

## CHAPTER 1



Sarah watched the stagecoach pull away in a cloud of dust kicked up by the horses' hooves. A moment of panic threatened to take over, wondering what she was doing here in the middle of nowhere, knowing no one, and no one had come to meet her. She drew quick, shallow gasps of air and let it out slowly until her heart rate leveled out and she didn't feel quite as dizzy.

She looked around the platform again. Her luggage had been haphazardly stacked to one side. The other passengers hadn't disembarked here. The young, newly wed couple was continuing on to the next stop, and the pinched-faced schoolteacher was going on further still.

Twin Creeks had sounded faintly charming in the brief letters she'd exchanged with Thaddeus Burcott, the only man to respond to her ad in the newspaper. She shuddered, still angry with herself for posting there, angry at her situation that had forced her to do it. Advertising for a husband was so humiliating, as though she were too old or ugly to find a husband through more respectable means.

The west needed women, she'd been told. There were plenty of strong, proud men who had come west alone to tame the wild land, and now that they'd built their homes and farms and ranches, they

were ready to marry and settle down. And hers hadn't been the only ad in the paper. But if they needed wives so badly, why had only one man responded to hers?

Thaddeus was a little older than she would have liked. He didn't come right out and say it, but she suspected he was nearly old enough to be her father. He was a tanner, had been married once, but his wife, God bless her soul, had passed away some years before. His daughter was back east at some fancy finishing school, and he was looking for companionship. He'd written that his tannery was doing well. He worked regular hours and was off on Sundays, so they could attend church every weekend that the preacher was in town.

She shielded her eyes from the bright sun, visible now that the dust cloud had settled. The little clapboard church was at the end of the street, off to the side with a small patch of green grass in front. It doubled as the school during the week in the winters, but the children would be home now helping with summer chores.

Behind her was the Mercantile, just as Thaddeus had described. "They carry a bit of everything," he had written. "And if they don't have it, then you didn't really need it after all." She'd smiled at his bit of whimsy, thinking that marriage to a man with a sense of humor couldn't be too bad.

There was a saloon, a restaurant, a hotel, a jail where she would find the sheriff most days, Thaddeus wrote, unless he was playing cards in the saloon. There were a few houses, too. Not everyone lived off the land. And there, next to the livery at the edge of town, was the sign for Burcott's Tannery. In small print, it listed some of the repairs he could make to saddles, tack, coats, shoes. Mostly, he tanned hides that he bought off the ranchers and shipped back east to a major shoe factory.

If she found him so hard at work in the tannery that he forgot to meet her stagecoach, it wouldn't bode well for the marriage. She set her jaw and marched down from the platform to the dusty road, past the saloon, hotel, the church, and across to the livery. But

when she tried to open the door of the tannery, she found it was locked. The sign on the door was turned to "closed."

Now what? She knocked anyway, although it was obvious no one was inside. She pounded on it, staining her white gloves with the fine layer of soot that emanated from the blacksmith next door. "Please, open up! Let me in," she called, nearly frantic.

"He ain't there," a gruff voice bellowed, as the noise of a hammer striking the anvil stilled.

Sarah turned towards the burly blacksmith. His face was so completely coated in soot that she might have mistaken him for a black man, but for his bright blue eyes. Then he wiped a grimy hand on an equally grimy rag, as he spat in the direction of a spittoon.

"Can you please tell me where I may find Mr. Burcott, sir?"

"Such a shame," he mumbled around the wad of chewing tobacco. "I've worked next to Thad most of my life. He was a good man. A hard worker."

"What – what happened to him?" she whispered, trying to keep the panic from her voice.

"He died. Just like that. About three days ago. No warning, no nothing. One day he was talking to me about the new wife he'd sent for, and the next day we was burying him out behind the church. Oh hell. That's you, I bet. Such a pretty little thing. Don't tell me you come out to marry the old codger?"

She was not going to pass out, Sarah told herself. Breathe! She must breathe...

And then strong hands helped her to his stool. She knew it would leave soot on her skirt, but she fell onto it, lowering her head to her knees. She glanced up to see the blacksmith pour a small amount of water from a stone jar into a tin cup, which he offered to her. The cup was remarkably clean, considering its surroundings. He must keep it somewhere protected from the soot that permeated the room.

She took a sip, found the water lukewarm, but refreshing just the same.

The blacksmith hunkered down on his haunches so he didn't tower over her. "I kin walk you down to the church, if you'd like to pay your respects," he offered.

She shook her head. She'd never actually met Thad. It didn't make any sense to meet him now. But what was she going to do? Less than five dollars stood between her and starvation.

"Maybe you should check in with the sheriff," he suggested.

She hadn't done anything wrong. What did she need a sheriff for? But the blacksmith answered her, even though she hadn't voiced her question. "The sheriff knows just about everybody and their business. He'll know if anyone could help you out, take care of you, offer you a home or some work."

"Thank you," she whispered. She must look pathetic if the smith had been able to guess her dire straits. She stood, wobbled a minute, but righted herself before the blacksmith could offer her a sooty hand.

"I'll march right on over there and see him now," she said with false confidence.

"That's the ticket, miss!"

So now she was reduced to begging. That's what it felt like. She was going to beg the sheriff to help her find work. Before the tingle of tears could swell and blur her vision, she shook herself good and hard. There was no time to waste on self-pity! She could not afford that luxury. She needed to find employment of some sort, and quickly.

