

Chapter 1

Gold Strike, Colorado, 1859

Callum Reynolds watched Wittaker's wife as she struggled to stay astride her horse. By her seat, he could tell she didn't often ride. She bounced in the saddle and tonight she'd have trouble sitting on anything, but she didn't utter a single complaint. A small smile twitched at the side of his mouth. Grit. She sure had it. To survive her present living conditions, she would have to have grit.

He slowed up his horse. "Where'd you come from, ma'am?"

"Ohio." Her body seemed to relax slightly as her horse matched the slower speed of his.

She brushed back several tendrils of honey-colored hair escaped from beneath her calico bonnet. The determined set of her jaw told him she would do whatever needed doing to take care of those two children she'd left back at the gold camp with her drunken husband. Her threadbare but clean skirt draped across her legs and exposed walking shoes with holes in the soles. The pink flowers dotting the green skirt had nearly disappeared from scrubbing. But her daughter's hair had been dressed with ribbons matching the decorations on the child's dress. "Why'd you come out to Colorado?"

"Gold. Same as most folks." As she slid slightly in the saddle, she grabbed for the gray mare's mane with ungloved hands.

"You didn't think to send Mr. Wittaker by himself?"

"We weren't given the option." She looked at him with eyes filled with despair and lost hope.

"I can't understand a man dragging his family out to a God-forsaken place like this."

A sigh escaped Missus Wittaker. "Some men don't cotton to leaving their families behind or don't have anyone to leave them with."

"So he dragged you and two little ones along." Cal shook his head. Perhaps he hadn't done her any service bringing Whittaker home? Would she be better off without him? What would a single woman with two young 'uns do on her own in the gold fields? "And for what?"

She shrugged. "Gold. A dream."

"He drank his dream and drowned in the whiskey." Somehow the thought of that drunken sot putting his hands on this beautiful woman made his stomach knot. He shouldn't care. Might be because of her sad eyes. Cornflower blue eyes. So beautiful. So sad. But, she was one of thousands who had swarmed to the gold fields to find their dreams disappear with the morning mists. And she'd come with another man. He let his eyes focus on the dirt path which led down the center of the town of Gold Strike, if one could call the ramshackle buildings and tents a town. Thinking about kissing her and touching her would make him crazy. A craziness he didn't need to bring down on himself. "We're here. The man whose got your wagon owns the store next to Red's. That's the third saloon on the left." Cal reined in his horse.

"Thank you, Marshal Reynolds. I'm sure I can manage by

myself now." She started to swing her leg over and dismount.

"You might as well ride the rest of the way. Leave the horse tied up outside the store. I'll get her later." He needed to put some distance between them before his mind wandered into dangerous territories.

"That's very kind of you." She flashed him a smile which made her eyes sparkle as his heart raced. "You've been most helpful. I wish to thank you again for bringing me into town to get my wagon and supplies. It would have taken me hours if I'd walked and I hate to impose on Mrs. Schmitz any longer than necessary. She's so gracious about watching Andy and Christina." Grasping the horse's mane, she urged it forward with her knees.

Cal leaned back and watched her slow progress down the street past the empty Calhoun house at the edge of town. The sun glinted through a small cloud of dust encircling the horse, making her appear as a specter riding away. Pulling his hat from his head, Cal wiped his brow with the back of his hand. A fleeting specter. Nothing more. She'd crossed his path for a brief, but bright, moment.

He looked up into the sky. Dark clouds gathered across the horizon. Rain. It would fit his mood. He nudged his horse with his knee and the animal walked slowly toward his office at the far end of town next to the assayer's office.

Melanie Whittaker slid from the saddle and stretched. Brushing out her skirts, she glanced around and decided against trying to rub her backside inconspicuously. Jolting down the road on a wagon was bad enough, but she'd never quite mastered riding.

She looked around Gold Strike. It didn't compare to the small town where she'd lived in Ohio, but it was the biggest town she'd seen in months. Pa had moved them from one gold field to the next, chasing the illusive golden pot at the end of the rainbow. At least here buildings, real buildings and not just tents, stood along a dirt street. And Red's Saloon, two stories high, issued forth tinny music. Best of all, this town contained a mercantile, somewhere to shop, not a tent pitched with mostly mining equipment and overpriced food.

