

Chapter One

"Clem, get over here with that dang coffee. This icy water tain't doin' my rheumatism a damn bit of good."

"Comin', Pa," Clem called, pouring the thick brew into a metal cup. Looking at the old man hunched over in the stream was sobering. He'd aged ten years, maybe more since they left their mountain cabin in the Appalachians. Every cent he'd put by over the years became traveling money the moment news of gold in the west reached his ears.

Leaving the isolation of the mountains had been no great loss. Clem wanted to see something of the world and the pittance a school teacher made wasn't nearly enough to keep them from leaving. At first it seemed like a grand adventure.

By the time they joined a wagon train leaving Missouri for the drive on the Overland Emigrant Trail, worry began to set in. Pa seemed possessed, consumed with the idea they'd soon be rich and he squandered money needlessly, insisting they would make the trip in style.

He bought horses and mules when the wagon master advised him that oxen would make the long, difficult trip better. They put in an ample supply of food stores, but also more whiskey than any one man needed. Despite this, Clem watched helplessly as he traded away grain, sugar and coffee for more whiskey after he'd exhausted his supply.

'Gold Fever' some called it and Clem could certainly see why. They hadn't even seen their first shimmer of the yellow metal and already Pa was sick with the want of it.

The arduous trip took more than five months. The only horse to survive was one Clem took to caring for, making sure he had enough to eat and walking him as much as possible. She named him 'Trooper' and admired his stamina. At a stop before the forty mile desert they managed to trade the mules, two nearly dead horses and some goods for a team of oxen or Clem figured they'd still be stuck right there.

In the evening, when he was sober, Clem read aloud to him from a book on mining they found in St. Louis. It seemed like a dirty and often unsuccessful occupation, but Pa was convinced that once they made it to California, all would be well. Shrugging, Clem read on.

Now, settled on the Culpepper River in the foothills of the Sierra's, it looked as though he may have been right. Each day showed some color and it was getting brighter all the time. They kept to themselves, only going into the town of Culpepper Cove for supplies and to see the assayer. Pa had a strut to his step when he wasn't knee-deep in the cold water flowing down from the mountains. It was early spring. The snow in the Sierras was beginning to melt and he'd slowed down on his drinking. Maybe he'd been right all along. Maybe they would make their fortune in the hills of California. To him it might as well have been the Promised Land.

"Here's the coffee, Pa."

"It's about time," Clyde McKay barked just before the bullet that took his life hit him square between the eyes.

Clem dove for the ground watching him fly backward, the coffee sinking into the dirt of the bank beside him. Inching forward toward Pa's gun, another bullet plowed into the muck less than a foot away.

"Don't go no farther, son. Your Pa's likely dead anyway and unless you'd like to join him in the hereafter, I suggest you pack up your gear and hightail it out of here. I mean to have this mine one way or another," a voice that was strangely pleasant called down from an outcropping of rocks.

Clem froze, not knowing which way to run.

"I'm a patient man," the voice continued, "so I'll give you an hour to pack up your belongings and get. And I suggest you take your father's body with you and get him a decent burial in Culpepper Cove. I can see there's some gold in that pan. Take it with you as it's the last you'll see from this mine."

Sick with fear and grief, Clem lie on the ground, cheek pressed against the cold earth until another gunshot split the air. Jumping up and gathering everything in sight seemed the smartest course under the one-sided circumstances. With the use of a rope and a big rock for leverage, Clem managed to get Pa's body over the back of the mule and tied into place, brushing away angry tears in the process. In less than an hour, they were on their way to town with little but a few clothes, personal possessions and a small pouch of gold Pa kept hidden in their tent. It wasn't much. Barely enough to bury him, but the pistol shoved in the waistband of the pants Clem wore went a long way toward riding with a stiff spine. It was the very pistol Clem would use to exact revenge when the time came.

The first stop was the undertaker. Clem was right. Even though they had no friends or family for a fancy funeral, the cost of the pine coffin and burial took most of the gold. There might be enough left for a meal or two at best.

Next Clem went to the Sheriff's office. Jebidiah Justice was sympathetic but since Clem had no idea who the killer was there wasn't much he could do. He promised to go out and look around and said he would keep his ears open for any information that might lead to the culprit or culprits. Killings of this nature were not unusual. A man was often poisoned by the idea of instant riches and many were not above committing murder to get what they wanted. He asked if they'd put up a marker of any sort on their claim and Clem described the three stacked rocks, which could easily be moved or displaced.

When Clem explained the need to find work quickly, Sheriff Justice suggested Clem check The Red Petticoat Saloon. Madam Jewel might have need of a boy for cleaning up around the place.

Clem blushed, but nodded and left the office. There weren't many options and beggars couldn't be choosers. The Red Petticoat was a bordello, complete with fancy ladies and plenty of customers. Once or twice Clem had peeked in the door as Pa sauntered past on their way to the town's cafe. The house of ill repute was clean, much nicer than expected and each woman spotted wore either a red or pink petticoat peeking out from under their fancy dresses. Taking a deep breath, Clem headed there with a committed stride.

"I'd like to speak with the owner," Clem said, trying to sound confident.

"About what?" asked a bronze skinned man leaning against the long bar. He was big, attractive in a secretive way and seemed to be very much in charge.

"A job," Clem replied. "I'm a hard worker and stronger than I look."

"Is that so?" the man replied with a crooked grin. "Jewel," he called out. "There's someone here who wants to speak with you. Good luck, kid," he murmured as he walked away and moved behind the bar.

