position. With a small amount of pressure, I could dislocate your wrist from your arm and probably tear several tendons in the process. Taking this into consideration, I would weigh my responses carefully but quickly if I were you."

She took his peep and anemic nod as understanding.

"I am here to speak to Mrs. Colson. Is she here?"

A yelp and a nod.

"Wonderful. Is she able to speak to anyone?"

A peep and a "No."

"Very well. When will she be able to hold a coherent conversation?"

They had arrived at the boggy fountain where she stopped their stroll.

"Three days, maybe four," he croaked. "Even then, she may, she may not be lucid—she was truly in a delirium." His voice rose several octaves with the increased levels of pain.

"If and when I decide to return, I will not be getting your standard greeting, will I?"

He glared at her through his pain. He tried to manage an escape by swinging at her with his untethered arm. With her free hand, she blocked his blow, pushed it away, slapped his face with an open hand and then reached down his restrained arm, gripping his elbow in two specific spots with thumb and forefinger. She applied a small degree of controlled pressure and Dr. Cuttrow crumpled at the knees.

Felix, unsure of the situation, took one step down and paused for further developments. He was more curious than worried.

Still holding his elbow and wrist, she slowly guided him to sit on the ledge of the fountain. "That's right, Doctor. Just sit for a moment and think this out thoroughly. I, too, have found sometimes the only way to get through to some people is negative physical stimulation. Now are we agreed as to the rules of my future visit?"

Tears trailed down his cheeks and beaded on his overly-waxed mustache, "Yes."

"You're so accommodating, doctor. Now, on the other matter. The one where you accuse me of being a busy-body? I have no idea what that is about, but it sounds like a fascinating story. Perhaps you would care to give me the succinct version?"

The Doctor screamed in pain and yelled, "Felix! For God's sake! Help me!"

Felix was startled then got one leg moving, then the other, and like a train leaving the station, his large frame gained speed over distance.

She tightened her grip on the wrist and elbow. The doctor howled and teetered on the edge of consciousness. She lessened her hold in the event she needed to turn her attention to the orderly bounding forth.

"Rein it in, big man," she said with an even tone and a warning glare.

He slowed his trot, placed his hands calmly on his hips and looked down on the scene with confusion and awe. "What did you do to him?"



”Just providing a lesson in manners. You would assume there was a course of some kind covering that topic in Medical School, would you not? ’How to treat a woman, lesson one.’”

”He sure looks like he done learned it good.”

”One can only hope,” she said as she released the doctor and stepped away quickly. She raised her hands to the orderly in a placating fashion. ”No harm done—not to his wrist, at least.”

Cuttrow slumped to his knees and cradled his wrist tenderly. He looked up to Felix. ”Get her off of this property *now*, you idiot!”

”I was leaving anyway, Felix, but you’re more than welcome to walk me out to the gate.” Her horse had wandered nearby where she retrieved it and mounted. She did not press the matter with Dr. Cuttrow, but motioned to Felix, ”Walk with me.”

He looked at the doctor, back at Alexis, shrugged and strode over to her.

Alexis threw one last glance over her shoulder to the doctor, who was gaining his feet like a newborn foal. ”Doctor? I would put a cold compress on that for the next few hours—ice if you have it. Keep it elevated.”

An acceptable distance away, Alexis turned to Felix and asked, ”What happened to your head? It looks painful.”

The big man reached up and probed carefully. ”Oh, some nut took it in his mind to bonk me with a door but good. It don’t hurt so much, but I wished the doctor hadn’t gone and shaved a patch on my head. I’m afraid hair may not want to return to that acreage. I’m already losing a bit much yearly as is.”

She smiled at him., ”I think you have a fine head of hair and it will grow back even thicker.”

He blushed. ”You think?”

"I am positive. So, the man who did that? Was this the escaped patient the doctor was speaking of?"

"Yes ma'am. I ain't never had no problems with him afore, but he gets this letter and the next thing you know, he's beating my head in and scurryin' off. 'Course, the doc there was so worried about the scandal I near bled to death before he saw to my wound. That was nothin' compared to finding out that the scoundrel stole my clothes—why, he had to be four sizes smaller than me. It was a new pair of trousers he done stole! Well, new to me, that is. Doc there, while he's stitchin' my scalp, he hears me complain about the pants and I ask if I might be reimbursed and he goes and yanks that thread so hard I started bleedin' again."

"He is not much of a care-giver. This patient, what was his name?"

"Kemper. Kemper Bidwell. He was a soldier down on his luck. We take 'em in if they's having mental problems."

"Is he dangerous?"

"No, ma'am, well...some, I guess, but on the whole, I don't rightly think so. He was always sort of lost unto his own and never got mean like last night. He's a complicated fellow." He lifted his hand toward his skull again, but forced himself to break off from that. "He ain't never said 'boo' to nobody, but whatever that letter done said, it turned him all nutty. I think the only people who's got to be worried is them that the letter concerns."

"Please, call me Alexis. Judging from the knot on your noggin, I reason that may not be completely true."

He absently touched the gash again, "Yeah, you may be correct there . . . Alexis." he blushed deeper.

"He could prove more dangerous if cornered. What did the letter say?"

"I don't rightly know. It came on a special Saturday delivery. We usually been opening the patient's mail—for their own safety, 'cause some of them get real worked up with news from the outside—well, he kind of asked me if I would do him the favor of getting his letters to him in unopened order. He used to get 'em lots, but in the last months, I think this was the only one. I just gave it to him and he thanked me and that was that—until this here happened," he said, pointing to the wound. Alexis was glad he did not touch it again.

"How much?"

"How much what, ma'am—Alexis?"

"How much did it cost him to get the unopened letter?"

He did not even try to pretend confusion and merely collapsed into despair. "Oh, no! You ain't gonna tell the doc, are you?"

"Of course not." She nodded toward the recovering doctor. "You've seen the nature of our relationship and I don't particularly care for the way he treats his patients or employees. How much?"

"A quarter. He would hold back on his drugs and trade them with other patients, so a quarter weren't gonna hurt his bank none."

