

Chapter Twenty Two

The Lula Belle on the Mississippi, 1:45 p.m.

The iron strands of the railroad's web were being strung across the remote corners of America. Whether wanted or not, the lives that rode those rails were changed forever, but that was made by the science and technology of man.

The Mississippi was a mythic beast that changed lives as well, but man had never tamed her. Man only slipped a bridle on her and road her bareback as she bucked and rolled through the middle of what was once a wild frontier. The Mississippi was never broken, but in modern minds, she was put out to pasture in the advent of the Iron Horse.

The train was a wonder of science, but the Mississippi was magic.

Emma felt that magic as she sat in the early morning sun on the foredeck of the Lula Belle. She had stood at one point or the other along the Missouri shoreline near her childhood home and gazed in mild awe as the river flowed past. She had been impressed, but never really moved.

Emma rode those waters and realized for the first time how powerful and transformative the flowing aorta of America was. Towns and plantations were built up and down the river and they prospered for many years. Some remained as stubborn, hopeful bastions in a war long lost. Others survived the decades and the real war, only to be swept away by the water's ever-changing course or by the progress of those rails crawling westward.

All along the Mississippi, Empires were built and crumbled, generations raised and moved on.

She was moving on too, and the farther away from her home she steamed, the more it sunk in that she was really going to be free. It scared her quite a bit.

Silas and Herc constructed a makeshift camp between the Lula Belle's huge iron crane beams at the front of the boat. They strung together a few of the old tarpaulins that normally covered the ship's cargo. This was an "empty run" so the tarps went unused.

Silas climbed one beam and then the other to the height of about twelve feet, lashing each end of the cloth to the supports, stretching them tightly to provide a lean-to shade from the sun beginning to beat down steadily. Herc took the excess of canvas as it draped over the sides and front of the crane and tucked them under crate edges or odds and ends found on the deck. They had an actual tent.

Silas rigged an awning to shield the horse's heads. The men had decided to leave them saddled since they had not been ridden that day. Many of the supplies were taken from the mule and placed amongst the machinery beneath the crane. It was evident the mule was still nervous about his boat travel, for he let his bowels free at an annoying rate. He was moved and tied to a support beam closer to the main structure of the boat, where his evacuations could be more easily nudged over the side.

"May I help?" Emma asked, sitting at the bow, legs dangling over the churning water.

Herc moved into the shade of the tent they had built and looked around to see if anybody had heard her. "No, *Emmet*, we are almost finished with our task, but may I caution you again about keeping your voice down? You ain't yet mastered the male cadence—no offense. You are burdened with the voice and tone of a prairie songbird. How about we tell everyone she's a mute?" he said to Silas, who was setting a package in a clear space in the shade.

”She is needing to get it down tight, Herc. How in the world is she gonna do that if you hush her?”

”Well, alright, but maybe she could sort of whisper more . . .”

”Sorry,” Emma said in a voice so below her range, her voice croaked.

”That was better, but unless you’re intending to start off a bullfrog mating frenzy, you may need to bring it up a touch,” Silas said, laughing.

Ezra Bean had gone off into the woods on the Illinois side of the river. He returned after a bit and found a nice perch in the crook of the massive hook dangling from the crane. There he swayed contentedly in the breeze, with a commanding view of all he surveyed.

Emma turned back to become lost in the river again. The bright brown water slapped against the hull as the Lula Belle pushed through. Eddies formed and churned in the path and the colors changed from deep sorrel to light goldenrod. A lapping wave crashed, sending a cascade of beads across Emma’s face. Looking ahead, the wide currents spread out, creating a fairly smooth surface.

Sandy banks lined the wide expanse. Some were thin slivers of pale, baked mud, and others widened and undulated to become vast white dunes spanning many dozens of rods from tree line to water. Dead trunks thick and thin lined the banks, some parallel to the flow and others half submerged. Emma pictured the rise and fall and power of the river over time.

The plane of water was periodically broken near either shore by some hungry fish snapping up insects on the surface, or by an even hungrier fowl diving into the murk to pluck a minnow or small panfish. The life hidden beneath the surface of the shining, muddy waves was mirrored by the life hidden amongst the dense foliage on the banks. A chaotic ballet of birds and mammals danced through the branches and

leaves and bushes below. There were popping flashes of bright red feathers here, shining grey coats of fur there. Though rolling down the center of the wide highway of water, far from either shore, Emma made out a murder of crows in one massive, ancient oak and found a horde of muskrats foraging around a water-rotted elm.

It was not windy, yet a brief, faint breeze swept through the cottonwoods sending a flurry of white seed pods out over the river. They collected in a downy mass, then flung out and strewn one by one on solitary paths to waft down and float atop the rolling waters. A few made the journey through the winds to the Lula Belle where they collected together in quivering clusters at the edges of the iron crane.

A solitary dragonfly whipped its way toward Emma, darting down in an erratic pattern to dip quickly into the water and flit back up as it kept course for her. It hovered, matching speed with Emma and the steamboat. They inspected each other closely for a moment before the dragonfly zipped off behind her and shot off through the frame of the crane.

”Emmet, can you join us here for a moment?” Silas asked.

She swung her aching legs up onto the deck and coaxed them beneath her. She felt another wave of nausea. Her constant nausea had been done no favors by the motion of the boat upon the currents. Silas and Herc were busy tending to their firearms. They sat opposite each other, cross-legged with a blanket laid out between. Upon this was strewn the parts and pieces of their weaponry in various states of assembly. Cleaning cloths, oils and reamers were deftly put in use.

Herc was tending a pistol while a repeating rifle lay beside him and Silas was polishing the barrel of a long rifle she did not recognize. The hammer was a long, curved affair with a flat lever on the end. The trigger guard was thin polished silver and cocked out at an odd angle leaving the breach open. Behind the firing mechanisms

was a range finder folded down against the stock and on the tip of the barrel perched a small tube for aiming.

Emma did not know anything about the weapon, but she knew it surely had to be as remarkable as the man handling it.

"You gentlemen expecting trouble here in the middle of the river?" Emma asked, practicing her tone.

Herc smiled and nodded in appreciation. "That's much better, Emmet. I hear a little bass, though not too much. As to your question, we began our adventures the moment we climbed aboard. From here on forward, the safe cradle of city softness is no more. Accepted, we may have no immediate threats bearing down upon us presently, but I would rather be ready instead of surprised, full of regrets and bullets."

"I had always hoped when I am dead, I might finally let go of my regrets, not have a whole bunch more heaped upon me at the moment I am going," Silas opined as he inspected the view through his pistol's barrel. He blew into it and took a small file to a burr only he could see.

Emma wondered what regrets he had collected over the years. She hoped she would not be the source of more.

Along Emma's thoughts, Herc injected, "Son, your only regret has been you did not unload me upon Estelle when the chance swam by. You been needing to get off on your own for many a year, and yet here I am like a tick in your backside."

