

## CHAPTER 1



The Colorado spring sunshine warmed both mother and daughter as they sat on wooden boxes next to a dying campfire. The canvas they'd tied to a tree for shelter the night before lay on the ground and was spread out to dry. Cecilia Lammott regarded the chipped porcelain edge of the tin coffee cup she had wrapped her hands around. She fought back the frustration that threatened to pour out of her in angry screams as she listened to her mother's apology and assessment of their desperate situation: Lawrence, Cecilia's doting father, died of fever two weeks before, leaving his wife and daughter with nothing.

"Cecilia," said Mrs. Lammott, sadly, "I am so sorry, but I was unable to secure a position for you at the fort. There are thirty infantry soldiers there, and they need only one laundress and cook."

"Sure, Mother," Cecilia replied "I understand, and I know that you did all you could for me. I still can't believe it; Father is gone."

Though he loved his daughter more than anything else, Mr. Lammott had wanted a son and was disappointed when Cecilia was born. Much to Mrs. Lammott's consternation, when Cecilia was four, her father had her in boy's trousers, spending entire summer

days riding horses—all of which had now been sold. Still, Cecilia would on occasion wear boy's clothes to do work and ride. She was as rugged—and willful—as any boy would be.

“Yes, he died so young, so handsome. I marvel that he could have been taken so quickly and easily by that fever while you and I went unscathed.”

Mrs. Lammott looked down at her hands wishing she had more coffee and some sweet treat to offer her daughter. The Lammott reserves had disappeared, and Mrs. Lammott saw few options for replenishing their provisions.

“What's next?” Cecilia inquired, trying to sound hopeful as she choked back her fear.

Mrs. Lammott scooted her box chair closer to her daughter and reached over to cup her hands around her child's face.

“*Hardly a child now,*” Mrs. Lammott thought as her eyes traced the beautiful young woman her daughter had become. Cecilia, fondly known as Cecil to her father, certainly favored her dad in both looks and mannerisms. Cecilia's high cheekbones and dancing eyes were just like her father's large, expressive hazel eyes that looked field green when excited. Both had warm tones in their dark hair and developed deep, golden tans from working outside with livestock, crops and fix-it chores. Both had angular faces with clefts in their chins—those impressions, Mrs. Lammott told them, were “where the Devil had touched them.” How else could she explain the ornery streak that seemed to run through them both?

The daughter had little in common with her mother's physical attributes. Mrs. Lammott's round face, fair skin, tawny blonde hair and gingham blue eyes, while considered lovely for a woman, looked washed out compared to her husband and daughter's features.

“It will work out,” the mother assured the young woman/tomboy.

“How? There's no gainful, legitimate employment out here,

Mother. You aren't thinking I go work in the brothel? Are you?" Cecilia's voice crept higher in pitch as she spoke out loud.

"Of course not, my dear," Mrs. Lammott murmured as she drew Cecilia into her arms. "We are desperate, but we have principles, as moral, good people do. I have a plan."

Cecilia sat back to regard her mother as Mrs. Lammott pulled a folded clipping from a San Francisco newspaper from her apron pocket.

"It's a crazy idea, but I think you, of all people, can do it," Mrs. Lammott said as Cecilia unfolded the paper that read as follows:

*Wanted: young, skinny, wiry fellows. Not over 18. Must be expert riders. Willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25 a week.*

"You want me to ride the Pony Express?" she asked her mother incredulously.

"Cecilia, if anyone has the skill and the bravery to be successful, it's you," her mother said. "You ride better than anyone I know, and you are small, yet determined and high spirited. Your father raised you to be tough, and I have no doubt that you can face down any danger you might meet on the trail. We can cut your hair short and tie it back into a skiff of a ponytail. You can dress in your father's clothes as he wasn't a large man, even though every inch of him was scrap and muscle."

Cecilia set her cup down, leaned back and pondered the scheme.

"You know, it beats letting strangers paw at me—and worse! Those wages – a fortune! I do believe, Mother, that you have found a way out!"

"I found an option. The way out remains to be seen. Julesburg has a stagecoach stop and has become a Pony stop, too. It's a day's journey from here. We can make the trip to the Fort together. I have enough money to get you a ride on a buckboard to apply for that new adventure. We can part ways at the Fort."

Mrs. Lammott's expression was hopeful as Cecilia stood to embrace her mother.