They arrived the front entrance. Alexis reached down from her horse and gave the man her card and a dollar folded beneath it. "Consider this a donation to the under-appreciated orderly fund. If you can contact me when Mrs. Colson is able to speak, or with anything you think would be of note to me."

"Yes, Alexis, I surely will. I won't tell the doctor, neither!"

"I never assumed it for a minute, Felix. Take care of that top knot now!"

”Hold a moment. What was that move you used on him back there? It sure looked slick. I could use a move like that. Some of them patients get a little hard to handle.”

”When I visit Mrs. Colson I will give you a private lesson,” she shouted as she rode off down Arsenal, toward the city.

When Felix finally found the doctor, he was upstairs behind his desk in his office. He had found a large chunk of ice he was moving about his wrist. ”Why didn’t you come to my aid out there? Couldn’t you tell she was hurting me?”

”Why, no, doctor, the way you was walking, I had just assumed you were wooing her, as usual.”

The manly compliment, though not meant sincerely, softened the doctor’s tone. ”I noticed you had a pow-wow with her, what was that about?”

”Oh, nothin’—I was just warning her not to come back around here no more or she’d be awful sorry.”

Dr. Cuttrow stared at the orderly and finally said, ”Yes, she had better not. She will not surprise me again.”

”I reckon not.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Smitty's, 9:53 a.m.

There was little other commotion on the levee that day. Two different boats were docked about a quarter mile down. One was loading bales and another was disembarking a slew of passengers in high fashion. Those travelers scurried and scattered off like ants into the colony. The north end of the banks was deserted, save the group near the Lula Belle as they prepared to launch.

Romeo was better than his word. The boat was ready in a half hour, despite his warning to Captain Smitty that the starboard boiler was soon going to need to be re-plated and the Steamboat Inspector was due this week.

"Aye, but I canna afford the time involved presently, lad," Smitty said tersely as he waddled up the gangway. "We'll be able to build a whole new boiler when I return with this load. You can tell the inspector the Lula Belle will be docked for him by the end 'a next week."

Silas led the pack mule through the cluttered scrap yard, the sun kindling to the hot day ahead. "Smitty's stubborn as ever, Romeo. *Now* do you wish you had come to work the Hotel when they was hiring?"

"No sir, I believe I fared much better than in that fancy emporium. 'Sides, they wouldn't be nobody to look after Dee Dee."

Silas placed his hand on his friend's immense shoulder. "You know one day she's gonna be big enough to be left alone, right?"

"Yessir, but till that day come, I got the one eye on her and the other on Smitty."

"Ain't that right? You gotta be glad old Herc is traveling off, otherwise you'd have to grow a third eye."

"Nope, that rascal's under your watch and you did good by him so far. Listen to me: Smitty gonna push Lula Belle real hard—too hard—tryin' to get down to that salvage. See if y'all can't talk some sense into him and tell him to take it easy on her."

Silas coaxed the mule up onto the walkway. "Will do, Rome. I want to get far from here too, but I would like to get there healthy and dry."

Romeo looked at Silas with concern. "Seriously, she ain't the flower of spring she used to be."

"Ain't none of us are, Romeo."

"Truer than you know."

The mule trod nervously onto the boards with his front legs, but when the boat moved, so did the planking, and the animal froze. A gentle wake had shifted the position of the Lula Belle only a few inches to the right, but it was enough to rattle the stubborn landlubber. Soon his legs front and back had split in an awkward stretch. Silas pinched the mule's ass which made it board the boat in a hurry.

The other horses were led aboard with no further drama. They were corralled up front near the huge crane. The sparse shadows of the machinery would provide little relief when the sun come on full, but it was better than the open deck. Silas gave out a generous hobble line, tying their legs with enough slack they could shift weight naturally, but not wander about freely.

Herc, Dee Dee and Emma came down together to the river's edge. They carried their own personal gear and Dee Dee had a bundle of cloth under her arm.

Herc bent down and gave Dee Dee a good-sized bear hug making her smile with a tear in her eye. "Dee, you go and find Estelle in the next day or two and tell her we

finally embarked, alright? And tell her I'm gonna wire her from Houston when we arrive."

"Yessir," she said, after he released her and she caught her breath.

He moved on to Romeo and shook his hand. No words passed—none were needed between friends as old as this—just smiles and nods. He climbed the plank with more caution than was needed. "I know we ain't ocean bound, but I still feel them sways and dips even on this flatboat. Gettin' old. I must have lost my river blood."

Emma stood alone with Dee Dee and eyed the ragged men who worked aboard.

Dee Dee recognized the worry on her brow and took her hand. "I know they's a lot of worry comin' your way, but them men is housebroken for the most part. Only one or two you gotta look out for, but they gonna be so busy under Smitty's whip, they ain't gonna have time to suspect you out."

Emma stared at her a minute, and then said with concern lacing her voice, "You're too young to know the ways of these men, Dee Dee. I'm sorry you do."

With a wrinkled brow, Dee Dee ignored her own concerns and returned to Emma's. "You got your boys keepin' close tabs on you. You have trouble, you get them, or get them other two boys my Poppa is friends with."

She craned her neck to find them among the swarm of men. She whistled high and strong through her teeth and two men turned to look.

The two crew members hailed Dee Dee and she waved back. "Them's the twins," she told Emma. "They come up with Poppa after the war. They was slaves. The skinny one is called 'Reverend' and the other one goes by 'Sharp.' Don't play cards with Sharp or pray with Reverend. The one cheats and the other will not shut up once he starts in about the Lord."

Emma looked aboard. She was unable to tell them apart as they were both equally dark-skinned and exactly alike down to the sharp part in their short black hair.

"I shall avoid both activities among them, and I thank you heartily for your wisdom."

"They good boys, though."

"That is a fine reference."

"Now that fellow there, the one with the ate-up hat?"

Emma looked and finally found the man—at least it had to be him, for he had a ridiculously tall ten gallon hat full of holes with a floppy, torn, soiled brim hanging limply over his face.

"Yes, what about this man?"

"He's a little 'touched.' He got some devil in him. He only just started workin' for Smitty and been startin' fights and trouble every time they stop somewhere. Smitty won't let him off the boat no more except here in St. Louis. He woulda been fired, but for his momma, who Smitty has a thing for. He's the bad apple you need to stay clear of, you hear?"