Silas smiled wide. Emma watched his eyes shine and the lines of laughter beside them deepen. She thought he was a handsome fellow when he laughed. His face shed years and his eyes sparkled like an impish child.

"No, my friend, I reckon I would have been dead many times over of it weren't for your heavy, hairy hand to guide me along,"

She supposed this was as near to compliments and camaraderie as these two strayed. The gentle ribbing reminded her of her father and his teasing. She missed him, but turned the sad thoughts aside quickly, for he was gone and Theo eclipsed all fatherly memories. In some dark, selfish moments she was even angry at her father for leaving her in Theo's clutches. She looked upon her current guardians and absorbed the fact they behaved as a father and son, more than some who were bound by blood.

She watched them working on their weapons and a thought struck her. "Am I to be allowed a sidearm?"

The two men barely glanced at each other, but Herc's brief I-told-you-so look to his partner suggested the men had discussed the possibility.

"Yes, you probably should be armed. In the unlikely event we become separated, you need to protect yourself," Herc said as he brushed out the chamber of his pistol. "We bought you a gun in town."

He reached down and plucked a short-barreled revolver that looked anything but new, or even workable. The spinning chamber was pitted and deeply tarnished and the once creamy colored ivory handle was browned from the oily hands of some previous owner. Emma thought the barrel appeared bent.

"It does not even look as if it could fire without exploding in my hand," she said. "Can it even be operated?"

Silas and Herc exchanged another glance.

Silas looked up at Emma, "Seeing as how we are short on funds, we couldn't afford a fancy brand new pistol for you."

She reddened at the reminder of her short changing their business dealings with them yesterday morning.

"I'm sorry, Emma—Emmet," he too, reddened as he replied. "That did not come out quite as I had meant it. I speak a little frankly sometimes and my feelings are hardly veiled and thus, well-known."

"'Frankly,' he says," Herc chortled. "Sometimes your sharp talk could keep a herd of cattle penned. What he should have come around and said was: it's the best we could get and it will have to do. That is, unless you had no aversion to brandishing this . . ."

He flipped up the flap of a worn saddlebag nearby and retrieved a long-barreled single action Colt revolver.

"How did you get that?" she asked excitedly. "That was my father's! The one I learned to shoot with." Her confusion was quickly set aside by wonder and joy. She received it like a long-lost friend coming back from the dead and standing before her.

"I, um, *borrowed* it from your Uncle Theo." He turned it over in his hands, looking for the special qualities only Emma could recognize.

Emma shuffled on her knees closer to Herc who extended it out, holding it ceremoniously with two hands. "I reckoned it was his and so thought you may not want to see it lest it remind you of him."

"Theo claimed it as his—along with everything else that used to be my father's . . ." She took the pistol and wrapped her hand around the grip. She turned away from the men, laid a blanket of her own in the shade nearby, and gingerly placed the weapon on the soft felt. She returned to the fellows and collected a few of their cleaning supplies. "May I?"

With curiosity, Herc nodded, "Why, of course . . ."

Silas raised a brow at his partner.

Emma laid the implements neatly around the Colt, sat cross-legged on the blanket and pushed her Stetson back on her head so as to give full view of her task. She paused briefly to gaze upon the weapon. She slowly ran her fingers along the length of the barrel, stroking the sharp downward curve of the walnut grip.

Herc rocked himself as if to rise to her aid, but was discouraged by Silas, who lightly touched his arm and shook his head.

She at once swung out the cylinder gate, revealing the bright brass rims of the unspent cartridges. The ejector, a small rod along the length of the barrel, was employed by being pushed backward into each chamber where, one by one, the ejected cartridges slid out and clicked together in her palm. She placed them to the side. Her nimble fingers worked proficiently as Emma smoothly half-cocked the gun then pressed a button on the frame below and to the front of the cylinder. She slid out the pin holding the cylinder in place, tilted the gun sideways and popped the cylinder out into her hand. She picked up a short, thin brush, and attached it to the end of a small ramrod.

She bit her lower lip absently as she worked, her hands beginning to grey lightly from the fouling collected by the brush and rod. Both men stopped their own work to admire hers.

Emma daubed the brush with cleaning oil from a small tin, then worked the brush inside the barrel. She repeated the process for each cylinder and held it out toward the shining river to inspect her work. She blew into one of the cylinders to remove some residue.

Next, she worked the bristles all around the inside of the gun frame, around the trigger the firing pin, and finally into the gap where the hammer and pin struck. She oiled a small cloth patch and, using the rod, slid it into and through the barrel and

each one of the cartridge chambers. When a cloth became too soiled, she tossed it aside and began anew with a clean one. Lastly, she oiled a larger cloth and worked it into every crevice and corner of the frame she had used the brush upon. One last general oiling and wiping and the entire disassembly process was reversed.

Emma serenely clicked back the hammer a few times, half cock, then full, while rotating the cylinder with her fingers, which were darkened from the lead of previous firings. She picked up the five cartridges, inspected them and then slid them into the cylinder, leaving one chamber empty.

The entire process took but a few moments, and the men were held mesmerized, surprised by her skill. Herc's spell was broken when Emma swung the gate closed on the cylinder and Herc noticed one cartridge left on the ground beside her. He rose and picked it up, offering it tentatively.

She declined it, smiling politely. "Father always taught me, 'Best to keep the hammer resting on an empty'."

"Well, I suppose that gun's hers." Herc's awe was barely muted.

"Suppose so," Silas said, laughing, as he tossed Emma a holster and belt.

The gear and camp having been tended to with satisfaction, the men wandered about the boat to re-acquaint themselves with the craft and crew. Emma hung back and only nodded or tipped her hat in greeting, or mainly slouched about with hands in pocket.

The crew was of a pleasant sort, save the wild-looking fellow with the mangy hat whom Dee Dee had warned Emma about. He did not come forward to introduce himself, but merely skulked about with rope and pulley. He did, however, pitch a constant staring match with Emma. Her unease grew with every glance she stole, but she never held eye contact with him for more than a brief second.

Sharp and Preacher were introduced as they were finishing up the stowing of the tie lines.

"Nice to meet you, Emmet," they said in unison.

"Emmet don't talk much, so don't be expectin' no sparkling conversation," Herc said.

"It is good that one should wait quietly for the Lord to speak to us," said the twin she assumed to be Preacher. "That way you can hear every word He says."

"Hold up on the sermon, brother," said the mirror image beside him. He turned to the passengers and asked with poorly-veiled nonchalance, "Y'all got time to play some cards?"

As similar as they were, they had their own distinct callings. Emma wished one had a halo and the other a pitchfork so she might tell them apart more easily.

"We ain't got no money to waste in donation to God or to lose at cards," Silas said with a broad smile. "Check back with us in the evening when you get down time. We may have a friendly game workin', but the pots is gonna be low."

"Check y'all later, then," Sharp said with mirage of cash before his eyes.

The trio strolled away and Herc turned to Emma. "Why, I never thought to wonder. Do you play cards with the same skill you clean guns, or is that too much for a road-worn traveler to ask?"