MRS. LAMMOTT TIED Cecilia's hair with a rawhide cord just below the nape. She then sheared off the long tress and carefully wrapped it into Cecilia's long apron. Mrs. Lammott lovingly packed all of Cecilia's feminine trappings in a large satchel among her own personal items. Cecilia turned to regard her mother.

"From here on, you have a son, so call me Cecil," she said.

Cecil, formerly Cecilia, donned the flour-sack shirt Mrs. Lammott had made for her husband. Cecil stepped into her father's brown trousers, fastened his leather belt and tucked his pant legs into work boots. Cecil then set the brimmed, sweat-stained hat upon her head and snugged the stampede strap right up under her chin. Rolling up her father's woolen coat, Cecil, now transformed into a son, turned to face her mother.

"It's amazing! You really do look just like a fella. If I didn't know you were a girl, I'd never guess you were anything other than a young man," Mrs. Lammott marveled.



THE NEXT DAY, the two women, one now moving through the world as a man, began traipsing toward the military installation that lay between their current location and the Julesburg Pony and stage stop. Cecil insisted upon carrying her mother's heavy satchel to the outpost where her mother would begin her new life without familial duties. Cecil would hitch a ride on the buckboard that Mrs. Lammott learned was bringing supplies to the Fort. The next settlement on the route served as a stop for the stagecoach as well as for the Pony Express riders where fresh horses, rest and food were available to those working men.

At the Fort, Mrs. Lammott struggled to hold back her tears and hugs as she faced her daughter.

"Be careful. Do your best. Know that I love you and am proud of you – always, my girl."

Cecil gave her mother a hasty hug, as she feared any lingering might make her look like a sissy.

"I'll make sure I send most of my pay to you so that we can get ourselves reestablished once we have the means," Cecil said as she turned to leave. Walking toward the wagon, Cecil tried to exude the confidence she knew she'd need to get the job as a rider for the Pony Express and to pass as a boy. She climbed onto the back of the buckboard but could not bring herself to look up as the wagon rumbled into the distance and toward Cecil's new life.



THE STAGE ARRIVED SHORTLY before the buckboard transporting Cecil pulled into town. She could see a stable hand leading a powerful bay horse away from the eight-horse hitch of the stagecoach. Cecil noticed some other fine horseflesh in a good-sized corral—ten strong Morgans and three stout, wiry horses that looked to be Mustangs.

"Thanks!" Cecil jumped off the back of the buckboard, shouted and waved to the driver.

The driver touched his hat brim in acknowledgment as his mules moved on, and Cecil turned to walk toward the outpost building. As she approached, she noticed a hefty figure stalking among the men who were working with the coach. The giant made the other men look stunted, and they cringed as he walked among them shouting orders, like he was cracking a whip over their heads. Cecil hoped she wouldn't have to answer to him to land the job with the Pony Express.

Moving around to the front of the station, Cecil stopped to admire the coach team. The few horses that remained on the hitch were tall and built for speed despite their solid frames as this was a passenger vehicle. A hitch to move freight, including some heavier

loads, would have been comprised of Belgians or Clydesdales. She also knew that mules or oxen would pull the heaviest freight. She had no knowledge of those teams, but she knew that muleskinners and bullwhackers required greater strength and commanded an even higher wage than the Pony Express riders.

One of the dark horses snorted and began to paw the ground as Cecil walked over to admire the beast up close. As she approached, the gelding turned his head in her direction, his ears pricked and faced forward as he whickered to her. Cecil moved in front of the tall beast. He still had his bridle and blinders on, and she slowly reached her hand out to pat the horse's neck. The gelding leaned into her as Cecil crooned pretty-boy praises to him.

"There's a good boy. Such a good horse, a fine looker, a..."

"Hey!"

A loud and abrasive shout tore through her enjoyment as the horse startled and tried to shy away.

"Get away from that horse! It's working, and you should be too, whelp!"

Cecil turned to face the tall and muscular man she'd seen bossing the stagehands. As he walked toward her, Cecil was struck by his large dark eyes, his pitch-black hair, his sensual lips and his commanding voice. Cecil briefly felt a warm tingle of sexual arousal as she gazed at the man.

"That horse is done for the day and needs a rubdown, and you probably should get on it rather than hollering at me," she said as she forced her hat down to hide her eyes lest they betray her by showing her trepidation.