"Loudly and clearly."

Emma knelt in front of Dee Dee and presented the brown package containing her dress, the doll, and the mirror and comb with a few other belongings. "I want you to have these. They will be of more use to you than me in the next few years. Just hold onto them. You'll know when it's time to use them."

Tears once again glistened in her eyes. "Oh! Thank you, Miss Emma! Ain't nobody ever gave me nothin' like this before—except Poppa, when birthday and Christmas come around—and then, it's usually somethin' for cleanin' or workin'."

"I hope it will come in handy," she said, pressing it firmly into the child's arms.



"I brought you somethin' too." The young girl handed over the cloth she was carrying. "It belonged to my Momma. It was the scarf she bundled me in when she saved me. It got burned some 'round the edge, but I done wore that off."

Romeo stood a short distance away. He had a look of concern, but did not interrupt the exchange.

"Dee Dee, I cannot take this! This is too sacred a thing to—"

"You gonna need it more than me—just like what you done said about my present here. It gets real cold at night on the boat. Early mornings and late nights, the wind sometime blows right down the river and straight through your bones. I know 'cause Poppa took me once down to Cairo. Ooooh, was I chilled. The whole time I shivered and dreamed of this wrap."

"But we have bought blankets and—"

"Sometimes a blanket won't do. You use it as a scarf or bandana," she said as she took it back from Emma to unfurl it and wrap it around Emma's neck. "Can you please just take it?"

It was of a cotton weave so fine, it felt like silk. Short, knotted tassles dangled from the ends. These twists were irregular lengths from years of warming little Dee Dee and the meticulous mending. She kept her mother's memory threaded in her heart by keeping the scarf from unwinding.

"There," Dee Dee smiled, "let's just call it a loan. You can give it back to me when we meet again." The child looked dreamy as she stared at it, stroking it absently.

The thought of her generosity and warmth brought tears to Emma. "Oh, Dee Dee, of course we will meet again! I will take good care of this and have it back to you in no time, but all the while, I will know it is not simply this cloth keeping me warm but also the memory of you, my friend."

”That’s exactly what I always thought when I wore it—I knew it was my Momma’s arms wrapped around me keepin’ me safe again!”

It was too much for Emma. She hugged the little girl so hard and long, Dee Dee finally whispered, ”Air. I need to breathe, you know.”

Emma climbed aboard. Tears were wiped away, the plank was lifted, the engine fired and soon they were backing away from the sandy shore of St. Louis. Turning out into flow of the river, the Lula Belle whistled a long, mournful farewell and paddled off down the Mississippi.

Ezra Bean gave an odd, haunting screech and swooped from the shadows of the buildings above the levee. His wings beat furiously as he climbed up and out over the water. He swung a wide circle over the Lula Belle, and finally alit onto the pilot house. His feathers ruffled as he hopped down to the slanted roof just below the pilot’s window. He ducked back into a recess, finding his new nest.

”Bye, bye, Ezra Bean!” Dee Dee yelled as she waved. She looked up at her father and saw he was not waving. A sharp nudge to his thigh and he was waving as well, though not as enthusiastically.

Dee Dee and her father stood and watched until the boat was but a speck of white drifting away on the brown water.

She sat right down, cross-legged there on the levee and opened up Emma’s present. She carefully went through the contents, finally coming to the silver plated mirror. She held it up and inspected herself.

Her father stood and watched for some time, finally saying, ”You know them clothes ain’t gonna fit you. Besides—”

”I know all about besides, Poppa. They too big now, but one day I’m gonna be big and a woman like Emma and now I got some finery to look forward to.”

"I done the best I could for you, baby. I just did what I thought was best . . ."

He trailed off and looked again downriver.

Dee Dee quickly and carefully rewrapped her treasures, sprung to her feet and hugged her father about the waist. Her fingers could almost touch. "Poppa, you done better than the best you could. Don't think for a minute I ain't grateful."

He chuckled and put his hand on her head. They stood in silence for a moment.

"Poppa, I want to go to service today."

"We never go to service, baby."

She looked up and held his gaze, chin on his hip. "I know. I always figured the Lord hears me wherever I pray to him. I pray a lot and I never felt need to be inside a brick box to do so. But, I want to make sure he hears me. I want to make sure he hears me loud and clear 'cause I'm gonna pray for Emma and Herc and Silas. They's gonna need a whole mess of praying and looking over."

"You right about that, sweet pea. Let me close shop and we go on home to get cleaned up."

They strolled through the scrapyard among the skeletons and parts of the long-dead riverboats and closed the doors of Smitty's Boiler Works, Ship Repair and Salvage.

## Chapter Nineteen

St. Louis Riverfront, 10:10 a.m.

In society there was always the lowest of the classes with no money, no position and no love. Kemper dwelled below even that class and it suited him just fine. It allowed him to go about his business unhindered and without scrutiny because even the lowest of the low did not want to acknowledge him. In most people's eyes, he was worse than a flea on a boil on a mangy dog's ass: just along for the ride and too unseemly to notice.

He arrived at the levee with but one path and goal before him: find McDonough and Bennet. All other humans in their own lockstep were but obstacles to Kemper.

He awoke beneath the porch of a tailor shop looking out onto the river. His bed was picked hastily last night, for at the time, he was fatigued beyond his most recent memory. The life of an asylum patient provided little exercise beyond trips up and down the hall to the privy.

The struggle overtaking Felix, securing his laudanum, the subsequent journey to the hotel and then to the levee had fagged him out. Another aspect he had to struggle with was the sheer overwhelming nature of life outside the asylum walls. The chaos he experienced just walking into a hotel lobby was almost too much, but when he focused on the men and his need to find them, he found himself slipping back into the stream of life beyond the walls. He was fortunate though to find this alcove at the riverside where he could rest and recoup, for he had reached the point of exhaustion when he climbed in.

Before making himself visible to society once again, he lipped at a bottle of his laudanum—only a half chug, for he knew not when an opportunity to restock his supply would present itself.

