

Chapter 1

Cottonwood, Colorado, 1875

Carter Hawkins placed his hands on the batwing doors at the entrance of the Fanny Sue Saloon. He let his cigar hang, held by his lips as he watched the afternoon stage stop in front of the Bardwell Hotel. It still showed signs of its hey-day, but now was as tired as his saloon. Still, Bardwell had the stage franchise, so the riders had to walk to the nicer hotels in the town of Cottonwood.

He stood in the shadows as he watched the stage. The only excitement on a lazy spring afternoon. Sometimes the driver only delivered mail, none of which came for him. But, sometimes, someone fascinating arrived. Which was more entertaining than watching the drunks playing cards at his scarred tables.

No one knew he was in Cottonwood, so he didn't expect anyone he knew to alight. No one expected him to be in this tiny bit of a town on the crossroads to nowhere. Anyone who knew him figured he'd passed the crossroads to nowhere years ago and disappeared. And he liked it that way.

But watching the stage broke up the boredom. He needed to find a buyer for the saloon and be shed of this town before the boredom settled and he found himself watching for the stage ten years from now.

Carter smiled as he saw the edge of a deep blue-gray skirt peek around the door of the stage. A foot kicked at the skirt wrapped around her shoe. She poised in mid-stride trying to shake the material out of her way so she could step down. Through the door window he could see her holding the edge of the door with one hand.

The stage coach driver climbed up top and threw luggage to the ground stirring up dust as it landed in the street instead of on the sidewalk.

"Please be careful." The woman kicked again but her foot seemed to become more tangled in her hem. "I don't want my belongings broken."

The man continued tossing down bags, then climbed down with the mail sack clutched in his hand. His hat was tipped back and even from the doorway, Carter could tell he smelled of sweat. A fine sprinkling of dust covered his flannel shirt and gray woolen trousers.

Carter tossed his cigar into the street as the woman wobbled because of the driver's dismount. He couldn't believe the man hadn't helped his passenger to the ground. He sprinted to the stage as she pitched forward and caught her against him, taking several steps backwards.

"Oh, my." Her head laid against his shoulder.

He had an arm around her waist, crushing her. He set her on her feet. "Sorry, ma'am." He hadn't meant to hold her so tightly, but she'd come at him with more force than he'd expected. He liked the feel of her pressed against him. He hadn't held a woman in longer than his memory would serve him and something deep inside of him stirred.

"I got caught up." Squaring her shoulders, she brushed down her skirt and smoothed at a piece of material covering her left arm, tucking in the ends so it blended with her bodice. Then she ran a finger up the feather on her hat, smoothing and straightening it. "Thank you for catching me." She flashed him a smile of white teeth that melted his heart.

He doffed his hat and smiled back. "My pleasure."

She was finely turned out for Cottonwood. Not many came dressed with fancy

do-daws on their clothes or a tiny bit of a hat sporting a deep blue feather. He looked over her shoulder to see who accompanied her. The stage was empty.

She appeared to have money, but a wealthy woman wouldn't be alone. And where was someone to welcome her? Anyone that knew Cottonwood knew better than to let travelers disembark at the Bardwell without someone to meet them. Some drunk could come spilling out onto the street and attack her.

Unease nagged at him. She needed a protector. "You're alone?"

She nodded as she looked up and down the street. A beauty of a young lady, her auburn hair hung in long curls that caressed the side of a white neck. The rest of her hair was wound on the top of her head.

"Doesn't seem safe to be traveling by stage unaccompanied." He was pleased with what he saw. She'd done a fine job of putting herself together with an injured left arm and no lady's maid to help. Except for a fine sprinkling of dust from the journey, she seemed ready to walk into the finest restaurant in Philadelphia rather than stand in the street in front of a run-down hotel.

"Some things cannot be helped." A sigh escaped her.

He looked up the street and saw no sign of anyone. The stage driver came out of the hotel, climbed aboard and drove away. He gritted his teeth. Whoever had forgotten to greet her should be horsewhipped. "Whoever's supposed to be meeting you seems to have forgotten."

She sighed again and fiddled with her sling. "It's not his fault. The stage is early by a day."

He suppressed a sigh. The prettiest woman he'd seen since he'd gotten to this godforsaken town and a man was supposed to be meeting her. But then, why would a woman dressed like her want anything to do with him. He was but a gambler. "That rarely happens. Most times it's late."

She clutched her reticule, her knuckles turning white. "My luck." She stepped away from him.

"I could get my carriage and take you wherever you're going." He wouldn't mind spending some more time with her. And she seemed to need someone to reassure her that no harm would come to her.

