
Chapter 1

LATE APRIL 1869, *Pony, Montana*

“Nettie!”

The shout echoed in the narrow shaft of the Fools Gold Mine. Dust and dirt seeped through the crevices in the rock, and a shiver ran through the woman who answered to the name, but she didn’t shout back. Instead, she reached for her pick and a spike. Bent over to keep from hitting her head on the rock of the narrow mineshaft, she crawled to the shaft opening.

Straightening her back, Nettie Carpenter gave a doleful look at the man standing at the mine entrance.

“Now, what?” she demanded.

“Well, howdy to you too,” the tall man said. He was built like the blacksmith that he was, with a broad chest and muscles that strained the sleeves of his coat. He was wearing the badge of a Territorial Marshal, and that could only mean trouble.

Tossing the tools inside the mouth of the mine, Nettie

stretched to her pitiful height of barely five feet and stared at Jesse Forrester. “You don’t show up here wearing a badge unless you want something. Usually, you want to know the whereabouts of those two idiot cousins. Let me get presentable, and I’ll offer you a cup of coffee. I haven’t got much more.”

“I accept,” Jesse said, following Nettie back to the miner’s shack where she lived and tying his horse to a post. She disappeared behind an old piece of cloth strung across a doorway to a tiny space that was supposed to store supplies. Jesse tossed a couple of chunks of wood into the small stove, picked up the dented coffee pot from the floor, filled it with water, and set it on the stove.

His eyes were drawn to the quilt-covered bed. It was more of a cot but took up a third of the cabin space. It was Nettie’s bed, and looking at it made him feel like a voyeur.

A much cleaner woman stepped into the room, making Jesse stand straighter. Nettie Carpenter was a pretty eye-ful. Even wearing men’s flannel and trousers, her curves weren’t hidden.

Jesse frowned when he saw she was thinner than the last time he’d seen her. Did that mean she was going hungry? Her black hair was pulled back and covered in one of those snood things women wore, and her eyes were the color of bluebells in the spring. In a town where men outnumbered women near thirty to one, Nettie had probably turned down dozens of marriage proposals since she’d come to the gold mining town of Pony, Montana. She was one of only two unmarried women in the settlement. The other woman, Nell Wagner, was well over forty and flat-out ugly. She was currently shackled up with a miner who bragged about bedding her, every time he got drunk in Golden Palace Saloon.

Nettie set a single tin cup on the scarred wood of the kitchen table and filled it for him.

“What have the cousins done now?” she asked. “They haven’t been around here in a couple of weeks, and I was hoping they’d move on. Both of them are scared to death of work.”

“Ben Hardgrove claims they stole his payroll,” Jesse said.

Nettie gave a snort. “Ben Hardgrove probably stole it himself and is blaming it on the cousins so he wouldn’t have to pay his men.”

Jesse took a long drink of coffee. “It’s his word against the cousins,” Jesse said. “He’s rich, and Calvin and Henry had the money to spend several nights upstairs at the Palace.”

“The cousins don’t have a brain between them,” Nettie said. “They stole that money from me. I found my gold renderings were gone right after they disappeared.”

“That’s not what Hardgrove is claiming,” Jesse said.

“I’m not responsible for what the cousins do,” Nettie said. “Did someone see them steal the payroll, or is Hardgrove accusing them without proof?”

“There are witnesses,” Jesse said. “Although the witnesses are men who work for him.”

“Are you falling for that?” Nettie asked softly, shaking her head.

“Nettie, what are you doing out here by yourself?” Jesse asked. “It’s not right. No woman should be working in a mine underground. You should be married and have a man taking care of you.”

“I was married,” she said bitterly. “And I hated it. I don’t see any reason to repeat a mistake like that again.”

Jesse shook his head. He pulled her hand across the table, turned it over, and stroked the calluses with his thumb. “A woman’s hands shouldn’t look like this.”

Nettie pulled her hand back and hid it behind her back. "As long as I can pull enough gold out of the shaft to feed myself, I'm fine."

Jesse walked into Palace Saloon and went straight to a table where a poker game was in process. He was surprised because Faro was the usual game played by Melvin Harper, the self-claimed mayor of Pony. Harper had taken on the title because he was the wealthiest man in town.

"What did you find?" Ben Hardgrove demanded, looking up from his hand of cards.

"What I expected," Jesse said. "Considering you set up the robbery."

"The hell I did!" Hardgrove growled. He reached for his holstered gun, but Jesse was faster.

"Lay it on the table," Jesse ordered calmly, and a disgruntled Hardgrove laid the gun in the center of the pot of greenbacks and gold nuggets.