If Pa knew she'd gone into town alone and without his permission he'd skin her alive. He'd yell at her about the dangers a young woman faced around those gold-hungry miners who hadn't seen a decent woman in months, not to mention a "purty" one. With little luck, she tried to tuck one of the unruly strands of hair back into the once neat coil tucked under her bonnet and smiled. Pa meant well, but that wouldn't feed the little ones. And she so did want to see a real store again. It had been so long.

After shaking the remaining dust from her skirts, she squared her shoulders and entered the store, ready to do battle with the storekeeper. She needed supplies and her wagon back. And she would have them.

Pa had put her in a similar predicament on more than one previous occasion. Unfortunately, it probably wouldn't be the last. She'd lost track of the number of times Pa had lost the

team and wagon in a poker game, but she had become an expert at buying them back. She just hoped this store owner wouldn't give her too much trouble. The wheeling and dealing bothered her, but no other choice existed. If Pa came to without the team being parked in front of the tent, he'd take it out on her. But he hadn't found much gold and she couldn't afford to pay too much.

Stepping into the store, she let her eyes adjust to the gloom after the bright sunlight outside. She meandered through the store, surveying her surroundings. The room smelled of bayberry candles and lye soap. Yellow gingham curtains added a splash of color at the front windows where sunlight filtered in. Rows of goods were piled on counters. Shelves held canned goods and a few trinkets for those who struck it rich.

The store was empty except for a couple of miners leaning against the cracker barrel, taking turns swigging out of a bottle of whiskey. A shiver ran through Melanie as one of them turned toward her. Just the type Pa warned her about. She slid her hand through the slit in her skirt into the pocket of her petticoat. Her fingers caressed the metal of her pepperbox pistol tucked in the specially sewn pocket. Turning away from the men, she ran her other hand over the fabric on the counter in front of her. The coolness and silkiness caressed her fingertips. Taking up the edge of it, she rubbed it slowly. Good quality. And it felt wonderful. The pale blue background reminded her of the sky above the mining camp. Tiny green sprigs adorned with dark blue flowers ran across the fabric. She touched it against her cheek. It would feel heavenly to wear a garment made from this cloth.

A new dress. She smiled to herself. It had been so long since she'd had anything new. But what would be the use? Where would she wear it? One of the mining camp dances on Saturday night while half drunk men tried to paw at her while Pa sat in a corner guzzling from a whiskey bottle. The whole notion was silly. Who cared what she looked like?

She straightened her shoulders. No use came of sulking over her life. No knight in shining armor would arrive riding out of the sunset to whisk her away. But the clean-looking sheriff with thigh muscles rippling beneath the tight material of his pants as he guided his mount came close. Melanie sighed. What would he want with the likes of her? He could have any woman he wanted. He wouldn't want someone dressed in rags and covered in mud. What an impression she must have made when he rode into camp with Pa thrown over a horse. Splattered from head to toe with mud from the children, she had wished nothing more than to run and hide.

She let her fingers drop back on top of the fabric. A gown was a luxury she couldn't afford. After she got the wagon and horses, she needed food for the children. A sigh rattled through her body.

But, ...if...maybe...Would the marshal show up at the dance on Saturday? They'd only been here two weeks. Anything was possible. And, if she wore a new dress... Why would he care? He wouldn't notice her, someone in tatters, even if the second set had been clean. No time existed for silly dreams about being

carried off by the marshal. All her time went to tending Christina and Andy. Sighing, she started to withdraw her hand from the fabric.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Melanie jumped and released the fabric as if it had burned her. She looked up into the smiling face of a woman in her forties, clothed in a neat brown frock. "Yes. I want a dress length of this fabric." If she cut very carefully and made her own skirt not too wide, she could make Christina a matching dress.

"This fabric comes very dearly."

"I'm not surprised. But I'll take it and I need some other supplies. Also, I understand the owner of this store acquired a team and wagon last night. I wish to speak with him about purchasing them." Melanie squared her shoulders and looked the woman straight in the eyes.

Golden brown eyes smiled back at her. The woman tucked at the graying brown knot of hair at the back of her neck as a short rotund man joined her. "The wagon and horses ain't for sale," he said.