Maybe she'd come to visit relatives. He could hope. And dream for a few moments. Life might gain some meaning with her in it. He nearly laughed. What use would a fine woman have for him?

The slight wind blew her curls from her neck and he saw purple bruises down one side. He balled his hands. Who had hurt her? No one should treat a woman in that manner. No woman. Not even the ones who worked in his saloon.

"That won't be necessary. If you give me directions, I can walk." She looked at her bags and heaved another sigh. "They won't be here if I leave them."

He wanted to take her into his arms again and reassure her that he'd take care of everything. He shook his head. He didn't know why he felt that way. Maybe the two weeks in Cottonwood had already affected his better judgement. He never stayed anywhere long. Never made attachments. And this woman screamed attachment. "I'll have them moved into my saloon. You can send someone for them later."

She studied his face for a few moments. "I guess I have no choice."

He laughed. "I promise I won't steal anything." He bowed to her. "I'm Carter Hawkins, proprietor of the Fannie Sue Saloon."

She nodded her head to him. "Nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hawkins. I'm Lila Kane. Mrs. Lila Kane."

His heart did a twist. She was married. He couldn't imagine the stupidity of her husband letting her travel alone. He deserved a tongue lashing at the very least. "Mr. Kane's suppose to be meeting you?"

"No." She brushed at her skirt. "He's passed on."

"Oh." A widow woman. A very pretty, very young widow woman. His heart did a little skip, then he chided himself. A woman meant staying in one place, meant responsibility. But... A widow woman might not be ready to marry again and might not mind a little attention. A diversion. "Stay here and I'll get Wes." He strode back to the saloon and hollered for the bartender.

Wes appeared at the door.

"Take those bags and put them somewhere safe until I can have them delivered to the young lady." Carter straightened his jacket and walked back to her. "All taken care of. Now, where are you staying?" He hoped he knew where the place was. He was only familiar with parts of Cottonwood. Other parts weren't too welcoming to him. Chances were her relatives wouldn't be too welcoming. Gamblers weren't considered part of proper society.

"I'm supposed to be met by Hiram Woodfield of the Cottonwood Bank."

Carter raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "I can take you to the bank." That seemed a strange place for her to be going.

"Thank you. If you point me in the right direction, I can find my way. I'm sure Mr. Woodfield will send someone to claim my belongings." She lifted her skirt to step off the boardwalk and exposed the most worthless street shoes he'd ever seen. They matched her dress, but wouldn't hold up if she had to walk more than a few blocks.

"It's truly not safe for a young woman to walk in this area alone." He stepped beside her. His hands itched to touch her.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter, but I can take care of myself." She raised her chin and straightened her shoulders.

He shouldn't have admitted to owning the saloon. She was a lady. He'd known many of them in his life, though not in the past few years. He generally avoided them. They were more trouble than they were worth.

But this one looked in need of help. Something had happened to her. Now she was alone in a strange town.

Not met by Hiram Woodfield, the only son of the leading citizen. If the man courted her, or was a relative, he should be horsewhipped for leaving her to navigate the town on her own.

He'd seen Woodfield in church, though the man didn't deem to speak to him. Everyone knew Woodfield. No one could be in this town more than a day and not hear about the esteemed Mr. Woodfield. He was rich and a bachelor, which made the mother of every unwed daughter in town between twelve and twenty-five drool. And try to ensnare the man.

He hoped Mrs. Kane was a cousin and not someone Woodfield planned on courting. Not that it should matter, but he didn't want Woodfield near her. He didn't like the man. And the thought of him near Mrs. Kane made his stomach churn.

"I'll escort you." He offered her his arm.

"It wouldn't be proper." She sidestepped so she wasn't close to him.

He strolled beside her, letting his imagination run wild. For just this moment he was again a gentleman escorting a beautiful lady. "I'll walk with you until we can see the bank. To make sure you don't lose your way."

She gave him half a hesitant smile.

“And if I see any of the honorable citizenry of the town, I’ll pretend not to know you.” He flashed her a smile.

“I didn’t mean... It’s just that I don’t know you.”

He wanted to take her hand and drape it from his arm so he could feel her warmth again, but he refrained. She’d back away from him.

He’d leave her at the bank. But he wanted to know more about her and he would. If she were a relative of Woodfield, he’d go back to his original plan and sell the saloon.

If not... Maybe he’d stick around for a week or two more.

Lila peeked over at Carter. He was a handsome man. She’d met plenty like him. And his attentions didn’t bode well.

She looked ahead, watching where she stepped, not wishing to see the look in his eyes. The look of wanting men got. She tucked the edges of her sling around her broken arm, trying to make it as unobtrusive as possible. A one armed seamstress wouldn’t bode well for business.