He re-corked and rose, stretching in the cramped space. He re-counted the cash at his disposal. A total of nine dollars and four cents was the sum together from both his bartering in hospice and a small amount found in Felix's pockets. That money had probably been Kemper's originally, anyway.

It had cost him one dollar and a half in bribe funds at the hotel to get what little information he had about the boys and the levee. It would in all probability cost him yet more before the day was out. It was better to be lighter of pocket and spirit, for each penny dispensed brought information to feed the soul.

At first, the hotel proved a dry well of information, for no one had any information as to Herc and Silas' direction of travel. He knew their destination was The Arizona Territory, but he hoped to snag them while they were so close. He had expected a night of random hunting, but a bellman returning from the levee overheard his inquiries and pulled him aside near the entrance.

He saw the men that day while he was delivering a guest's luggage to a departing steamer at the landing. Kemper gladly payed the man to remember their direction and to keep quiet about his inquiries.

He was disappointed at the low amount of commotion on the levee. He reasoned the more people, the more opportunity to discover the path of his prey. Still, there was a fair amount of laborers to question. He heaved himself over the low brick edge of his cradle and navigated toward the southern end of traffic. The bottles tinkled lightly in his pockets. He touched them to quiet them, and himself.

As he found his pace, he looked out between the docked ships and onto the river. A paddlewheel boat with an odd-looking crane on the bow was venting off a low, long whistle. As she passed, Kemper noted a great deal of activity on her deck. With his limited knowledge of river life, he reckoned it was common upon launching.

What seemed uncommon to him were the horses grouped around the crane device and three road-ready traveling men standing nearby. If a group were ready to travel by horse, why engage the services of a steamer? They were unclear to him, for his eyesight had degraded from disuse in the asylum over time, but he reckoned he was looking for two men and a young girl, so he disengaged from the curiosity and walked up to three black men rolling barrels aboard another steamer docked nearby.

*Good a place as any.*

In the short span of an hour, Kemper had found the trail of his quarry. There was much talk of a fellow named Pie who was "baptized" in the river yesterday by a burly fellow in the company of another man and a young girl. He was directed to the boat Pie served on as dock foreman.

He came up to a small cluster of four black men who sat before the boat in question, The Cairo Star. "Hello, boys. You all work for Pie?" He contained his excitement admirably.

They looked among each other and finally one old man clutching a gnarled pipe between his crooked teeth said, "That depends." He appeared to be in charge only because he was the oldest.

"Depends on what?"

None of them looked up to Kemper, only at each other.

The old man offered, "On whether Mister Pie gone show up t'day or not. Cap'n give him another hour, then he fired."

The younger men smiled coyly at this and looked to the ground or the river.

”He ain’t the best boss, I surmise,” Kemper said.

”Sir, I would rather not comment, as he ain’t fired yet and you may well be an ally of his.”

One man, a young, gangly fellow sitting on the brick inspected a hole in the sole of his shoe.

”I have never met the man, but I would like to. He is the man who got thrown in the river yesterday by an old acquaintance of mine.” Kemper reasoned he was not actually lying. ”I was looking—”

The old spokesman brightened, ”Why on earth didn’t ya’ll say so! Any man a friend of Hercules, he’s a friend to all!” He said as several of the others also perked up considerably. ”I tell you right now, old Herc done thowed that man a good ten rods into the water right on this spot right here! It was a comical sight to see. Yes, I been on this river for goin’ on twenty years and I ain’t never seen nuthin’ like it, but then again, that’s the kind of excitement follows old Herc around.”

The men to a one nodded and grinned in assent.

”You all see where my friends made off to after that?”

”No sir. We was so blinded by tears of laughter you could’a dropped an elephant right in front of us and we’d be hard-pressed to notice. Yup, they just disappeared . . .”

The young shoe inspector wanted to add a few words, but was quickly hushed by the elder statesman.

”What is it, boy?” Kemper asked the young man. He stepped into the crowd and looked down on the seated fellow, imposing his race, and therefore position, on him.

”You got something on your brain?”

”Boss, don’t you pay him no mind. That boy ain’t right and he get all kind of things mixed up most times,” the old man said quickly. ”He ain’t but a dumb pup.”

The younger man gave a look of incredulity.

Kemper reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar, waving it before the young man. His wide-eyed gaze swapped between the old black man and the money. He was truly at a consternating crossroads.

The old man put his hand over the dollar and waved at it in the negative. ”They’s good friends of ours and we won’t be sayin’ what we know for any old dollar.”

Kemper withdrew two more, setting all eyes wide—even the old man’s.

The spokesman looked about him, scratched his bright grey beard, drew a puff off his pipe and snatched at the money in Kemper’s hand.

Kemper whipped his hand back, out of reach, and shook his head. ”Tell me the story first.”

The old man smiled. ”We don’t know where they gone, but Pie, he said he was gonna find ’em and get his due. I hear he found the boys down at Smitty’s and he was gonna do his deed last night. Looks like he got hung up and that’s why he ain’t to work yet. I would not want to be the man to go up against either one of them boys, let alone the two as a pair.”

They gave directions to Smitty’s at no extra cost. Kemper threw the money to the levee bricks and walked north. He did not look back to watch the scuffle over the cash.

In the knot of action, the old man stood up and called to Kemper. ”You all ain’t gone say nothin’ about this here deal to them boys, is you?”

”I doubt it will come up.”



He followed the open path between boat and brick along the levee. He was in such high spirits, he pushed down the urge to partake of his stash.

## Chapter Twenty

Liberty Investigations

Downtown St. Louis, 10:25 a.m.

As usual, the Sunday streets were uncrowded save the occasional carriage leisurely rolling past, wheels creaking and horseshoes clapping on the worn bricks.

Alexis was climbing the steps of the Liberty Investigations Building when she heard someone shouting from the intersection to the east.

"Miss Free! Miss Free!" It was the manager from the Hotel Crawford. He gave the impression he had run the entire way, for his shirt all around the collar and his face were drenched with sweat. "Miss Free, I'm so glad I found you. I have some information about those fellows you were asking about."

He was panting but beaming.

"Why, Mister . . ." She was embarrassed. "I'm so sorry, but it appears I have forgotten your name."

"That's quite alright, I don't believe I actually had the chance to tell you: Cecil Rosewater."