The woman who came from a door at the back of the room was easily the most beautiful creature Clem had ever seen. Her hair was nearly white blonde and she moved in a way that looked like she was floating across the floor. Clem gulped.

"What can I do for you, young man?" she asked with a voice as soft as a breeze.

"I need a job, ma'am. My Pa was killed by some dirty, thieving, claim-jumping bastards and, oh begging your pardon, ma'am," Clem squeaked out. "I mean he was killed by some scoundrels and..."

"I understand," Madam Jewel sighed, shaking her head. "This can be a barbaric country. I'm sorry about your father," she continued gently. "I'm sure I can find a place for you here. We've been looking for a boy to do the sweeping up and empty the spittoons. You can also fetch and carry for Nettie, my cook. How does that sound?"

"What's it pay, ma'am?" Clem asked quickly.

"Well," Jewel said hiding a smile. "I imagine it will be enough to cover a young boy's amusements. How does three dollars a week and your meals sound?"

"Oh no, ma'am. I need to make much more than that. What do you pay the girls who wear the red petticoats?" Clem asked intently.

The man behind the bar laughed and Madam Jewel scowled at him. "Gabe," she scolded. "Apparently this young fellow is in desperate straits. Now, as far as what my girls make, a lot of that depends on them," she continued, turning back to Clem and assuming a stern demeanor.

"How much?" Clem demanded.

"A substantial amount, but you don't have... you're not equipped to do the work they do," she informed Clem.

"I really would like to be one of those red petticoat girls," Clem replied firmly. "You see I need to make a lot of money fast. There's a lawyer in town and I want to hire him to help me get my claim back. As my father's only blood relative, by rights that mine belongs to me."

"What is your name?" Jewel asked, a note of frustration creeping into her tone.

"Clem McKay, but that's short for Clementine," Clem replied, taking off her hat and letting her blonde hair fall to her waist. If Madam Jewel was surprised, she hid it well. A small rise of her perfectly formed eyebrows was the only thing Clem noticed as Jewel crossed her arms over her chest and began to slowly walk around Clem, looking her over.

The man, Gabe, however appeared doubtful, as though he would have liked her to prove she was indeed a woman. He leaned on the bar watching in interest. It was the sharp crack of wood that startled Clem and she looked to the left and realized it was the sound of chair legs hitting the floor. In the back corner of the room, a man barked out a laugh. He'd obviously been

observing the scene with curiosity as he played with a deck of cards on a green, felt covered table. Jewel ignored him for the time being.

"How old are you?" Jewel asked as she circled Clem for the second time.

"I'll be twenty-one my next birthday."

Jewel shook her head and sighed, leaning a little closer to her. "I strongly suggest you don't lie to me. I don't like it and neither does Mr. Vasquez," she insisted, nodding toward the man at the bar. "Lying will get you disciplined at best and dismissed at worst. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Clem whispered although she really didn't. "I'm going to be nineteen."

"Hmm, well that seems a little closer to the truth," Jewel said with a nod. "You're quite small," she noted. "I would have guessed around sixteen."

"No, ma'am, I swear I'm going to be nineteen. My Ma was small boned too," Clem insisted softly.

"You're definitely pretty enough, or you will be once you're cleaned up. With the proper undergarments, we'll be able to make your breasts a little more appealing. You're obviously not ignorant. Have you had schooling?"

"Actually, I taught school, ma'am."

"Really, where?"

"Back home in West Virginia. Once I completed my studies, I was given a certificate. I can show it to you if you want."

Jewel laughed. "That won't be necessary. Most of our customers don't care if you can even speak proper English, let alone write it. Tell me, Miss McKay, do you have any idea what being one of my girls entails?"

"I think so, ma'am, I mean yes, yes, I do," she quickly stammered, blushing fiercely.

The man in the back stood as he laughed out loud. Clem shot him an evil glare and he laughed louder as he approached with a long-legged stride.

"Jasper, there is no reason to rude. This doesn't concern you," Jewel said, her voice showing the first hint of displeasure.

"Oh come on, Jewel," he replied with a drawl. "I'm one of your best customers, at least as far as drawing in poker players. Surely you don't have to resort to hiring children?"

"I'm not a child," Clem hissed looking him over derisively. "Just because you wear nice clothes and have clean fingernails doesn't give you the right to judge me. I'll bet you've never worked a day in your life," she continued, somehow managing to look down her nose at him despite the fact that he towered over her.

"Well, well, the little cat has claws," the man called Jasper stated with a smile as he picked up a lock of her hair and fingered it. "I like a woman with spirit," he continued. "If you take her on, I have first dibs." Grinning, he slapped Clem's ass crisply as he walked toward the door.

"Get out of here, Jasper," Jewel ordered with a smile as she snatched Clem's arm and stopped her from stomping after him. "You don't want to tangle with him," she warned. "Let it go and come into my office," she said gently. "We have quite a few things to discuss.

Clem released a breath from between her teeth.

"Who is that dude?" she asked watching him over her shoulder as Jewel led her away.

"Jasper Montgomery. He's considered one of the more prominent citizens of Culpepper Cove, although at times I'm sure I don't know why. He's a professional gambler by trade, but he's wealthy in his own right, family money I believe although I couldn't swear to it.

"As a rule he's in here several nights a week, cleaning the gold out of the pockets of any miner foolish enough to challenge him to a game of cards. He doesn't show much interest in going upstairs, which is a shame," she sighed. "He's very attractive."

Clem heard the man behind the bar growl, watched Jewel hide a smile and filed that information away for further consideration.