She tried not to think of the man in the black suit and white shirt walking next to her. She had to admit he was handsomer than most she’d seen. He sported a small black moustache and had a smile that would melt butter on a winter day. The problem was not to let it melt her heart. She couldn’t afford to get close to a gambler. Even if he had a kindly face and had been helpful. And she must forget that a jolt had shot through her when he’d caught her when she fell from the stage. A jolt like she’d never felt before.

He would ruin her plan. She would close her heart to him. Ignore his warm smile.

Lila straightened her shoulders. She’d expected Cottonwood to be a mite larger. Hiram Woodfield, the banker, had presented the town to her in a fashion that made her believe it would be a good place to open a dress shop. He’d said they could use a good seamstress who knew the latest eastern fashions.

But the dark blue-gray Boston fashion she’d clad herself in at the last stage stop seemed a might fancy for this town, not quite grown to a city.

It didn’t really matter. Selling Boston fashions had been a whim. Only the richest could afford them, which meant she’d meet all the best people, but to put food on her table, simple everyday dresses would be the ones. Definitely this town would have more call for that type of business. She could be content with that.

As the bank appeared, she stopped and glanced around, seeing several citizens, but none seemed to pay her any mind. “Thank you for the directions, Mr. Hawkins. You have been very kind.”

He doffed his hat to her. “I’ll take my leave.” He flashed her a big smile. “I hope Mr. Woodfield was only detained.”

“I’m sure he was.” She tucked at her sling again. Nervousness clutched at her stomach. She was about to pull off the biggest charade of her life and she hoped she was up to it.

“Family should treat each other better.” He doffed his hat.

She picked at the fabric of the sling. “He’s not family.” She wished the words back. Carter would have left her be if he’d thought her related to the banker.

He smiled, bowed his head and strode back down the street.

For some reason she felt bereft as though she’d lost her best friend. Her only friend. Which was silly. The tiredness of the journey and the injuries weighed on her. Once she was settled in her own place, she’d feel better.

After all, she was embarking on a new life.

She stopped in front of the bank and took in a deep breath. Mrs. Kane, she reminded herself as she opened the front door. She blinked at the dimness of the room. Heavy velvet drapes covered the window, keeping out most of the sunlight. A hushed reverence seemed to hover over the place like a church during silent prayer. She looked around. She'd been in banks before this. Most of them small with maybe one teller and no curtains. People visited while about their business. Here, no one would dare to visit. Didn't seem many dared to do much business.

"May I help you, Miss?" A man in a blue suit stepped in front of her.

Lila lifted her chin, fighting down the churning of her stomach and the desire to run for the door. He couldn't know her secret. She looked the man up and down. "I have an appointment with Mr. Woodfield. I realize I am a day early, but the stage schedule does not seem to be something by which one can set a watch."

The man took a step forward. "And who might you be?"

She wrinkled her nose as if catching a bad smell, and the man stepped back. "Mrs. Lila Kane."

A tall, slender, young man neatly dressed in a brown wool suit came scurrying across the foyer of the bank. "Mrs. Kane. I'm so glad to meet you. I'm Hiram Woodfield. I didn't expect you until tomorrow or I would have met the stage." He took her gloved hand and placed it on the arm of his suit jacket as he walked her across the bank.

"The stage got here sooner than expected. Will that create a problem moving into my store? I need to know whether to book a room at a hotel for the night." Lila took the seat he offered her. She hoped she wouldn't have to rent a room. The small amount of money she had left would have to last until she gained her first customers.

"No problem. In fact, I had the crates you shipped delivered two days ago." Hiram pulled some papers from a pile and tapped his fingers against them. "I require your signature here and then I'll have the buggy brought round and take you over myself. We are all so excited about having a seamstress who knows the latest fashions move into our town. My sister can hardly wait for you to open for business."

"I would think others would feel this a good place to open such a business. The town is growing." Lila took the pen and signed her name. Mrs. Lila Kane. The store was leased to her. And with that lease came a new life.

Hiram smoothed back his brown hair over his ear. "Our one seamstress is adequate, but hasn't the talent for more sophisticated styles our leading ladies require. You're very dress says you are attuned to the needs of the more prosperous. My sister is very interested in having several dresses made in the latest styles from back east." He fiddled with the papers for a moment. "I didn't offer you condolences on the death of your husband."

Lila looked down into her lap and fiddled with the edge of her sling. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Such a tragic thing that one so young and beautiful should be left to fend for herself." Horace pushed back his chair and smiled. "But I'm sure that condition won't last for long. Yes. A most respectable and beautiful widow woman." He offered her his arm and steered her toward the door.