"Everything is for sale." Melanie smiled at him. "Besides, what possible good can you get from two beat up old nags and a wagon near ready to crumble into pieces at the first good jolt."

"Then what would you be wanting with them?" His heavy eyebrows furrowed together as he stared at her.

"Sentiment." She walked toward the counter at the back of the store. "If you could fill my order, then we'll discuss the wagon."

As the man stacked the items she named in front of her, she tried not to grimace. Forty cents a pound for flour. The prices truly were a crime. It would be wonderful to have butter for the biscuits or bread she made, but not at six dollars a pound. The flour, pork, beans, and dried beef would have to do. And, a penny stick of candy for each of the little ones, at fifty cents each.

"Now. How much do you want for the wagon?"

"A hundred a piece for the horses and two hundred for the wagon."

She sucked in her breath. Exhaling slowly, she stared at the man. "That, sir, is plain and simple robbery."

"You're the one what wants 'em." He leaned his beefy elbows on the counter.

"For that price, I could have real horses and a real wagon." Melanie crossed her arms in front of her and tapped her foot.

"Then go find some." A smile crossed his face. "I didn't offer to sell 'em to you."

"True." Staring at the grease spot on the front of his shirt, she paused. "However, you are never going to find another buyer for those worthless beasts that you won in a card game last night. And, from what I hear, you've had the good fortune to win enough rigs to drive a different one every day of a fortnight." She gave him her sweetest smile. "Seeing as most folks arrive with their own teams and wagons, I can't imagine the call for such goods is that high. Especially, goods in their shape."

"Why do you want such beat up animals yourself?" A frown creased his face.

"As I said, sentiment. I raised those two horses from foals."

His eyes widened as he listened to her.

"Yes, sir, you fleeced my pa in that card game last night."

"I most certainly didn't fleece him." He slammed his hands flat down on the counter top. "I won the team and wagon fair and square."

"Mmmmm. I apologize, sir. So many in the past have fleeced my pa. Every time he gets near a whiskey bottle he seems to think he knows how to play poker." Shaking her head, she looked at her feet. "He's a dear man, but..." She let her voice trail off. "Anyway, without that wagon and horses, I have no way to get these supplies back and two little ones await me in camp. My pa really is a good man, and he will be so distressed when he finds out what he's done. The wagon won't fetch you the price you're asking, but I'll be more than glad to take it off your hands for twenty-five dollars and the horses for ten each. 'Tis an exorbitant amount to pay for such broken down beasts, but I do so want to be fair."

"Now you're trying to rob me. Those are some mighty fine horses."

"Now, I would never do such a thing, sir. I'm only trying to take care of my family."

"Oh, give her the wagon, Cyrus. You've got ten more out back no one wants." Leaning over the counter, the woman patted the man's hand.

"I won't be cheated." He straightened himself and folded his arms across his ample stomach.

"The poor little thing is trying to take care of her and hers out here in this wilderness. The wagon will end up firewood if you don't sell it to her. It's the worst of the bunch." She winked at Melanie.

"Then I'll sell it for firewood and get more than twenty-five dollars for it. I'm a business man." He scowled at his wife.

The woman continued patting his hand. "Now whose going to pay for firewood when they can go chop their own?"

"Some of these lazy worthless bums who hang around the store." He inclined his head toward the two men leaning against the cracker barrels.

"Now, dear," the storekeeper's wife said, "it won't hurt none to help the child out. Not often do we get the chance to help someone deserving."

"'Tis a good thing or we'd be broke with you giving away the store." Still scowling, Cyrus shook his head. "All right. But only because she raised them horses from foals. I know what 'tis to put time into an animal." He turned toward the back door.

"I'll get the damn rig hooked up and around front while she pays." Huffing, he stomped out. Over his shoulder, he hollered, "Make sure you charge her for everything."

"Yes, Cyrus."

The woman picked up the first item and marked the price on a

paper pad. "Your children, boys or girls?"

"They're not my children."

Never lifting her head, the woman kept inscribing the costs.

"Not yours?"

"No. My brother and sister."

"How old are they?"

"Six and three." Watching the growing column of numbers, Melanie wondered if she'd have enough to pay for everything.

"Must be a handful. Barely more than a girl yourself."

"Sometimes. Especially Andy. But there's no help to the matter. Someone has to watch over them."