In a voice fulfilling her disguise in tenor and depth, "I have sat in on a game or three."

Herc clapped and rubbed his hands together. "This journey is surely brightening at every bend!"

"He cheats, you know," Silas leaned in and whispered to Emma. His breath was sweet in her nostrils.

She forced herself not to turn to his face, so close to hers. "So do I, if required or provoked."

Herc was ignorant of the aside as he looked up to the pilot house. "Emmet, you go and bust out the cards from my gunny and start the shuffle. I'm gonna head up and have a word with our illustrious captain and see if he is gonna be easin' up on them boilers. We must be trotting along at thirteen knots. That cannot keep up. This old tub needs more care than he's willing to spare."

"Aye, aye," Emma replied, saluting him. Herc nodded, accepting the formal address and strode off.

"He used to have a small stake in the Lula Belle, but sold it off to Smitty when we hired on at the hotel," Silas explained. "He may be having proprietary longings from the past. Still, we are chugging a little fast for boiler health. Same as running a horse too hard. You have to pace a boiler."

They watched as Herc climbed the stairs and stepped into the pilot house.

"I would like to see the steering room up there . . ." Emma said hopefully.

"Let's give it a while. You need to be more familiar with Smitty before he lets you in the pilot house. You go on back to the tent. I'm gonna go and start to bargaining with the cookie about galley privileges. He's been wanting my cobbler recipe for a while now."

Chapter Twenty Three

They parted company, Silas disappearing into a room near the back of the steamer, and Emma beneath the cool tarps of the tent. She found the deck of cards in question, sat down, took off her hat and set it aside, then shuffled the soiled, battered cards.

A game of solitaire was underway when she noticed a flap of the tent rise behind her. She did not look up, but broke up the game and collected the cards.

"That sure is a nice hat," an unfamiliar voice said.

Emma turned with a start to find the surly fellow who had been giving her the stink eye all day.

"Name's Finkle," he leered. Emma noticed he was not staring at her but at her new hat. "You wanna cut the deck for that hat of yours?"

His voice was as oily and thick as the engine grease smeared on his clothing. He had no teeth—not even a chipped nugget of one—and his beard was not a beard, but a stringy mess of thin patchy strands. His own hat was even more pitiful and disgusting up close. Sections of the brim were torn or missing and a fly or two darted in and out through gaps in the crown. She even noted a few greybacks milling about. She feared the lice would look around the tent and deem the new surroundings much more habitable and therefore jump ship en masse.

"What? You ain't got nothin' to say about the proposition?" Finkle said, training his wild stare directly on her.

She looked over at her pistol, but it was too far away on the blanket for her to reach without making a bold statement to this intruder.

”Ya’ll is plain rude. When a man proposes a wager, it’s only polite to pipe up yea or nay. I don’t take kindly to being treated rudely,” he said as he put his hand on the butt of a hefty knife strapped at his side.

”Now, how about the hat . . . I say we forgo the gambling and make an even trade,” he said as he lifted his sour mess of a hat from his head.

Finkle was ripped off his feet and out of the tent faster than if tied to a whipped horse. The canvas flapped wildly with the movement. Finkle’s hat, filthy and sweaty, dropped heavily at the opening of the tent. Emma stepped around it and outside to see Herc standing over the man. Finkle was scrambling backward on his bottom.

”Listen here, Mister—” Finkle protested as he took in Herc’s muscle and madness towering over him.

”No! You listen here, you little grease spot! It ain’t civilized nor neighborly to intrude upon a man’s camp without being asked first. I don’t know you from this crew and I don’t want to know you from the manners you display. Now you just toddle on off to your work afore I bring Smitty down here and we discuss the benefits of throwing you overboard.”

Finkle sputtered a string of profanities as he turned a vivid shade of maroon.

”Cursing, though admired when done properly, will not help you here.” Herc took a healthy step toward the man. ”You best get back to whatever job you were doing poorly before I make you a stain on the poop deck. I ain’t gonna tell you again.”

Finkle was still propped up on his backside as he slowly drew his right hand back and placed it on the knife handle.

Ezra Bean broke from his throne high on the crane hook, shrieking as he swept down toward the prone man. Finkle raised his right arm in self defense. Talons slashed lightly across his forearm, tracing shallow slices across the flesh. With one great

downward beat of his wings, Ezra Bean rose and was soon flapping around the crane for another pass.

Thin streams of blood trailed down Finkle's arm. Afraid to bare his face, he remained a-cowering.

Silas appeared from a cabin doorway and quickly took in the scene. Though he did not know how the situation came to that point, he knew by Herc's posture action was required.

The churn and splash of the paddlewheel, the constant slapping of the water against the boat and the omnipresent low rumble of the machinery came together to mask his approach as he snuck up behind Finkle, until he was practically standing on top of him. Finkle's attention was wholly upon Herc and his monologue of threats.

Silas noticed Finkle's hand gripping the knife. He stepped on the man's hand, crushing it like a cornered rodent in the pantry. Finkle howled, drew his hand to his mouth and nursed it there while Silas bent down, snatched up the knife and threw it overboard. A plop, a pillar of water and it sank down beneath the muddy swirls.

Finkle worked his gummy mouth in protest, but Silas quieted him. "Not one word, Mister, or you're going in the drink next. You may not like losing your knife, but you should have contemplated that before you crossed us." Silas crouched down beside the man and stared into his blood shot eyes, searching but finding nothing. "Besides, I couldn't let you keep it and then be wondering with every log I saw if you're sneakin' up on us to use that rusty thing."

"You better scat, Mister," Herc growled. "And we better not see you even lookin' toward our camp the rest of this trip."

Finkel scampered to his feet and ran off, not risking even a single backward glance.

On the upper deck, Smitty leaned out of the pilot house, "What's the bother on my boat? I will nae tolerate horseplay on the Lula Belle!"

"Nothin' Cap'n! You all can get back to ridin' this boat too hard!" Herc called up as he walked over to the abandoned hat and picked it up with two fingers. His distaste was evident by his wrinkled nose as he threw it overboard, too

The hat sank without the preamble of floating. There was not even a bubble to mark the descent. The boat quickly chugged past the burial spot.

Silas met Herc, and as they went into the tent, he asked, "What did he do, anyway?"

"I am not rightly sure. All's I know is he was sticking his nose in our tent."

Emma followed and the three sat down to a game of cards.

The hands were dealt and stared at. There was a round of discards and pick ups. Emma finally broke the quiet and said, "You all know I can take care of things myself." She did not look up from her cards. Her words were terse and pointed.

Herc sorted his cards around in his hands with eyebrows as high as they could rise. "Alright, next time he's all yours." He slapped the cards down with a hoot and then bellowed, "Straight flush, Aces high!"

Silas threw his cards down in mild disgust. "I told you he cheats."

"No doubt there," she replied, "seeing as how I have an ace of spades identical to the one in his hand."

"Why, how in the world . . .?" Herc flustered in mock astonishment.