"We can discuss this without gunfire," Mayor Harper said, laying his cards face down.

"The Halloway cousins were set up," Jesse said. "Murdered, and you don't think anything is wrong with that?"

"We ain't concerned about the Halloways now," Melvin Harper said. "What are you going to do about the woman? One of Ben's money bags was found on her property. That makes her an accessory to the hold-up. I ain't for hanging a woman, but I can levy a fine on her. She can go work upstairs to pay off the fine. I wouldn't mind having a piece of that. Nettie's a good-looking woman, a sight better than most of the girls upstairs."

Jesse saw the looks on the faces of the men who ran the town as they nodded and looked smug. He was disgusted.

Their heads turned in his direction when he cocked his six-shooter.

“Nettie Carpenter didn’t have anything to do with the robbery if there was a robbery, and she isn’t going to be sold off to pay a fine she doesn’t owe.”

“Have you got a proprietary interest in the Carpenter woman?” Ben Hardgrove demanded.

“You’re damn right I do,” Jesse growled. “None of you have the power or the authority to charge her with anything. Only I have that right as a Territorial Marshal. I’ll bury the lot of you if any of you make a move on her. That’s a promise!”

“What’s your problem?” Hardgrove demanded. “She ain’t married, and she’s been asked by plenty. The lines going upstairs here at Palace on Saturday nights are damn near the length of the town.”

“My problem is that you scumbags would destroy a young woman rather than help her,” Jesse said. “Stay away from Nettie, she’s mine, and you’d better start looking for a new source to be the law around here. I’m through with this rotten town!”

Jesse dismounted and tied his horse to the porch post. He crossed the wood porch, raised his hand to knock, but jumped to the side when he heard the distinctive sound of a rifle being cocked.

“Nettie! It’s me, Jesse!” he shouted over a shotgun being fired. He jumped sideways, away from the door. A bullet might penetrate a planked door, but it wouldn’t pierce through the logs. He had a few seconds before she had time to reload.

Nettie’s hands were shaking so bad that she couldn’t get

the bullet into the chamber when the door slammed open, and Marshal Forrester burst inside. She screamed and ran to the far side of the table. He snatched the shotgun from her hands, and she ran to the other side of the cabin.

“Nettie!” Jesse exclaimed. “Stop!”

“Don’t come near me!” she screamed, picking up a long blade knife.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Jesse said gently.

“I didn’t have anything to do with the robbery! If there was a robbery,” Nettie yelled. “Those hypocrites have already murdered the cousins!”

“I know,” Jesse said. “I’m not here to arrest you.”

“Then why are you here?” Nettie demanded.

“I’m here because you need protection,” Jesse said. “I told Harper and his crew of hypocrites that I was done with this town. I gave the men who run this town a piece of my mind and told them I was leaving. I also told them I’m taking you as my wife.”

“Why would you tell them that?”

“Because if I didn’t, they would try to hold you responsible for something you didn’t do,” Jesse admitted. “Harper may think he runs this town, but he has no authority.”

Nettie sucked in her breath and chewed on her lower lip. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know you didn’t,” Jesse said. “But, you turned down Ben Hardgrove when he asked you to be his exclusive woman. I know it was an immoral proposition, but he is corrupt, and so are the other men running this town. “I’m not that kind of a man. I’m asking you to marry me, and we’ll leave Pony and the stench it carries behind us.”

“I don’t know you,” Nettie exclaimed, shaking her head.

“That’s not true. I’ve been up this mountain several times talking with you. Admittedly it was about the cousins, but we’ve discussed other things. If you think you don’t know me,

we can take care of that. Take a seat,” Jesse ordered. He reloaded the rifle and placed it on a shelf on the wall. When he turned around, she was still standing against the back wall. “I’m not going to hurt you, at least not in the way you’re thinking. It’s about time we got to know each other. Sit down.” He looked around the cabin and realized there was only one chair. He pulled the table across the floor a short distance, leaned against it, and motioned for her to sit in the chair.

She was still looking at him suspiciously. She pulled the chair further away and sat. “Are you really leaving Pony?”

“Yes, I am. I threatened those assholes, pardon my language, who thought they could force you into prostitution. It will take me a few days to ready a wagon and gather my tools before I’ll be ready to leave. Until then, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Why do you care what happens to me?” Nettie asked.

“You’re a decent woman, Nettie Carpenter, and I reckon I’m the kind of man that doesn’t like men taking advantage of women,” Jesse admitted. “Women are disadvantaged enough. At least, that’s what my mother drilled into my head as a boy. You told me you were married before. Is he alive? Did you run away from him?”