The woman paused and looked up at Melanie with a smile.

"Name's Amanda."

"Melanie."

"Well, Miss Melanie, if you ever need anything, even some female talk, you come on back." Amanda reached under the counter and pulled out a jar. Opening the top, she scooped some butter into a paper, wrapped it up and added it to the pile of supplies.

Melanie looked at the package for a moment, saliva filling her mouth as she thought of hot biscuits dripping with butter and honey. "I can't afford butter."

"No charge. It'll be going rancid if it isn't used up."

The smile Amanda flashed warmed the space around Melanie.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Please call me Amanda. If we stand on too much formality around here, we'll all be strangers. People come and go so quickly, you have to make friends fast. It keeps the lonelies away."

"I'll remember that." For a moment she thought of Regina in whom she'd confided all of her hopes and dreams until two years ago. Now she had no friend, but then she had no hopes or dreams either.

"You haven't been in this territory long, have you?"

"Under two weeks. Pa got the itch to move here when he heard folks were getting rich in the fields."

"Lots of folks hear that. Not too many make it." Amanda leaned against the counter.

"That's the right of it." Melanie smiled.

"You seem to be taking the moving around pretty well."

Melanie shrugged. "Not much a body can do about it. Here's not much different than the last camp we were in. Lots of mud, lots of hopeful people, little gold."

"A pretty little thing like you ought to be settled into a home of her own. A nice home, not a grubby tent."

"All I see in my future is caring for Pa 'til he dies. I'll probably end up like my spinster aunt."

"Living all alone. That's no life for a woman."

Melanie laughed. "No one would have Aunt Myrtle. She'd scare a grizzly bear. Hopefully, I only end up taking care of my nieces and nephews and making my little brother or sister support me after I raise them. I surely don't want to scare anyone."

"You're too young to be seeing yourself on the shelf as someone's maiden aunt. Lots of men would be happy to take a wife as pretty and smart as you."

"Not any of those grubbing in the gold field." Melanie grimaced and a shiver ran through her. "I'd rather be a maiden aunt than the wife of a prospector. At least being the daughter of one, I've hope of getting out."

"Truly spoken." Amanda patted Melanie's hand. "We're having a quilting bee on Wednesday afternoon."

Melanie raised an eyebrow to look at her. "We?"

"Some of the women from the camp. I'm having them here. Suzy's about to birth that young 'un of hers. I started the tradition back awhile. All the women get together and make a quilt for any new babies in the camps. It gives all of us a great excuse to have a day of female company. The men can't complain too much, since we do it for the baby." Amanda gave her a sly smile. "We'd be pleased if you'd join us. It turns into a right nice afternoon. Tea, talk, and sewing."

"Oh, that sounds so lovely." To be around a group of women to visit and have a good time. It sounded heavenly to Melanie. She couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed female company. "If Pa'll let me, I'd love to join you. What do I need to bring?"

"We each donate two or three squares to put into the quilt. Then the new mother has something to remember us all by every time she looks at it."

"What a wonderful idea. Yes. I'd love to join you."

"We'll see you on Wednesday." Amanda picked up her pencil and started scribbling on her tablet.

Melanie watched while the woman totaled up her purchases. When she finished, the air rushed from Melanie's lungs as though someone had punched her in the stomach. Lord, but the prices in the gold fields were outrageous. She slipped her hand through her skirt and into her pocket, pulling out a small bag. She poured gold dust and flake onto the scale in front of the woman watching as it tilted toward a balance. The stream from the sack stopped before the scales evened out.

"I'm afraid you're short. I could take back the material even though I've already cut it. Some other woman will want it when her man strikes it rich."

The only things they didn't need were the cloth and the candy, and the candy wouldn't make enough difference. Besides the look of joy on the children's faces would make the price worth it. She must give back the material. She really had no need for it. The two dresses she owned would last a bit longer and the material came so dear. She stroked the material with her fingertips. She'd never seen anything so beautiful nor felt anything as luxurious. A dress of that material belonged in a fancy city ballroom, not a grubby miners' camp.

For a moment she stared at the scales. Scraping the gold back into her leather bag, she drew the string shut. Shoving it back into her skirt, her fingers dug deeper into her pocket. She pulled five nuggets out and dropped them on the scales. "That should be more than enough."