A new deck was brought forth from Silas' gear. "Stow them funny cards for the yokels, Herc. Now we are going to separate the boys from the men." He looked to Emma and winked. "No offense."

"None taken," she replied in a strong basso.

Herc pouted like a child as he swept up his dubious deck and pushed them in his shirt pocket.

Emma looked at her cards as they were dealt, but she was not focusing upon them, "I have to ask, do you suspect there will be a next time with this Finkle?"

"There's always a next time with the Finkles of life," Herc answered. "You can scare the daylights from a rat, but furry curiosity will ever bring him back."

"Yessir," Silas added as he looked through his cards. "I suspect he will attempt his revenge before morning, but I am not distressed. You will handle him justly, Emmet. What was the focus of his grievance?"

"He claimed he wanted my hat." She discarded an unsatisfactory four of hearts.

"It *is* a nice hat," Herc said as he looked upon his cards with disappointment.

They played for white beans and Herc's pile was soon much smaller than the others. Emma gathered Herc was not very good at cards unless he had his own deck.

The tent proved to be a true Eden on the water, though the celestial furnace raged on outside and even a stiff breeze down the Mississippi was a warm one. The slight shade provided by their encampment was a different, hopeful world.

"You men certainly have constructed a grand palace for us," Emma said.

"Our time served incarcerated at the clutches of that old 'Southern Hospitality' gave rise to the occasion for us to hone them skills," Herc grinned as he wedged out an apple with his knife.

She found it amazing a man could survive the hell on earth that was Andersonville Prison, and yet sit there chuckling lightly.

"You either became as skilled at tent-work as a Bedouin or Blackfoot, or you cooked like a worm in the Georgia mud."

Silas added, "He is correct there. Some men got so sick they just boiled to the color of a lobster, their skin blistered and peeled and—"

"Now let's not get all graphic in nature about it," Herc cut Silas off. "Emmet here don't need no nightmares more than what he's got . . ."

Silas nodded and continued, "No shelter was provided by our captors. It was a constant chore to keep your own makeshift tent stretched, and people would steal your shield if you looked away for but a moment. One fellow had used a flag of the United States for a sunshade, and had many detractors who threatened him good. He took it down and scrounged some other fabric, but after a few months, he was allowed to re-string up Old Glory. By then, any old trousers pulled across your head was just as holy as the stars and bars. I remember every day and minute staring out across that sea of desperation." He looked to the river ahead, but only saw the persistent past before his darting eyes. "It was . . . something."

The men sunk back into a mild, silent reverie as the next hand was dealt. Emma kept respectfully quiet for a good ten moments or more, until all were roused by their first visitor, Sharp, the card man.

He played well and fair and soon had the bigger pile of dried white beans they were using to represent money.

"Sharp, you got you enough beans to make a soup for the crew," Herc complained good-naturedly.

Silas was sullen but polite. "I shouldn't have strung out my luck on that last hand. We will surely feel the financial squeeze down the bend."

"Y'all ain't got to worry none," Sharp smiled as he rose from the game. "Romeo said he'd bust my behind if I took money from y'all. Let's just say this was an exercise in humility for y'all and leave it at that."

”You could say it don’t amount to a hill of beans for you,” Herc said. ”Still, we appreciate your generosity and your tutelage.”

Sharp stood at the tent opening, sun shining on his deep brown skin, his smile as bright and warm as any ray of light. ”If I had my druthers, I’d be walking out of here with clanking pockets, but I ain’t gonna get my ass beat by Romeo never again in this life.”

He closed the tent and drifted back to his endless toils.

Moments later, Emma was confused in thinking Sharp had changed his mind and returned to retrieve his winnings. There he stood in a different shirt—this one blue and buttoned up to collar and down to cuff despite the weather. Then she saw the fervent look in the eyes. This was Sharp’s twin brother, Preacher.

”I have not come to gamble. I have come to see that every man, woman and child I meet does not wager their souls against the sinful ways of this realm. May I testify as to the power of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?”

Herc set the cards aside and stretched his legs out before him. ”You *are* in a tent; let’s have us a service.”

”Amen,” Silas added.

If he thought the men had been flip in speaking about the Lord, Preacher showed no injury to the words. Preacher set sail through one of the stormiest sermons Emma had ever weathered. The young man’s verve was infectious. She did not subscribe to the same tenets and theologies as Preacher, but she found herself nodding along with his enthusiasm. Herc nodded also, but in sleepiness. Silas sat and finished the cleaning of his special rifle. Emma was herself alone responsible in returning Preacher’s attentions.

The young man went without script or scripture before his eyes, but Emma envied the passion emanating from him. He loved the Lord so fully and gave all trust to Him. She had loved her own father with that same abandon and was left alone by him. She went from jealousy to pity as the pulpit-less messenger wound it down. She knew what loneliness lay in store, and though he had faith in *his* Father, she feared he too would be bitterly disappointed in the end.

Preacher shook hands with all and thanked them dutifully for opening their ears and their hearts to "a poor servant of God."

He left a moment later and the three travelers sat in silence to contemplate his words—or at least give a moment to respect his passion. As if a funeral procession were rounding the corner, Herc waited until he was out of sight then immediately shuffled the cards of a new hand.

Over the next hour or so, Herc and the other two took turns entertaining as the men aboard took their individual breaks. A bottle was produced from the ship's stores and Herc took no time draining the unidentifiable liquid. Stories were shared while cards spiraled through the humid oasis between the black iron beams. Many aboard took respite, save Smitty and Finkle and a few men on watch. To a river man, any rare moment of levity and leisure must be stretched in the mind to seem like hours, as a morsel can seem a meal to a starving man.

A few hours after midday, Silas announced he was off to commandeer the galley, as negotiated earlier. "Though our spirits be filled, our bellies are a different matter entirely."

Herc claimed the need to visit the ship's head, but after a half an hour, she heard him being chastised and run off from the pilot house. Upon his return, he confessed to Emma, "That fool won't listen to a syllable of reason. It unnerves me to be pushing

this hard. We only let the paddlewheel go still for that wood stop, but he kept that boiler a-kindle like the eternal flames of Hades. Ain't no boat should be treated such. I fear we may not make Memphis.”

Having no idea of the technical aspects he was speaking of, Emma simply nodded in blind commiseration.

Beyond their shady refuge, the clamor of a battle was waging somewhere in the innards of the main cabins. Emma and Herc looked out the tent to see Ezra Bean fly off as the noise was great enough to roust him from his nest in the eaves of the pilot house. They slipped up the starboard side of the broad deck running alongside the superstructure, arriving in time to witness several kitchen implements flying through an open doorway and out into the river. Emma peered off the edge to see an earthenware pot bobbing in the wake. It tipped to one side, filled with water and quickly sank.

”I wonder if that fellow with the knife has tried the old ’divide and conquer’ on our friend,” Herc whispered over the shouting.

”You mean Finkle?” Emma imagined a pitched battle, but rested easily in the knowledge Silas was more than a match for that scab of a human—unless, perhaps, he had been caught by surprise.