The saloon was right next to the sheriff's office and jail. The convenient location wasn't lost on her. These places had a rough reputation. Normally she wouldn't think of setting foot inside such an establishment, but her body was used to three meals a day, and she had no choice if she was to survive long enough in this place to save enough money to take her elsewhere.

It was dark inside, even though there were windows across the

front. The glass was cloudy, caked with years' worth of pipe and cigar smoke. A few wall sconces were placed about the room, and a chandelier overhead, but none of the candles were lit. A mustached gentleman of indeterminate age wiped down the countertop while eyeing her suspiciously.

"Ma'am," he said, his voice gravelly. "This establishment isn't for ladies such as yourself. If you are looking for a meal, there is a restaurant at the hotel." His handlebar mustache wobbled indignantly. It was obvious he wanted her to leave at once.

"Sir, are you the owner?" Sarah asked politely. "I am seeking employment."

"Ma'am, a lady such as yourself wouldn't want to work here. The females who work here are of ill repute," he whispered the last two words and his ears turned beet red with embarrassment.

"I was hoping for a position doing the books, or even cleaning or cooking.

"I do my own books, ma'am, and I have a man who cleans and cooks. I'm right sorry for your loss. You must be Thad's bride. It was such a surprise when he keeled over. Well, no one remembered to contact you and suggest you change your travel plans. I was just talking about that this morning with Joe over at the mercantile. But this is not a place for a lady. You'd best ask the sheriff if he knows of a rancher looking to hire on a cook. That would be your best bet at finding something respectable."

All the time he'd been talking, he'd come out from behind his counter and herded her to the door. As soon as she cleared it, he closed and locked the door, flipping his sign to "closed."

Next she knocked on the door to the sheriff's office, only to find that it, too, was closed. A small, well-worn handwritten sign in the window said, "Out to Lunch." As if in agreement, her stomach rumbled. She felt a bit woosey. How long had it been since she'd last had something to eat? She needed water. A glass of water might fool her body into thinking it wasn't really hungry, although that hadn't worked well yesterday.

She'd packed sandwiches for the trip, but had foolishly shared her meager fare with a child who had big, sad-looking eyes. He shared a sad tale of losing his parents and being sent out to live with a relative he'd never met before. She would have given him more, if he would have accepted it. Instead, they had shared her sandwiches fifty-fifty.

Maybe the restaurant would let her have a meal in exchange for washing dishes. Straightening her shoulders, she marched right over there.

Compared to the saloon, Bessie's was quite bright. Clean glass windows let in sunlight, while striped awnings over them prevented a glare from blinding the patrons. The tables were covered with cheery red-and-white checked gingham, stubby candles and salt and pepper shakers holding the tablecloths in place.

A large man stood, nodding in her direction. She couldn't miss the tin star pinned to his leather vest, identifying him as the sheriff. He beckoned for her to join him. She took stock of him first. Although he was easily the largest man in the room – in any room – there was nothing threatening about him. He had friendly eyes and a kind face. If it weren't for the star, she'd have guessed him to be a farmer or maybe even a preacher. Something in her relaxed. He might not be able to help her, but she didn't believe for a minute that he would turn her away. He pulled out a chair for her, as polite as any dandy back east.

"Miss Sarah Prescott, I presume," he asked, then smiled when she nodded. "I'm Sheriff Logan. We're all sorry about what happened to Thad. Please accept my condolences."

She managed a feeble smile. "Thank you, sir. Although, Mr. Burcott and I had only exchanged a few brief missives. I'm not sure how I feel about losing a man I never officially met."

"I understand." He waved to an aproned waitress. "Bessie, bring something for my guest, please."

"Oh, I couldn't eat a bite," Sarah protested politely.

"Nonsense. Your troubles just won't seem so bad on a full stomach. That's what my wife always says." He patted his girth jovially.

"But I cannot afford this," she mumbled.

"We took up a collection at the funeral for you, miss. It ain't much. But it will buy you a meal and a night or two at the hotel while you figure out what you want to do."

Her eyes filled with tears. She wiped one away, forgetting about the soot she'd gathered at the blacksmith's. The sheriff snickered. He pulled a stunningly white handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her. She removed her soiled gloves and made a bigger mess as she tried to blot away the mark. He rose, dipped the kerchief in his water glass and wiped her face with tender experience only a parent could know.

"Looks like you've had quite the morning," he said quietly.

The waitress returned with a big steaming bowl of stew and two fluffy, buttery biscuits. Sarah dug into it like a starving person.

Before long, the sheriff extended his hand over her bowl. "Slower, miss," he whispered. "If you eat too fast on an empty stomach it can do strange things."

She colored, thoroughly embarrassed. "It's just..." she stammered.

"I figured things must be pretty rough for you. They usually are when a lady moves west to marry a stranger."

Once again, she felt tears threaten to spill. She didn't know what was coming over her! She wasn't normally such a crybaby.

"After lunch, you go on up to your room and get some rest. I've already asked around town, and no one needs any help, but one of the ranchers might be hiring. Then I'll pick you up around seven, and you'll join my wife and me for dinner. I can tell you then what I learned."

She was about to protest, but he shook his head. "I won't take 'no' for an answer. My wife already told me this morning that I was to have you over. Now you wouldn't come between a man and his wife, would you?"