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## Chapter 1

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AUGUST 1870, *Larkspur Valley, Wyoming...*

Eighteen-year-old Ruby Green wanted to beat someone to a bloody pulp. Or at the very least, she wanted to scratch their eyeballs out. It was the perfect way to describe her irritation. She had been stuck in the stupid stagecoach, going from her own worthless little town full of poverty, shady characters, and murderers, to the much larger and dignified Larkspur Valley which boasted about their good, Christian spirit.

She was hungry, had less than five dollars to her name, and her best dress of blue and white calico was a dirty mess which clung to her sweaty, half-starved body. In short, she had more than enough reasons to be an irritated mess.

She should be wearing black, as her father had died from drinking too much and was buried only a week ago, but she didn't have enough clothes. Besides, her father had never been someone to mourn over.

*It will all be worth it, Ruby, just you watch,* she told herself as she forced her way out of the stagecoach. She held a brown, worn-out satchel, which her father had used when he had

gone to school as a young man before he became the town drunk and married her whore mother.

"She was beautiful, your mother," he would often blubber when the alcohol would start settling in his stomach. Thankfully, her father was never a violent drunk. At most, he would just force her to dance or sing before sleeping the rest of the afternoon off. "Looked like an angel. Sang like one too. You, my Ruby, are the spitting image of her."

Ruby never knew if her father was telling the truth or if he was confusing her mother for someone else. Her mother had died when Ruby was only two, strangled by the hands of one of her clients when he had refused to pay for enjoying her body. The client had gotten off scot-free because he had been the sheriff's brother-in-law, but her poor mother had to be buried in a shallow grave off the beaten path because the church would not accept a whore being buried in their graveyard.

But she imagined there must be some truth to her father's statement because he hadn't been the only one who had commented on her looks. Ruby was a stunning blonde who loved letting her pale locks fly free across her shoulders, even if women often rudely commented the type of hairstyle was only appropriate on young girls, not someone who was on the verge of womanhood.

Her green eyes had often been described as catlike, with her tongue equally sharp and ready to insult anyone she fancied. An array of light freckles adorned the top of her cheeks and nose which she often tried to cover with rouge.

Ruby Green knew she was a beautiful girl.

She was hopeful her beauty would make her a rich girl.

Before her mother had been murdered, she had been an "independent" whore who didn't belong to a brothel and entertained men in her own home. Her father often boasted

about how her mother had earned money, jewels, and expensive presents as she charmed men with her beauty.

But unlike her mother, she would not be killed, and unlike her father, she would not spend it all on alcohol and stale peanuts. Ruby reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out an old watch which had belonged to her father.

It was almost five in the evening, which meant she had to reach the brothel before it became busy for the evening. Starting off in a brothel, was not her first choice, but despite her less than stellar homelife, she was still hopelessly naive about the "pleasures of the flesh". Ruby thought it would be for the best if she started in a traditional brothel, to learn the tricks of the trade before she went on her own way.

A year would be enough to learn how to pleasure a man and she would be able to save money on room and board.

Her green eyes scanned Larkspur Valley. This town was so big, much bigger than the town she had come from, where a person could visit every single spot in less than twenty minutes. This town felt like it went on forever. If Ruby was still a childish fool, she would have compared it to something out of a storybook.

She bit her lower lip. The brothel must be on the outskirts of town, away from the big, white church, so it must mean—

"Are you lost, little lady? Where's your daddy?"

The voice was condescending with a hint of teasing, as if Ruby were a little girl and not a grown woman. She turned around to give the bastard a piece of her mind.

The first thing she saw was a large, gold sheriff's badge attached to a clean, stiff brown vest. A brown cowboy hat sat on top of black, inky curls. The man was smiling, showing off a row of white teeth. His blue eyes were the same shade as the sky—the kind of eyes baby angels had.

He was handsome, but being handsome did not take

away his rudeness, especially at a time when she didn't want to be bothered. So, this giant with the sunny blue eyes was the town sheriff. She wondered if he could throw a decent punch. He seemed like too much of a pretty boy, even though his arms were thicker than her neck.

"My father is dead," she replied coldly.