They rounded the corner of the doorway and saw Silas, red-faced and sweat-drenched as he waved a wooden spoon not at Finkle, but a dirty little man in a soiled leather apron.

Silas did not turn to notice his friends, though the little galley master peered around to them with pleading eyes. ”He is mad, I tell you! He has thrown away most of my good pots and spoons—he says I could kill someone with the way I keep my kitchen. Please, do something to stop him before I have no tools left.”

"You should have kept a proper pantry, brother—or never let him near your galley," Herc said. "He is a strict enforcer of proper hygiene and food handling."

"Well, can you hold fault with me? Look here at this venison he was set to poison us with." Silas displayed the haunch of deer, white spots of mildew and several maggots squirming beneath the patchy hide. "He said he was gonna cook out the 'bugs'. I will shoot this man myself before he poisons me with unhealthy carrion."

Herc motioned the cookie to follow him out of the cramped room. "Your best bet now is to step aside and pick up the pieces after this tempest has passed."

The three of them exited leaving Silas stewing. The deer meat flew out into the swirl.

They glanced back as Silas hurled eggs at the fleeing chef. "All these eggs is cracked as your skull's gonna be. You know what kind of fungus flourishes in the crack of an egg?"

Herc and Emma made their way back to the tent. Emma found the experience amusing but a touch frightening. "Is Silas going to be alright? He seemed a little . . ."

Herc patted her on the shoulder. "That there is another hold-over from our time in Andersonville. He was our cookie for many months. Bad food was all he could scrounge and not much of it at that. No matter how he strived, some of the few fellows in our camp could not maintain on the meager menu. Many got so sick they couldn't eat and when they did, they couldn't keep it down. Some died from improper nutrition or soured staples. We got this mush from the rebs that always had a blue fuzz growing in it—them Johnny's didn't have much better grub for themselves on their side of the war. Silas did what he could, but when a fellow died, he always felt like his cookwork was partially to blame. Ever since, it has been a bit of a mania to him where food is

concerned. He's always tryin' new things and watches real close what we eat. Yeah, he is a might over top with it, but he has them demons. We all do sometimes."

Later, Silas threatened Smitty nearly at gunpoint to take on wood and coal and let him haggle for a fresh doe. The butcher at the port had a small garden near the launch, and he was talked into a deal to include a bushel of mixed root vegetables and kale.

The sun climbed down off the throne and the darkening twilight began the ascent. The whole crew, except Finkle, who was brooding elsewhere aboard, had supped on a stew made of some of the most tender venison they had ever put teeth or gums to.

Emma realized why he had been cooking at the hotel. His cuisine was fit for high society. The savory, thick broth he had rendered, along with the darkly roasted turnips and tender greens, these were what she would compare all future repasts.

They had eaten in the tent alone. Silas took their empty plates to be cleaned. Emma moved to the bow of the steamer and once again dangled her feet over the edge. To her surprise, Herc joined her and mimicked her leisure, save the difference of a half empty bottle of whiskey in his grip.

"He may be driven by demons, but he don't disappoint, that boy," Herc sighed. He looked worn out, but she understood it to be more the liquor and less the actual work done that day.

Emma rubbed her stomach as she watched the sky over the Mississippi turn a pale orange then pink. The zealous calls from hidden perches signified a good-night from the birds of the river. She noticed a gap in the cane break. As they came up along it, a wide, placid dell spread out and up from the banks. She watched as fireflies set to

twinkling low to the grass. They danced and flashed so, the stars themselves would be jealous.

The Lula Belle pushed past before the darkness fell completely.

The crew were not afforded the after meal rest period. They were put to work even harder as the day's last light slipped away. They stood at various points along the edge of the boat with one fellow posted outside the pilot house. Though night blind to but a few feet before them, they tested the depth of the river with their long rods and sent the news updeck.

It was a new moon that Sunday night and cloudy as well. Any sane pilot would slow the pace under the low visibility—no matter how familiar with this bend or that shallow the man claimed to be. Smitty was not any sane pilot. He was a driven man. Despite his blindness at night, he refused to see the light in Herc's perpetual warnings.

Long poles were used by the men to measure depth, so efforts to keep running deep were largely successful even though one plumb became irrelevant almost instantly at their speed. How long were they expected to stay vigilant without their rest? Smitty gave no sign.

With pitch black embracing them, and the captain not allowing any lanterns to be lit as they would impair his night sight, the trio of passengers resigned themselves to a noisy slumber.

Despite constant shouting from the crew, there was a hypnotic cadence to the engines thrumming, the motion and sloshing of the water and the close proximity of her guardians. It all provided Emma with a gentle yet swift descent into slumber.

"Shallowing out starboard," was called, but Emma drifted off, not hearing it.

Chapter Twenty Four

Downtown St. Louis, 10:24 p.m.

"America is on the move, I tell you!" the fragrant man sharing the carriage told Alexis.

His meaning was clear as they approached the Union Depot. Even at nine o'clock on a Sunday night, the little depot had the crowded frenzy of a prize fight.

He continued as the driver slowed the horses and finally stopped. "Look at that! A beehive of activity and how far do you want to wager the bulk of those people going inside are headed out west and not east?"

The cabbie had begged Alexis to let him pick up the extra fare along the way. She wished she had offered him more money to clop on by so she could ride alone.

She did not wait for either the cab driver or her chatty co-passenger to open the doors. Before the wheels even stopped, she gathered her purse, parasol, and long, slim pistol case and hopped out onto the cobblestones. She motioned the driver to toss down her single piece of luggage. He was one foot on the runner, but due to her insistent nature, obliged her by loosing it from the strapping and lowering it to her.

"Here now, Miss! Please let one of us fellows—" the man riding inside cried. The acrid tang of his cheap toilet water clung in her nostrils as she rushed off.

"No time, Sir, but thank you ever so much. I am afraid I am quite late," she replied as she collected her things from the road and darted between the traffic of man and beast alike.

She climbed the steps and went to the ticketing agent. The timetable board hanging next to the window was so overcrowded as to become undecipherable to most anyone else. She found the schedule to Kansas City and her shoulders sagged. Being a

regular traveller to many points near and far, she had known the departures to the northern neighbor city by heart. Progress had once again confounded her as she learned the line had added stops, so she was not half an hour early as she had expected, but late and therefore early for the next departure.

Alexis stood in line and finally purchased her ticket. Kansas City was her nexus and from there she would purchase passage on the Union Pacific.

Though she had not eaten since lunch, she decided to forgo the oft questionable depot cuisine. Instead, she trudged with her baggage to a nearby bank of benches and deposited herself heavily. She took an apple from her clutch and ate it greedily.