“He’s dead, and it was good riddance,” Nettie said. “He was a drunk and was run over by a freight wagon. His family tried to claim it was my fault, but I wasn’t even there when it happened. Since I was with the Pastor’s wife, the Constable had to believe me.”

“That was a tough break,” Jesse said.

“I considered it a blessing,” Nettie said. “My father married me off to a man twice my age. I was only married for four months and hated every second of it. He was barely cold in the ground before my father had already promised me to another man. Another one of his drinking buddies.

“My father drowned in the Delaware River two weeks later, and I felt no grief for him either. He was not a good man. He was drunk when he fell into the river. He couldn’t swim, and no one tried to save him. That alone tells you what kind of a man he was to his only daughter.

“That’s when I moved west. I took what little I got by selling my father’s property and filed this gold claim. The newspapers lied about how easy it was to become wealthy.”

Jesse smiled and chuckled. “A lot of easterners get cuckooed that way. They come out here expecting to swing a pick and hit the motherlode. It has happened, but it’s rare. What about the rest of your family?”

“I have no other family,” Nettie said. “My husband had family, but most were worthless, like the cousins. They came out here with the same expectations I had, except they thought they would live off of their cousin’s widowed wife. When they discovered that I wasn’t rich and they were expected to work if they wanted to eat, they decided stealing was easier. How did you come to be in Pony?”

“Blacksmiths are needed everywhere,” Jesse said. “I was headed to Oregon. I took a side trip to Bozeman and was told of the gold strikes in Pony. I came and set up shop. Then I became the de-facto law hereabouts because I spent twelve years as a Territorial Marshal. Montana Territory was dangerous after the war. Still is to those who are naive. You need not worry about being supported, Nettie. I earn a good living, and I’m a kind man.”

“What are your faults?” Nettie demanded. “All men have faults.”

Jesse leaned back against the table and appeared to be considering the question. “I reckon all men do have faults, but so do women. I’m not a churchgoer if that’s important to you. I believe in my own way, but I don’t need a ‘holier than thou’ preacher to tell me what is right and wrong. I don’t like

arguing and can get salty if someone tries to cheat me. I was raised by a widowed mother. She taught me to be kind to men and women, but I won't put up with a lot of nonsense."

"Why haven't you married before?" Nettie asked.

"Soldering and Marshaling are jobs for single men," Jesse said. "Decent women are scarce out here. If women get widowed, they're remarried before the last shovel of dirt is thrown in the grave. I don't blame them for that. Usually, they've got young'uns to feed. I haven't minded being single, but it's time I was settling, and although you've been a mite stubborn, I think you're a good woman. Are you considering what I'm offering?"

Nettie looked around at the tiny cabin and considered her options. She had three potatoes in her larder and hadn't found a speck of gold in over five weeks. With a knot in the pit of her stomach, partially from hunger, she nodded. "It's a far better offer than those awful men in town would have given me, no matter how unfair it was," she said.

"There are two more things that you should know upfront," Jesse said, standing and pulling her to her feet.

Nettie had to look up as Jesse was more than a foot taller. "What would that be?"

Jesse took her by the shoulders. Nettie thought he was going to kiss her, but he didn't. Instead, he propped one of his boots onto the chair, and his grip tightened.

"One," he began, looking her directly in the eyes, "I purely hate it when women don't use the good sense God gave them. I've been up here a dozen times, trying to convince you to leave this mountain. The other thing is that I won't let a woman misbehave. If she doesn't listen, then she's earned a spanking!"

Nettie was lifted off her feet and bent over Jesse's knee. She didn't have time to protest before he smacked her across the bottom. She started to scream in protest, but it came out

as a wail as his hand descended on her bottom repeatedly. She tried to fight him, but it was useless as he had muscles honed by years of his blacksmithing trade.

She kicked and screamed, but Jesse continued spanking her with hard stinging whacks. She tried to scratch at whatever part she could reach, but that only made his hand sting worse on her backside. Every smack hurt and burned, and he kept spanking her until she stopped fighting and lay weeping over his knee.

When Jesse stopped, he looked at the bottom he'd just spanked. The trousers she wore didn't hide her shape. Setting Nettie on her feet, he pulled her into his arms, and before she could protest, he kissed her long and hard. He breathed deeply when it was over and pointed her to the bed.

"Get some sleep, and cry out any misgivings you might have. Tomorrow, we'll move your things into town and into my quarters, where you will be safe. I'll sleep on the porch tonight to ensure no one tries any nasty business. Sleep well, and think about this, Nettie Carpenter. A woman being spanked and not beaten is about as fair-minded as any man can be in these parts."