The sheriff had the decency to look embarrassed as he removed his hat. "I'm sorry for your loss. I apologize for my tasteless joke. I'm Sheriff Steve Bennington. Is there anything I can help you with, Miss—"

Finally, someone in this town was making themselves useful.

Ruby offered her pale hand towards him so he could kiss it. "Ruby Green. Yes, you can help me. I need you to tell me where the brothel is. No need to walk me to it, you can just point me to it."

Sheriff Bennington looked beyond horrified, as if she had just told him she ate rattlesnakes for breakfast. It was quite amusing. "A brothel?" he inquired politely. "Is that truly the place you want to go to, Miss Green? It is not a good place for impressionable young ladies. If you need a place to stay, I can point you in the direction of the nearest inn."

"It won't be necessary, Sheriff Bennington. Now, the directions for the brothel if you please, or do I have to ask someone else?" she asked sweetly.

Sheriff Bennington narrowed his eyes, obviously thinking she was making fun of him. She didn't know why. Ruby knew she certainly didn't look the part of a respectable young lady with her tangled hair and dirty clothes.

"It's three blocks down, Larkspur Heaven, next to the saloon in front of the feed store. Madame Eugenia owns it. You can't miss it," he said slowly, his eyes never leaving hers.

So, this town's brothel wasn't in the middle of nowhere. It would certainly make everything much easier for her. Ruby

gave a small curtsy in a mocking way, as if he were a member of the aristocracy. "Thank you."

Ruby could feel his eyes peering at the back of her head as she made her way to the brothel with the tacky name of Larkspur Heaven. The whorehouse seemed as old and unkempt as the saloon next door, painted a faded green with ugly, brown shutters and creaky windows and doors. A worn-out yellow sign with a crooked, painted larkspur flower read, *Larkspur Heaven*.

There was a bit of a commotion happening as the workers got ready for the evening rush. Women gossiped as they brushed their hair and people watched from the upstairs rooms. Three older women plumped up couch cushions outside while they complained about how dusty they were. A tall, bald man with a thick mustache looked around carefully as if he expected an attack at any moment. He was a guard of some sort and the only one who would be able to get her a front row seat to see Madame Eugenia.

Ruby arched her back and started walking towards the entrance like a young queen. The bald man stepped in front of the door almost immediately. "Who are you?" he spat.

Ruby gave him her most patient smile. "I'm Ruby Green. I was hoping to speak to Madame Eugenia."

"She's not interested in anything you have to sell, girl."

"Oh, but I'm not selling anything, sir. You see, I am interested in working for Madame Eugenia as a lady of the night, to put it politely."

She regretted her words as soon as she said them. Why did she dance around the subject? She should have said "whore". Now, he would think she was an ignorant fool.

The man narrowed his eyes. "You? Working upstairs, spreading those pale white legs of yours and accepting every miner, farmer, rancher, and storekeeper who stores a coin in your bosom?"

Ruby hoped she wasn't blushing even though she felt her skin turning hot. "Correct. Now, may I please speak with her? I've been traveling all day."

He looked like he wanted to slap her but, eventually, led her inside. The place smelled of soap and strong perfume, nicer than she had anticipated. The brothel was so busy with workers arranging card tables and getting plates and beer glasses ready, they didn't pay attention to Ruby at all.

"Follow me," the bald man ordered.

He took her to a small office at the back, behind the staircase, covered head to toe in red velvet with a fancy-looking chandelier. A plump woman was sitting at the desk in the back, her large breasts nearly popping out of her tightly corseted dress. There was a large emerald and pearl choker around her thick neck. Deep red rouge covered her cheeks, and her overly thin eyebrows rose in surprise when she looked at Ruby.

"Frank, what is this?"

"I'm Ruby Green," Ruby butted in before the bald man could answer, ignoring the sting at being referred to as an object. "I want a job here as a prostitute, to sleep with men." There, that sounded natural enough. She might have grown up with a drunk father and a whore mother, but deep down, she was like an innocent, pathetic schoolgirl.

Madame Eugenia and Frank exchanged looks before they burst out laughing at her naivety.

"Is there any other work a prostitute does?" The woman lit a thick cigar. "What's your name again, girl?"

She raised her chin proudly. "Ruby Green."

"How old are you, Ruby?"

"Eighteen."

"Have you ever fucked a man? Sucked him off? Bent down on all fours with your ass in the air, being offered like a platter?"