She watched a pair of dirty-faced children playing with a small leather ball inside the terminal. The girl was of about six or seven years, and the boy was about twelve yet tall and gangly for his age. They threw the ball back and forth. The looked to have remarkable coordination, but he frequently missed the soft tosses from the her. In those instances, the ball would bounce and roll into a traveler's baggage or between their legs and the young man would run off after it, often bumping into people or falling on them. He would back away with profuse apologies while receiving polite but disapproving acceptances from the offended. He would then return to the little girl and give her a hug and then the circus of clumsiness repeated.

Alexis watched the children's odd behavior with a small amount of professional interest, but her thoughts returned to the chat she had with her father back at the Free household, shortly before she left for the station.

She had finished her research and returned for dinner and to pack. As they discussed the case, Alexis informed him of her suspicion the escaped asylum patient was in fact the same man who asked after Silas and Hercules at the hotel.

This was confirmed by her father, from information his friends on the asylum board had grudgingly given him. "His name is Kemper Bidwell. He admitted himself voluntarily a year ago and has been a wholly unremarkable patient. The doctor, a man by the name of—"

"Cuttrow. I have had the displeasure of meeting him," she said through tight lips.

With raised brow, he continued. "Your friend, the doctor, has listed him as delusional to the point of obsession and mania. He does not go into more detail, but he does mention his penchant for certain medications. Now through my contacts in the Army, I have found the trio shared a sketchy history stretching back to the Civil War." He paused and asked Alexis, "Do you think they may be in on some plan together? Something involving the girl? You say Estelle has strong feelings for these men, and is very protective of Emma, but that may not mean she knows these men as well as she thinks she does."

"I do not think so, but continue."

"More detailed records shall soon to be sent by post, but I have received several telegrams giving limited glimpses of the trio's histories and military careers. Though the two men, Silas and Hercules, had escaped from Andersonville, Kemper was with them at the attempt. Kemper was recaptured and eventually was included in a prisoner exchange near the end of the war. There is quite a long stretch where Silas and Hercules are unaccounted for and, yet, during one of the amnesty campaigns by the president, the two had secured a pardon through the help of a lawyer. They were reenlisted and served out a three month term whereupon they were honorably discharged."

"During their missing years, what was Kemper up to?"

”After his exchange, there was a long period of convalescence, and then he was attached to a division of the Army which hunted deserters. His record states he was brought up on charges twice for excessively violent treatment of some of the men they arrested. No court-martials.”

”Father, let me guess: he requested to be posted on that duty?”

Her father sifted through the telegrams, found the one he wanted, wiped away a bit of crumbs and said, astonished, ”Yes. He asked for the post. How did you—”

”I’m a detective and my father’s daughter. We see the dots and we connect them.”

This brought a broad smile. ”When the detachment was shut down, Kemper asked to be discharged.”

”Kemper was hunting them. Probably for some grudge incurred at Andersonville. When the Army was no longer paying him to do that, he decided to go it alone.”

”That must be quite some insult they cast upon this Kemper fellow,” her father said, fork in hand, stabbing the last piece of ham on the platter.

”Indeed, or this Kemper Bidwell is actually insane.”

Sitting there waiting for her train, she considered the added dangers this posed to Emma. Kemper was likely not interested in her, but by way of her traveling companions, she may be in his line of sight.

The crowd an hour later was as bustling as ever, and the children had not tired of their antics. Alexis exercised her mind by closely watching the sea of travelers. She was able to discern who was heading where by the baggage they carried. A West Coast bound person often had what seemed like their whole realm of belongings, while a

person who was visiting relatives nearby or in the Plains was weighed down by a mere case or two.

She noticed one couple that appeared to loathe the idea of being together, and another that were together but were trying hard not to resemble a couple, perhaps married lovers on a week-end getaway. She never once spied the parents of the two children.

Her attention focused upon a sight which scratched at the base of her skull. Theodore Colson stomped through the Poplar Street entrance with luggage in hand.

He was in a brown suit with black string tie and had a felt bowler perched atilt on his small head. The broken nose had been tended to as was signified by the tufts of cotton swabbing protruding from his nostrils. She knew from experience Theo's nose was not likely to bleed much after her resetting it, and assumed his display was for sympathetic gain. His face and nose had transformed into a purple and black swirl with yellowing around the edges of the bruise. The veins in his eyes were filled to the point the orbs looked like they were bleeding.

She looked away, not in disgust at his appearance, but to avoid him locking eyes with her.

Damned if it was too late; he called her name from across the terminal. Scores of travelers shrank back in horror from his visage as he stormed over to her on the bench.

The scowl he saved for Alexis did not help his countenance. "Ha, ha! I have found you at last! What is this outrage I hear of? You attempted to interview my wife without my permission and then accost the doctor assigned to her care?"

She was not surprised by his anger, or that he had learned of her earlier visit—no doubt from the spineless, petty son of a bitch doctor. She amused herself with the thought of how the doctor looked like a rat, so why wouldn't he act like one?

"How dare you go nosing around that poor woman? Have you no shame? My wife has nothing to do with you finding Emma and it leads me to believe you implicate *me* or her in my niece's kidnapping. You are dangerously near to having your services terminated. Your father may attest to your investigative skill, but now I wonder if it is bald nepotism and that no woman should ever be considered equal to a task such as this. Well, what have you to say?"

This volcano of bile was spewed forth before Theo had even set down his bag. Having slammed it down as punctuation, he crossed his arms and cocked his head back in anticipation. She let his lava cool as she calmly slipped on a pair of black cotton gloves.

"Have you no defense?"

Seeing Theo with a packed bag, she showed no signs of her consternation. "I am just taking in your questions and weighing which one is the most important and should be answered first."

"How can you sit there and be so glib? Do you not understand you are in no position to sass me? The whole issue of your continued employment hangs on your answers and yet you are content to mock me."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she looked upon him, she struggled to keep the venom from her voice. "In truth, Theodore, every word out of your mouth so far has either been a half-truth or a pontification on anything but the one subject of importance: your niece and her safe return. So far, you have dressed me down as to my abilities as a female detective, you have threatened me with withdrawing

your funding, you have withheld certain information of great importance as to Emma's desire to flee, not to mention a few other tidbits about your own motivations for wanting her back. I am as unimpressed with you as you are with me."

He blinked and stuttered. The flesh around his bruises turned bright red—the bruising itself unable to become any darker.

Sensing the implied depth of her knowledge as to his family life, Theodore straightened his tie and changed tack. "Perhaps we *have* started off a little shaky. In my ire as to the puzzling trajectory of your investigation, I have lost sight of the importance of returning Emma safely. I apologize. I realize now how truly unforgivable my behavior has been. To rectify my previous offenses, I humbly offer my services in any way. To that end, I feel it is best I accompany you in your investigation. From here on out, I will be with you every step of the way. It will give us a chance to combine our resources and get to know each other better. You can recount to me what you have learned so far about those men and I can add my personal insight as to what it could mean as to Emma's behavior."

The pathetic, contrite look on his face would not have fooled a blind man, but this abrupt switchback in direction threw her. His words were never weighed and he had a bad habit of letting everyone know exactly what he thought of things even if they didn't care what those thoughts may be. It was her turn to be stunned. She took the last tart bite clinging to the apple core, but it was too sour.