"My, Mister Rosewater, you seem to be out of breath—"

"Please, call me Cecil. I knew that timely information is quite important in your line of work and I aim to be timely where you are concerned."

He gave her a giddy smile and she hoped he was light-headed after his jog, but his idiotic zeal persisted and she worried the fellow's motivation went beyond the limits of a professional relationship.

He courted her with information like some men brought flowers.

"Please, Cecil, do come in and we shall discuss this." She touched his arm lightly, regretting it immediately. He grew even more flushed, if it were possible. His round, red head resembled a beet shoved into a paper collar.

"Right, right," he said, looking about the streets. "It wouldn't do for a detective to be discussing a case out here."

"No, it would not."

She unlocked the front doors and led him up the stairs to the upper floors. Their footsteps echoed through the empty hallway as they passed the deserted offices. The shades were uniformly halfway drawn. They reached the end of the corridor and went into the library.

"Please, Cecil, make yourself comfortable."

He waited for her to seat herself behind the desk before he drew one of the leather chairs closer to the desk.

He was looking around the room with awe when she brought him back at hand. "Now, what is this information you have gone out of your way to bring me?"

"Oh, it's no trouble at all! I knew you would want to hear this and it also gives us a chance to—" He leaned on the edge of his seat, back straight, as Alexis worried he may pitch forward and smack his head on the desk.

"Cecil, I do apologize, but this information?"

"Yes," he said, a bit deflated. "There was a fellow last night who came around asking after the men who worked for us—the ones who had the altercation with the young girl and her uncle yesterday?"

She straightened at this, interlacing her fingers before her, "Yes?"

”He was an older fellow and very scruffy-looking, thruth be told. *Very* scruffy. He was asking as to their whereabouts. He told us he was an old acquaintance of the two men. I wonder in what capacity they were friends . . .”

”You say, ‘we,’ was it you that this man talked to?”

”Well,” he said tilting his head slightly, ”I was then on break, but when I learned of this, I spoke at length with the employees who actually spoke with him.”

She let out a sigh. ”Did you at least get a description? And what did the other employees tell him?”

”He was of middle age, quite sickly looking and had ill-fitting clothing. He was told little, for the employees knew very little.”

”Did they get his name? Where he was going?” She plucked a pen from the well works, dipped it and was poised over a sheet of stationary.

”They did not get his name, no, or anything else for that matter. I have gone ahead and put a stop to the idle chatter; I told the employees if they are discovered speaking to non-employees about anything that goes on there, they will be let go.”

”Cecil, no.” She shook her head as she replaced the pen. ”If you do that, they will no longer be able to supply any information to me—to us.”

He frowned at this rebuke, blinking rapidly.

Alexis thought he was about to cry and it made her uncomfortable—and mad. She softened her tone.

”You inform them that not only should they notify you if any other people are inquiring about this matter, but that if the information proves to be fruitful, they will be well compensated. I include you in this transaction, of course.”

He brightened. ”Why, yes, Miss Free. I had not thought of that. I’ll see to it as soon as I return to the hotel. As for me, there is no need to pay me, as a matter of fact

I was wondering if you might be free tonight and if I could be so bold as to ask you—  
”

The library door opened and Alexis’s father, Benjamin, looked inside. ”I thought I heard voices. I should have known the only person here on a Sunday—besides me—had to be you. I see you’re with someone, so I shall be up in my office—” He slowly withdrew his curious face from the door.

”No, Father! Um, please come in. This is the fellow from the Hotel Crawford. The one I told you about last night?” She stood and nodded to Cecil.

The two men shook and exchanged pleasantries.

”I don’t want to interrupt . . .” Benjamin said as he once again backed away to the door.

”Actually, Father, you and I need to discuss this new information immediately. Mister Rosewater—I mean Cecil, I would like to thank you and remind you that anything new you discover, please feel free to contact my father here. I am afraid he and I need to be alone just now, but thank you again for coming down.”

”Your father? I’m afraid I do not understand. Are you not still investigating this? Is your father taking over the case?”

”Hmph. Would that be such a bad thing, my good man? I am the founder of this company and though I am no longer in the field . . .” his bruised ego radiated. He rocked back and forth on his heels, thumbs behind his lapels.

”No, Cecil, I am sorry for the confusion,” Alexis said. ”I am still investigating this, but the case has now expanded to the point where I have to follow its progress outside the city limits, so my father will be your contact until I return.”

Obvious disappointment washed over him. His deeds had put him in her good graces, but that did not matter if she left town.

He pouted his good byes and departed.

”What in the world was that about?” her father asked.

”You just saved me a dinner date with that man,” she replied, collapsing back into the chair.

”Oh, my.” Benjamin looked at the door, readjusting his judgment of the man.

”’Oh, my,’ indeed. Father, there is something he related to me that I would like you to look into. Can you call your friends on the board at the Asylum and ask them for all the information they have on the man who escaped last night, a Kemper Bidwell?”

”Certainly, Dear,” he said as approached the desk, picking up the pen and taking notes. ”Does this man figure into the scheme ? An accomplice, perhaps?”

”No, father, I think it may be worse than that. I believe it is time to call in a favor or two from your military cronies and see what you can unearth about this Bidwell man, and Silas McDonough and Hercules Bennet.”

”Are you going to explain this knot to me, or am I just to be your secretary?” He smiled lightly as he picked up the paper and waved the ink dry.

”Oh, Father, don’t be so dramatic. I will explain it tonight whilst I pack.”

”Pack? I was under the impression your comments to that irritating fellow were a ruse to derail his amorous intentions. Where in the world are you off to?”

”Arizona. I am hoping to travel Union Pacific and pick along their trail.”

”You’re sure these men took her by train?”

”No, but it is one possibility and if I find out different along the way, there are many opportunities to alter my course.”

Benjamin Free folded the note and placed it in his breast pocket. "You're packing tonight...when are you leaving? Hopefully you will wait to say goodbye to your mother; she's out with Kendall's parents for the day . . ."