The giant grunted as she quietly moved away. She noticed that he had a heavy rifle resting easily in one hand, so she concluded that he was an armed escort for the stage and that she wouldn't have to go through him to get work. His terse mannerisms were easily explained once she determined he was a guard, so Cecil no longer took what he did or said personally and her fear of him less-

ened to a small degree. She moved away and began walking toward the Pony Express office.



A BELL EMITTED a cheery announcement as she entered a room that had little more than a counter and a chair. A chalkboard listed times, names, and destinations on it. A man with thinning brown hair and silver wire spectacles looked up at her from his paperwork.

"What do you want, boy?" he said, as he looked her up and down.

"Well, sir, a job," she said as she walked closer, pulling the newspaper clipping from her coat and holding it out to him.

"You wanna work for the Pony?"

"Yes, sir. I meet all the qualifications of that advertisement—as you can see."

"Can ya ride?"

"Better than most folks I know."

"Shoot a pistol?"

"Yes, but I'd rather high tail it out of a scrape if I can."

"Good, that's what we want. Do you drink spirits?"

"No, sir."

"Swear?"

"Why, sir, I swear I do not drink—never had a drop in my life!"

"All right then, what's your name?"

"Cecil. Cecil Lammott."

"Well, Cecil Lammott, you're in luck. We just had a kid quit—he's out mucking stalls as we speak. Lost his nerve for the work. Think *you* can do it?"

Cecil noticed the man's tone offered a veiled warning alongside a certain hopefulness.

"Well, sir, I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I could do the

work, but I won't know for sure until I try. I'm certainly willing to do my best."

And just like that, Cecil found herself hired on. The man, Jason Carswell, managed the logistics for both the stage and the Pony in Julesburg. He immediately outfitted Cecil with a Colt six-shooter, 12 bullets, a blue bandanna and a tanned fringed jacket. The treated leather of the new jacket would do a better job of repelling moisture, and the coat's fringe could be used for multiple purposes, including tying things together or mending tack.

Carswell lined Cecil out on her duties as she followed him out to the corrals.

"You're gonna ride a short route of 25 miles to start. You're gonna do it in 15-mile increments, and you're gonna travel about eight to ten miles each hour. You will move off one horse to the other in three minutes and will take the mochila with you."

"Mochila?"

"The leather pouch that fits over your saddle. The mail is in the four locked pockets. You won't carry keys. They reside in Saint Joseph, Missouri; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Sacramento, California."

"I don't have my own saddle?"

"Naw, these saddles are smaller and lighter than what you are thinking. No one would use them – except a rider for the Pony Express." Carswell regarded her, saying, "You'd best get some rest. You're slated to ride this evening. See Mel Jessup and get some grub."

"Mel Jessup?"

"That guy who's always hollering. He will set you up with a bed as well. Don't get underfoot. He's a teamster for any beast of burden you can imagine, *and* he's my armed guard. He'll help you, but he won't take guff, so you best mind yourself—and mind Jessup's every command."

"I appreciate everything. Thank you, Mr. Carswell."



Cecil gulped as she turned to leave, amazed that no one knew she was really a woman.



“MR. MEL JESSUP?” Cecil asked, her voice cracking with fear.

“What?” Jessup yelled when she addressed him. “My name is just Jessup. Mel is an old man’s name.”

“Mr. Carswell told me to ask you about some grub.”

“So, you’re the new rider, huh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Seem kinda puny, and you have a big mouth. Know what everyone’s supposed to be doing ‘cause you have no idea how things work ‘round here.”

“I like horses and want to see them cared for. Now, about the grub?”

Cecil tried to hold his gaze but was afraid she’d swoon when she saw Jessup’s intense, bottomless, brown eyes and felt them bore into her. And, she also noticed the man had the most beautiful wavy ebony colored hair.

“There’s beans and ham and cornbread over yonder. The bunks are in the next room.”

He tilted his head toward the outpost building.

“Better hurry up with your supper – you’re gonna be lucky to get three-hour’s shut-eye before you light out. I’m thinkin’ this is your first ride,” Jessup said. “You’re gonna be tired when you return, if you return. It’ll probably be your first and last run.”

Cecil touched the brim of her hat as she turned to go.

“*That man is nothing short of a boar!*” Cecil thought as she stalked away. Still, she had to wonder about the flutter she felt when Jessup looked right at her—right down to what seemed like the core of her body and soul.