She managed to swallow and said, "Theodore, that will be unnecessary. I have a few trails of information I am currently following and my itinerary may change any a moment's notice. It will be rough travel and considering your injury, you may best stay here and recuperate. Any new findings will be relayed to my father and I am sure he will keep you abreast daily."

”I am sure he would do his best, but would it not be more timely and therefore ease my mind more quickly if I were to just get the news from the source? That, being you.”

”There will be long stretches in between stations and rough travel, leaving you in much anxiety. Perhaps you should remain here—that would give your injury time to—”

”Oh, that! Thanks to your unorthodox treatment, my nose is actually healing quite rapidly. I have always been a bit of a fast healer. See?” He plucked the cotton from each nostril and gave no time for her to see how bloody they may be, for he quickly tucked them away in a pocket. ”Good as new!”

She tried another notion. ”Don’t you think you should stay near your wife? She is in a very sensitive state and her recovery depends on having those around her who will support and love her. And your other daughter . . .”

”Elizabeth is under the best care possible and there is nothing to be done for her but let her rest and see that her mind restores itself, besides,” he said with a disturbing and confidential tone, ”she is so medicated, she wouldn’t even know if I was there. Louisa is in the warm bosom of a family friend, so I am assured of her care as well. There is now only my deep concern for my imperiled adoptive daughter which must be tended to.”

She was about to respond with another volley, but sensed it was a bushel of wasted words. A fresh distraction nearby also kept her silent.

A raucous swirl of men came bursting through the front entrance and they hooted, hollered and howled. One or two had suit coats, but many were in shirtsleeves rolled up around swelling biceps. At first Alexis took it for an angry mob set on violence

of some sort, for they all carried wooden clubs. It was then she spied many carrying baggage and a small number clutched base ball hats and one or two gloves.

She surmised it must be the local ball club, The St. Louis Brown Stockings, as they travelled to some scheduled match nearby.

One man stood out in the crowd. He was in his late thirties, with a tightly trimmed, bright red beard. He had taken off his hat to reveal a thick but closely cropped mane of the same ginger hue. At six foot and a few inches, he towered above the heads of not only his fellow sportsmen, but everyone in the terminal. He had a handsome face and a confident gait that did not flaunt or exploit his sharp good looks. In a well-tailored blue suit, he weaved his way to the ticket counter, set down his bag and leaned his bat against his leg. No others in line before him, he made his transaction.

The other players milled as a herd, but eventually gravitated toward the obvious leader, the tall red-headed man. A few stragglers of the group roamed the terminal, opting to secure a bite before booking passage.

Theodore withstood the jostling from the boisterous ball players as they passed. "I believe I had better get in line, or I may not make our departure."

He slipped in front of a few of the late-arriving Brown Stockings. She overheard one turn back and remark to Theodore, "My, my! The wife sure did lay one on you, didn't she? What was it? It looks like a skillet. Hope you don't mind a little friendly advice: learn to duck."

Though Theodore pretended not to hear the man, several others in the group burst out in wild laughter. They patted him on the back good-naturedly. He was buffeted and bounced out of the line due to his slight built.

Alexis took the opportunity to collect her things and transport herself to the platform. She estimated the train coming in soon. She stepped around a drowsy family

strewn across a bench along the way, the father cradling his young daughter with her head under his chin as they both napped.

She was about to descend the steps leading out back of the station when she spied the young boy and girl who had been playing ball earlier. They were in an inside corner sitting cross-legged and deep in some conversation. She sidled up beside the boy and startled him as she crouched down to speak.

“See that fellow in line there? The one with the bruised up face? I hear is quite loaded down with money...”

”Why are you telling me this?” He asked as he craned his neck to get a good look at Theo.

She patted him on the head and turned toward the platform, where she paused outside the doors to peer back inside.

The two children stood and slowly ambled close to the wall near the ticket office. Theo was third in line from the window. He was looking around dumbly, trying not to have to speak to the athletic men around him.

The girl bounced the dark leather ball then they tossed it back and forth, each throw sending the boy farther from his sister and closer to the line of people. She heaved the ball and when it came near, the young boy stepped out of the way and let it hit Theo in the hip. Theo turned in surprise and immediately had a young boy launching into him. The boy splayed his arms around Theo and gave a loud yelp as the ball bounced away.

The base ball players, who obviously had not not warmed up to Theo in their brief time together, jeered and laughed at his misfortune.

”See here!” Theo whined, ”what is the meaning of this? You clumsy little—”

”I’m sorry, Mister!” The boy said as he backed away in fear. ”I didn’t see you there and my sister ain’t a good thrower.”

One of the players elbowed Theo. “Don’t be scratchy, Mister! They’re just kids playin’.”

”Playing in a congested terminal? They have the whole outside of St. Louis to go galloping around without running into innocent bystanders. Hmph.”

”Sorry again, Mister!” The boy said, already towing his sister by the hand as they made for the Poplar Street doors.

Alexis smiled and went along her way.

Chapter Twenty Five

She found the Kansas City bound train at the platform beneath the gaslights. It was set to depart quite soon. There was a great deal of activity around the resting behemoth, steam pulsing from the vents into the passing crowd. Through the dusty windows, Alexis saw the train was over capacity. Scanning for the rare empty seat, she chose the fourth car from the engine and was helped aboard by a porter who took her one piece of luggage. She declined to hand over the slim case.

She trudged down the aisle, past the bowlers and bonnets, to find an empty seat next to an old, white-haired woman who had a bag of knitting on her knees and was hugging a large smoked leg of ham wrapped in paper.

”May I?” Alexis motioned to the seat beside the woman.

”Why, certainly, dear. You’ll have to excuse the ham shank. My sister is turning seventy tomorrow and she swears they do not smoke their hams in Kansas City near as good as home. I promised her the St. Louis hams were the same ones they retail up there, but she has the Dodson stubborn streak and so here I am traveling with a pig cut that is larger than myself. I was afraid for a moment they might force me to buy an extra ticket for the ham.”

She laughed, for how couldn’t she? Her real focus, however, was the crowd running to catch the train as it rolled out. She craned her neck around old lady Dodson’s high fashion hat. She spied a thick knot of the ball players jogging along the cars behind with the lazy gait of trotting in from a three run homerun.

She was pleased as the train picked up speed and began to clear the platform. The athletes made it aboard easily, albeit loudly. Then to her dismay, she saw a very un-athletic display in the awkward darting figure of Theodore Colson. The man’s face

was contorted in a rictus as he launched his bag in between the cars. She saw an outstretched hand reach out from the train as it grasped Theo's flailing paw. The forearm of the mysterious aide strained and tensed and flung Theo onto the train.

Alexis remained calm, but knew she had little time. There was a free seat next to her and the only other unoccupied one was across the aisle and two rows up. She looked behind her, at the closed door leading to the rear cars. No Theo, but the red-headed baseball star was looking right at her through the window. His emerald eyes shone brightly--even from that distance. His nose was flat and rounded near the nostrils with a crooked bump on the bridge, suggesting it had been broken a few times yet it all made him that much more rugged and handsome.