"No doubt trying to wed me off. It is a shame she's married to you. I think she would wed him herself if she were available. No, I will be home later to see her. Now I need to find out where exactly this Arizona grandfather lives. If I can gather enough information, I hope to leave on the late train tonight to Kansas City." She turned to a stack of mining registry books and dug in. "If he has a mining claim. I'm sure there is record of it here."

He watched her for but a moment. A moment he locked away in his mind to treasure forever. Benjamin and his wife had only one child blessed upon them. He chided himself for the selfish feelings he had when she was born. He had wanted a boy and was silently disappointed. Looking at her working away at a fresh lead, taking the legacy of his agency into the future, he would not have had it any other way.

The person she grew into was so much more than he ever hoped for in any child—male or female. He was amazed by the way she related to their clients and cases on a more human level than he was capable of. What warmed him the most was the way she stepped away from the money involved to look right to the safety of this girl, this Emma Colson, to see the help she needed.

Alexis made his heart swell. He knew there was no way to express it to her though he tried feebly at times like this.

He pulled himself away from her, anchored his hand on the door knob and asked, "You know how much I love you and how proud I am of you, don't you, Alexis? One day, this will all be yours and I couldn't be happier that it will be left in your hands."

"I'm sorry? What was that?" Alexis said absently as she poured over the pages, her face buried.

"Nothing, dear. We will discuss it later—after this case."

"Oh, Father? I wanted to ask," not looking up from the research, "Do you still have the Buntline? The one with the detachable rifle stock?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." Concern overtook his moment of pride and contentment. "Are you planning gunplay? I'm not so sure I feel comfortable with this—"

"No, father, I do not anticipate 'gunplay,' but I do think being prepared for any eventuality is not uncalled for . . ."

"Yes, dear, of course. I will have Henry clean and pack it."

"That will not be necessary; I will clean and pack it myself. You always said, 'never let another tend to your weapons for you. You're the one it will be most important to.'"

He raised his brows high and nodded. "I said that? Hmm. Good advice, that. Well, until tonight, my dear."

He smiled as she ignored his departure, for she was already about fourteen hundred miles away in research.

As Benjamin opened the door, he was surprised to find a nervous-looking Cecil Rosewater standing near the door.

"Ah, Mister Rosewater," Benjamin said. "I thought you had left."

Alexis looked up only long enough to roll her eyes.

Cecil fidgeted with the brim of his hat, looking up and down the hallway. "Yes, yes, I had left but I got a little turned around and couldn't find the stairs."

"Ah. Let me show you out," Benjamin said, closing the door behind him.



Alexis flipped the pages of the registry and muttered, "Yes, please show him out. Out of my life, if you don't mind."

## Chapter Twenty One

Smitty's, 10:51 a.m.

Kemper had missed Smitty's on the first pass. Upon retracing his steps, he finally located the foundry. He was relieved to find it closed. The more people around, the more likely his prey could be alerted. He hoped to surprise his old 'friends' if they were still thereabouts.

He considered his lack of weaponry, but his fervor imposed itself on his reasoning and he forged ahead unarmed. He nosed his way around the compound, however, and found an iron bar that would have to suffice if violence came up.

The main building was chained up at the wide front doors and all windows secured. He was aware of his exposure beneath the sun to everyone under it. He was sweating more than he had in years. He wiped his clammy forehead, swilled some of his happy juice and moved off toward the back of the weathered structure.

He tripped over a fat, rusty cable hidden beneath a layer of dried mud and caught himself before he went down. The iron bar fell from his grasp, striking a sheet of scrap metal. The clang echoed about the yard and he froze, waiting for some sign he had been discovered. He only heard the squawking of the river birds fighting over a morsel in the shallows of the nearby banks.

He continued on.

The foundry abutted an old abandoned building. Kemper stopped, for he thought he heard a voice.

He did. Through the puckered boards he heard it again.

"Help! Is there someone out there? You must help me!"

Kemper tried to place the source and soon decided it was coming from inside the foundry, close to where he stood outside.

"Hello? Who is that?" He asked through the wall. He turned his back to the siding and slid down till he sat on his haunches.

Silence.

"Who is calling for aid?"

"Who is out there?" A pitiful voice asked from inside, "That you, Romeo? Listen here! They all left and now I think it only fair that you unhang me. I swear I won't say nothing to nobody. Please, Romeo! You know I been a good friend to you. I can't feel my legs nor arms no more!" The voice was rising in desperation. "I am afraid it may become permanent!"

Not being aware in the slightest what the pleading man meant, it was clear to Kemper this man was being held against his will. That fact couple with the foundry being the last known destination of McDonough and Bennet spurred Kemper into action.

He moved along the wall and found a plank which was rotted and warped at the bottom. He wedged the iron bar between the planks but stopped.

"Are you alone in there, friend?" He stared at the wood as if he could peer through.

"Yes! Yes, I am! Who is that?" The forlorn tone turned hopeful.

Kemper did not answer, but instead put what modest muscle he still had into prying out the bad plank. It cracked a few feet up from the dusty ground. He tossed it away. He was unable to slip through such a narrow opening, so he plied the bar to the adjacent plank and soon had a generous crawl space. He tossed the bar in before him and snaked through.

Going from the blinding morning sunshine into the dark building, it took time for his eyes to adjust. He held still, crouched in the opening, listening for anything beyond his own heartbeat.

Pie noticed Kemper in the gap and pleaded to his would-be savior. "Please, mister! Over here. In the corner. I'm hangin' on this hook over here."

Kemper made his way toward the voice and stood looking down on Pie. The man before him was bound about the ankles with hemp rope strung over the hook of a rusty block and tackle used to lift the heavy forge equipment. His hands were tied behind him, his face a truly frightening shade of reddish-purple.

Even upside down, the man's hideous bowler clung to his head. A chewed up rag lay on the ground below him. Kemper knew this fellow had been hard at work but only managed to remove his gag.

"Please unhook me, sir."

Kemper was about to oblige, but a thought struck him. "Who are you and how do I know you are not some dark character? What do you know of Hercules Bennet and Silas McDonough? Are you friend or foe to these men, for I will tell you now, I am conscribed by a blood oath to bring those scoundrels to justice. If you be their friend, I would just as soon leave you trussed up, and move along to find them."