It took Jesse a while to bunk down in his bedroll. He was thinking about the woman inside. The woman he would marry the next day to protect her from vile men. He wasn't kidding himself. He wanted to share her bed and body, but he had to have the right to be there. He'd yearned for it for quite some time, but Nettie hadn't been ready to accept him in that role. Mistreatment by her father and a lousy marriage partner had scared her off from trusting men.

He would have to teach her that all men weren't rotten to the core, and he'd just made that harder by spanking that nicely shaped-bottom. He was worried about the spanking he'd given her. He'd laid into her pretty hard with a stinging spanking, but she deserved it. She was a stubborn woman,

and she'd put herself in danger. Now she knew what to expect, and so did he, if the kiss they'd shared had meant anything. Her response had damn near curled his toes. Other parts of him were getting anxious to share in the bounty of a woman that would be his and his alone, but that could wait until she trusted him.

When the door closed, Nettie locked it on Jesse's order. She blew out her only lantern and changed into a floor-length sleeping gown in the privacy of the little storage room. When she heard Jesse snoring outside, she used a hand mirror to see how battered her bottom was from his hand.

Nettie's father hadn't cared for her as a child. He'd wanted a son and made no bones about it. Her mother had died several weeks after her birth and left him with a girl child to raise that he didn't want. She'd been ignored by him and the wetnurse he hired to care for his daughter.

Quiet and obedient as a child, her father had still treated her poorly. His constant threat had been to send her to a workhouse until she was old enough to cook and clean. He expected her to obey, and generally, she did. The husband her father had chosen for her had been the same. Beyond the duties expected of a wife in bed, her husband had shown her no interest. Days would pass without them speaking.

Nettie wasn't sure what to make of Jesse Forrester. He was a man of the west, tough and strong, but he seemed to know right from wrong. She had been scared daily as a woman moving into a town of men. After purchasing her claim, she'd received marriage offers daily. She hadn't been interested. As a widow, she'd also received offers that weren't decent.

Word had spread that she wasn't interested, and when the Halloway cousins had joined her, the miners had taken it for granted that they were there to protect her. That assump-

tion wasn't valid, but as long as it kept the men away, she wouldn't correct them.

She'd never met Jesse Forrester before he'd begun coming around looking for the cousins. He'd always shown her respect, although he disapproved of her working a mine.

The cousins had put Nettie in a precarious situation. She was not guilty of breaking any law, but the town leaders had decided to treat her as if she was equally guilty. She didn't have the money to leave town and doubted the townsmen would have allowed it. Pony was run by four evil men, and everyone knew it. Most men stayed clear of them or died. Jesse was offering her protection, but it came with the price of marriage.

Nettie wouldn't allow herself to be used without the decency of marriage, and her choices were slim. Live with a man who would marry and protect her or be used by every man who could pay the saloon owner a dollar. Of course, she would marry Jesse.

Jesse woke up stiff and cold. A sprinkle of snow covered his bedroll, and he shook it off. Snow was still expected in the mountains this time of the year. While the lower regions showed signs of spring, the mountains were still freezing at night.

He headed to the woodpile, split wood into stove-sized pieces, and carried them to the door.

Nettie opened the door when he knocked. She was still dressed as a man.

He dumped the split wood into the woodbox and stood before it trying to get warm.

"Do you own a dress?" Jesse asked.

"Several," she answered, lifting her chin. "I didn't want to ruin them."

"That makes sense," Jesse agreed. "Are we okay this morning?"

Nettie nodded. "I was awake most of the night thinking about your offer."

"And?"

"I will marry you, Jesse Forrester, if we leave this town. I was planning and saving to leave before the cousins stole my gold. I don't believe I'll ever feel safe in Pony again."

"That's the idea," Jesse said. "It will take me a few days to prepare for our departure. In the meantime, we can live in my quarters behind the livery. Parson Cummings can marry us. Badge or not, no man in this town has the guts to take me on!"

Nettie nodded and whispered, "I believe that's true."

The only thing Nettie had to offer for breakfast was the last of a slab of bacon, she cut the mold off, and a stale loaf of bread.

"Were you planning on going into town for supplies?" Jesse asked when there was no coffee offered.

"I was before the cousins stole my gold," Nettie answered truthfully. "Your proposal has come at a time when I do need help. I have been afraid to leave the cabin without the shotgun. I have had to fire on men because they have approached me and the mine entrance. I'm not a very good shot."

"I've already figured that out," Jesse said with a laugh. "There shouldn't be a time when you'd need to, but I can teach you how to handle firearms. It goes against my nature, but I'll bend if it makes you feel safer. From now on, you're my responsibility."