He entered the car and she boldly held his eye. As he neared her row, he smiled at her, his bright red mustache rising impishly at the corners. She thought him quite dashing, but she knew the rumors about professional ball players—especially the Brown Stockings.

"Ladies." He nodded to Mrs. Dodson but did not take his eyes from Alexis. "It appears I have no other place to sit. May I join you?" His voice was as deep as the rumbling of the train.

"There is the other seat up yonder," the Dodson woman said in complaint. "I was hoping I could get this this ham off my lap and set it in the seat next to her . . ."

She smiled apologetically, but the ginger man was quick. "Why don't you allow me to carry your burden for you, Ma'am?"

He sat down, bumping lightly into Alexis as he reached and held the old woman's ham with one mighty hand, pulled it toward him and laid it carefully across his strong thighs. "Consider it payment for me enjoying such lovely company. So,

ma'am, are you knitting a sweater for this ham?" He said indicating her bag with yarn and needle poking out.

The old lady Dodson giggled, as if she was thirty years younger and it was the wittiest thing she had ever heard. Her pale, wrinkled cheeks even blushed, though it had in all probability been many years since that phenomenon had occurred.

Alexis noted a distant Irish accent in his voice—Dublin, she guessed. It was enough of a lilt to kindle *most* women's hearts. She smiled faintly, not wanting his full attention since he had taken the seat. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, perplexed. Donnie usually had a woman swooning with such pleasant banter.

Alexis was glancing back at the doorway every few seconds. Theo banged into a traveller or two as he made his way to Alexis. He stood next to the big Irishman, shifting from foot to foot like a child with an impatient bladder. Even seated, the Gael was near as tall as Theo.

"Excuse me, Sir? I am traveling with this young woman. Would you mind allowing me to sit with her? There is an open seat just up there," Theo said.

"How, now?" The red headed man asked as he looked over to Theo standing in the aisle swaying to the motions of the train. Theo resembled a seasick traveller. "You are the fellow who had his wallet lifted by that young boy. I heard the commotion—how did you come by the fare if you were pick-pocketed by the whelp?"

Theo saw he needed a new tactic, and softened his sharp address to the man, showing none too small an amount of pride along the way. "I never travel with all my eggs in one basket. I have all my money secreted about my person."

"My, that sure as aces paints a disturbing portrait, doesn't it?" the athlete quipped, looking to his seat-mates for approval.

Theo stubbornly sniffed away the comment and pressed on. "Perhaps, but nevertheless, would you mind moving?"

"I sincerely do wish I could accommodate you, but, as you can see, I have been conscripted as the ham bone carrier for this leg of that fine woman's journey. If your lady friend wishes me to move . . ."

He raised his brow and he and Mrs. Dodson both looked to her for an answer.

Alexis pretended her attention was elsewhere. "I am sorry? Oh, no—though I do know this man, I must confess we are not traveling together. These arrangements are quite good, seeing as how we are all ensconced . . ."

Even sweet Mrs. Dodson was relieved to hear the decision, for she approved of the red-headed fellow and not the bruised up man.

"There you have it, my friend!" The Irishman beamed triumphantly. "That seat farther up is available, but I would hurry if I were you; when my boys bought fares, the ticket agent warned them the train was already over capacity."

Dejected, Theo gave Alexis the stink eye, then left to snag the seat ahead.

Having secured his rightful place on the throne beside Alexis—with a royal smoked scepter in his lap, no less—the ball player wiped his hand across his lapel and held it out to introduced himself. "The name is Donnie O'Banyon. The fans call me the Belfast Baron. I am on my way to Kansas City to school the boys over there on how to lose gracefully."

Madam Dodson threw her hand across Alexis, causing the handle of the derringer inside her jacket to dig into her ribs. "Goldia Dodson. So pleased to meet you. You know, I am a grand baseball enthusiast. I saw you make that catch last week against those Wichita scoundrels. Wonderful athleticism, young man! Thrilling!"

”Why, thank you, Ma’am,” he said, still boldly staring at Alexis. ”I must say a man is only as good as his team mates and I have a fine bunch of boys surrounding me. How about you, Miss—?”

Alexis took his hand and lightly shook it. ”Miss Free, and no, I am not a base ball enthusiast.”

She had lied. Her father and her often slipped away some afternoons to take in the games. She was, in fact, in attendance at the game Goldia Dodson had mentioned, and she too was thrilled by his amazing catch, but she knew it best not to encourage this bigger-than-life fellow any more, especially since she had already manipulated him into blocking out Theo.

”Oh well, there’s always the next game to win over a new fan,” he said as he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out four tickets. ”With my compliments, I would like to invite you all to the game tomorrow.”

Goldia snatched two faster than Alexis thought the old woman could move. ”Thank you so much, Baron! I knew those rumors about you must be wrong; you’re such a nice young man! My dear sister will be so excited to go to the game on her birthday. What a surprise! Though she may be broken-hearted by the end of the day, when you fellows trounce her precious Cowboys.” She leaned into Alexis and whispered, ”You could do a lot worse than this fellow here, young lady . . .”

”Though the Cowboys are not a professional team such as we are, they do have some fine players,” the Baron pretended not to hear Madam Dodson, stating, ”one or two, that is—well, one, really.”

He held the tickets for a moment giving Alexis the opportunity to note the admittances were actually hand-written notes with what she assumed was the Baron’s signature.

Alexis wanted to remark on the fact that due to a few player's involvement in the Louisville Greys game-fixing scandal, The St. Louis Brown Stockings were in fact no longer a professional team, but a rag-tag ghost that played anyone, anywhere, to make a profit. She thought it best for the comfort of the next couple hundred miles to remain silent.

She turned to him and said, "I am so sorry, but I will not be staying in Kansas City. I have plans to travel west as soon as I arrive."

"Oh, well, that is truly a shame. I would be thrilled to look into the stands and see you there. Perhaps Goldia has some other friends she would like to—"

Before he finished speaking, the tickets were in Goldia's hands with the others.

Alexis was suddenly preoccupied by one thought: How did Theodore Colson know she was headed off to Kansas City? She knew she had never mentioned her itinerary to him and yet there he was at the station on a train she never told him she would be on.

She remembered then how her father had found one Cecil Rosewater lingering in the hallway of the Liberty offices when she had told her father her plans to leave for Kansas City that night.

When she returned to St. Louis, she was going to make sure she had a word or two with Mister Rosewater. But that little weasel would have to wait his turn.

Donnie O'Banyon tried to recapture her attention. "Perhaps upon your return, Miss Free, we could see to it you get to attend another game. So, if I may be so bold, what exactly sends you off to the West in such a hurry?"

Alexis looked up at the back of Theo's head and said, "It appears I am on a snipe hunt with a vulture as a companion."

He had no response to this, which was fine with Alexis.