"What manner of fool are you, Mister? Why would a friend of those bastards be strung up so in their lair?" He bucked sideways to add emphasis. He swung slowly and the beam above groaned.

"Careful, *Mister*; such talk will not get you down any faster. I will un-hogtie you if you give your word you will tell me where to find them and thereafter stay out of my way."

"A deal is only struck on a handshake, and as you can see . . ." He tipped his head to indicate his predicament.

Kemper wrapped his arms around the man, lifted him and slipped the ropes binding Pie's legs over the hook. Not having much more strength than that, Kemper let go. Pie landed on the top of his head and the rest of his body slapped down against the floor in a cloud of dust.

"Ouch! You didn't have to drop me on my cranium." Pie complained, writhing in pain.

"Apologies. You're fatter than you look."

Pie stopped writhing long enough to fire Kemper a testy look. "I shall not take offense and will assume your direct and mean talk is just your brand of humor." He squirmed artfully upon the floor, slipped his hands from behind him under his legs and rose, teetering as he greeted him. "Many thanks, my friend! You wouldn't happen to have a knife of some kind upon you?"

Kemper gave no answer and soon Pie hopped about with legs tied, searching the room, ultimately finding a jagged saw on a nearby bench. "Over here. If you wouldn't mind lending me a hand?" His hat was as flat as a mesa, tilted askew, but it never came off.

Kemper did as asked, and though the rough work in the dim lighting resulted in a snag or two on the flesh of the rescued man's wrists, the rope was cut in a short time. Pie took no chances with the leg work, as he cut his own ropes.

Kemper noticed the man had but one shoe. "May I ask what happened to your footwear? Why are you half shod?"

"A dirty trick played on me by the scoundrel Herc," Pie proved the hat was not glued to his head as he plucked it off and punched it back out. As he wedged it back on

his sweaty skull, he grinned. "The name is Pie—just Pie, and I sure do thank you mightily."

He shook Kemper's hand vigorously yet briefly and went back to rubbing his sore wrists, streaking them with blood from the bad saw work. "Though you may have just saved my hide from an undefined sentence here on the hook, I am obliged to let you know you have done missed your quarry by no more than an hour or two—though it is damned hard to measure time when trussed the way I was. Hell, it could have been longer. It sure seemed like it. You ever sleep hung up-side down? Well, I will let you know, you should just skip right on by the experience if it ever comes around. I may have passed out for a minute or two by sheer exhaustion, but in all, I remember every second that—"

"Could you pipe down for a minute, Pie?—if that's your real name," Kemper had the strong urge to slap him, but knew it may staunch the flow of information. "You say I just missed them? How do you mean? Did they leave by wagon or train? Horse, perhaps?"

"No, Sir. Well, they did have their horses, though I might have gotten them as balance due me if it hadn't been for that little wench."

Pie searched the area, picking up various items. He inspected a wrench, shook his head as he replaced it, and went looking for the next thing of value. He found a battered corn cob pipe on a workbench and blew into it, blowing a puff of dead tobacco. He pocketed the pipe and kept searching.

Kemper was short on patience. "What are you doing?"

Pie sifted through a crate of rivets on the floor against the wall. Without looking up he said, "I may as well get some compensation for my incarceration."

"Sir! How did they go?" Kemper was seconds away from hurting this man badly. If he strayed one more word away from the information he wanted, he knew he would certainly choke him.

"They just paddled off on the Lula Belle, that dirty Captain Smitty's wreck. I am fairly certain they had their horses and that girl, but she is now disguised as a boy. I wonder if you know why that would be? Are you a bounty hunter? Did them boys get in some real trouble? I sure do hope so. How much are they bringing in bounty? Is the girl a ransom point? She acted as if she was with them, why she even knocked me on the head, is what little Dee Dee said. I done figured out Dee Dee is actually a she, y'know? Why all this time—"

He could endure no more, so Kemper slapped him lightly with an open palm. He tried not to hurt him, but if an egg must be cracked to make an omelette, then there it was.

"Hey!" Pie said, rubbing his cheek. "Ain't no call to get rough, mister."

Kemper resisted his urge to slap him again, settling on patting the oily, funky man on the shoulder. "I apologize, Pie, but I fear the blood may be gone from your head. You are rambling and if you want to help me catch up to those vermin, you need to focus clearly."

"I understand, but hot damn, did you have to hit me? I been banged up and tossed about more in the last day than a bastard stepchild."

Then something Pie had said a moment ago dawned on Kemper. He had seen them with his own eyes aboard the paddle-wheeler earlier. This sent a jolt of urgency through him. "You must help me, Pie! They are slipping away as we speak. Is there any boat you can get me aboard? I know you are in the employ of one loading now."

”Hold on one moment, mister,” Pie said with an eyebrow cocked. He removed his hat and smoothed the stray hairs, streaking his scalp with blood. ”Now, if them fellows is worth something and you all are pulling down a bounty on them, I believe I am due some recompense for the trouble I have gone through. I can earn my keep here and get you aboard a boat, but I ain’t gonna just sit on my hands. You gotta pay the bird if you want to hear it sing.”

”There is no bounty that I am aware of, though I do assume the law is in pursuit as well. My motives are purely of the selfish nature.” He straightened and his face grew calm. ”I have four dollars and it can be yours if you can gain me passage on the next boat out.”

That left him a mere two dollars and change, but being this close made him even more nonchalant about his financial standing. If he could close the gap quickly, he would even go the remainder of his funds to this disgusting opportunist.

”No, Sir. I know you stand to make a sight more than four dollars bounty. I will consider it a down-payment, but I need some assurance that I will be given my due once I get you your passage. You got anything else of value? I heard them pockets clinking . . .”

The elixir was worth more than gold to Kemper and the thought of bartering with it made him nauseous. ”That noise is my medicine and I shall not bargain with it. Can you simply take my word that I will return and reimburse you?”

It sounded feeble and suspicious even to him. He knew there was only one deal that would be brokered there in Smitty’s foundry.

”Oh really?” Pie slowly raised an eyebrow. ”I bet Smitty even has a bible lying around here for you to swear that pretty oath upon . . .”



As puerile as it had sounded to his ears, Kemper was amazed Pie was so gullible, yet there was that river rat, nosing around for the Good Book to swear a deal upon.

Kemper contemplated the iron bar over near the opening he had come through earlier. He knew he was facing an obstacle he himself had made by releasing Pie.

Pie continued his searching and asked absently. "Medicine, you say? Are you ill?"

A route around the obstacle formed in Kemper's mind. "Yes. Quite ill. The doctors say I have not long to live. I was truly hoping I could find . . ." he looked directly at Pie, no emotion in his own gaze, ". . . revenge. I doubt you would understand. They committed an act that, to this day, is burned upon my soul and I feel I may find no rest unless I balance the scales of justice."

This indeed resonated with Pie. "You may not believe me, but I understand fully what treacherous opportunists those men are."

"Might I suggest a solution that could prove advantageous to both our needs?"

"I will listen," Pie answered, hands tucked in his trouser pockets, looking thoughtful like a salesman hearing a counteroffer.

"What would the weight of a signed promissory note carry?" Kemper asked, inching a closer to the iron bar.

"I do not understand."

"What if I were to give you a written promissory note stating I will pay you eighty percent of the bounty upon my turning them in?" Kemper lied, knowing there was no bounty, and that he planned to never see this man again. "A square deal between gentlemen of a united cause. After all, I will not live long enough to spend this money. The doctors will try to take it from me anyway to reimburse them for their services. I

would rather see you spending that cash in good spirit than to see them stuffing their already fat wallets.”

”I see. And for this note, what do you ask of me?” Pie rocked on his mis-shod feet.

”Simply a similar promissory note, a letter of reference to the captain of that ship you work for. You tell him to ride me down after the men and after I find them, I return them here for the money and we shall divide it.”

Pie smiled wryly, his eyes narrowed. ”He is a hard man. He will not take you aboard unless you pay a fare or work in trade. You do not seem hale enough to take on a deckhand position. No offense.”

”None taken. You are just stating a pathetic truth. I must confide, however, the closer I draw to this rabble, the more I am enlivened. I assure you I can do the job if it aids my quest. How do you reply? Do we have a bargain?”

Pie took all of two seconds to contemplate. ”There is a clerk’s desk near the door to the yard. Perhaps it will have paper and pen.”

He watched Pie make his way past the forge pits. Kemper went to the hole in the wall, picked up the iron bar where he had tossed it and tucked it carefully into his waistband. He closed his jacket over it.

Kemper drew up his contract first, on the back of an old work order. The sum was unspecified, but with his signature, he agreed eighty percent of the imaginary bounty would come back to Pie.

Pie perused the document. He stroked his chin, contemplating some detail. ”It says eighty percent, but it don’t say eighty percent of what.”

Kemper shivered in anger. He held his ire and said flatly, "As you know, bounties vary depending on the condition of the wanted persons. One rate alive and one dead, so . . ."

Pie's eyes widened and a sinister grin crept from one side of his lips. "You plan on killin' them?"

Kemper took a deep breath. "Can you just . . ." He nodded to the paper in Pie's hands.

Pie read it twice, folded it neatly and stowed it in his hip pocket before scribing Kemper's introduction letter.

While he fulfilled his side of the deal, Pie gave Kemper the rest of the information he had. He explained that despite being locked inside, he heard most of the discussion between the men and Captain Smitty—including the snag boat contract and the final destination.

Pie's letter was a potent reference. If he were a steamboat captain, Kemper would be remiss to not hire the man being described.

Kemper took his letter, pocketed it and asked Pie, "Can you think of anything else which may be a boon to me? Any other information?"

Pie scratched his chin in thought. Kemper wanted to be done with this buffoon, but he stayed his anger.

"Now that you mention it, they was talkin' about goin' down to Houston," Pie said, his eyes lighting up at the memory. "Yessir! Houston to get something or other and then on to Arizona. Yessir! Prescott, Arizona. Some old man named Colson is waiting for them."

Pie was so proud of himself he nearly burst.

”Arizona . . .” Kemper whispered to himself, lodging the word deep in his mind.  
”Fine, anything at all else? Anything?”

”No sir, I have given you all I know.”

”Good. Tell me, do you have a weapon of any kind? A pistol or knife, anything of that nature?”

”If I had any such thing, don’t you think I would have used it to avoid capture? Why do you ask me this?”

”Oh, just curious,” he sighed, as he produced the pipe.

The iron bar did not register with Pie as being a weapon until it was too late. He looked at it with innocent curiosity as Kemper lifted it high and swung as hard as he could manage, striking Pie’s face with a thick, wet thud.

Kemper felt Pie’s cheek bones crumbling as subtle vibrations down the length of pipe, through his fingers and trailing off at his knuckles. Blood sprayed in a vaporous cloud across Kemper’s eyes. Pie was going down fast but the swift sideways blow snapped his head to his right and the bowler lifted upward off his head. As Pie slumped to the ground, Kemper reached out and snatched the tumbling hat in mid-air and put it on himself. It fit loosely, but comfortably.

Kemper did not feel any remorse or bloodlust when he gave Pie two extra whacks on the skull where he lay. As with money and food, blood meant naught to him. These last two blows had made certain Pie’s fate. Blood had poured freely from his nose and mouth, but soon slowed to a mere dripping. As he had learned from the countless dying soldiers in Andersonville Hospital: when the heart stopped, the blood always did too.

Searching the pockets, Kemper found his note of promise and two dollars. He had turned a profit today—if he cared about such things. He used Pie’s soiled

handkerchief to wipe the blood from his face and neck, then shoved it back in the dead man's pocket.

Kemper picked up Pie's legs and dragged him to the hole in the wall. He stuck his face through the opening and found nobody nearby. He climbed out first and, with much effort, pulled the dead man through, smearing a thin crimson swath in their wake. He secreted the body away behind a stack of rusting sheets of iron.

Not wasting another moment, Kemper sipped his early lunch of opiate and found Pie's steamer of employment.

Timing could not have been more fortuitous as the ship was ready to launch. He was directed to the captain, a sour-looking man who also appeared to take a liquid lunch—but of a different flavor. Kemper showed the note from Pie and after a brief but intense grilling he was aboard.