With every question, her face grew redder as she struggled with an answer.

Madame Eugenia let out a puff of air. "Get out of here, girl, and get a decent job as a seamstress or a kitchen maid at a hotel."

"It won't get me the money I want. Those jobs don't pay well. You work like a dog for every penny. Here, you earn twice the money with a single roll in the hay. I don't care about being a respectable woman if that's what you're wondering."

They exchanged looks before Frank spoke up. "We could give her a try. The men always become crazy dogs for virgins."

"I do hope you know what you're doing, girl. Your reputation will never be safe after entering this place." Madame Eugenia peered at her. "When do you turn nineteen?"

"On January first."

"Only a few months from now. Good. You will work as a barmaid until then. Earn your keep and learn from the other girls."

"What? Why?" she spat furiously.

"Because, despite your age, you are still wet behind the ears. Not to mention, you have a horrible temper which needs taming. You need to know what you're getting yourself into before you make a rash decision. I don't do this with everyone. You should be kissing my feet in gratitude." Madame Eugenia seemed to take pleasure in looking at her sullen face. "What do you say, beautiful Ruby?"

"Fine!" Ruby agreed after a while, still looking displeased. "I assume room and board and food will be covered."

Madame Eugenia and Frank exchanged looks. "My, aren't you a greedy little beggar. I should have Frank wash your mouth with soap. Yes, room and board and food will be included. I will take fifty cents for every dollar you make. You

are responsible for your own clothes. I do not want to hear any lip about men constantly ripping your clothes. It comes with the territory." She squeezed Frank's arm. "Frank is my security and my husband. What he says goes, understand?"

She nodded, not wanting to argue about how half of her earnings would go to Madame Eugenia. "When can I start?"

"Tomorrow. You look rather worse for wear today. We need to make you pretty. The other girls can lend you things while you earn money." Madame Eugenia snapped her fingers. "Go find Linda. She will take you to your room and lend you clothes. This is a brothel, so there is no sense in looking like a church girl."

Both she and Frank snickered as Ruby left the room, heading outside to find Linda. Ruby had been too busy looking around, she hardly noticed when she ran into a wall of muscle. She winced as she rubbed her forehead.

A pair of strong arms was holding her steady by her shoulders. "Sorry."

A wave of irritation crossed her body. Oh, no, not him again. The sheriff was looking at her with a disapproving frown on his face. She hadn't realized how big he was until they were standing close to each other.

She pulled back when she realized her breasts were practically rubbing against his vest. "Are you really doing this?" Sheriff Steve Bennington looked disapproving.

"Yes." Ruby raised her chin. "Not that it's any of your business."

"On the contrary, I'm the sheriff of this fine town. Everything each citizen does is my business."

"Are you worried about every particular citizen, Sheriff, or am I just a special case?"

"Look, girl, I doubt your folks will be too happy knowing what you're doing. I know times are tough, but working in a brothel is not something your pa or ma would approve of."



"My parents are dead, Sheriff, as I told you." She smiled coldly. "Pa drank himself to death and I'll be entertaining men just like my dear ol' ma. It's practically a family tradition at this point."

Steve glared at her, obviously not pleased with her sarcasm.

"There are other jobs, sweetheart." Steve's voice was almost gentle, filled with pity. The kind of pity Ruby hated. "I could help you find one. Lord, you're barely out of the schoolhouse. Opening your legs to strangers, is not the way to make a living. You're too—"

"Stupid? Headstrong? Naive?"

"Innocent," Steve interrupted, obviously annoyed by her interruption. He gripped her wrist. Why was this man being so annoying? It was exhausting. "Let me help you, Ruby. My older brother and my sister-in-law will know what to do. I even have a place where you could stay with my sisters."

Ruby managed to pull away from his iron grip, nearly falling on her bottom. "And I told you I don't need help. This is what I decided from the beginning, Sheriff Bennington. If you were a true gentleman like you claim to be, you would respect my decision and let me be."

Her stubbornness was starting to make him angry. She could tell just by the way his blue eyes were narrowing at her, like he wanted to strangle her.

Steve took a step forward, looking like he wanted to place her over his shoulder and carry her away from the brothel.

But Ruby was tiny; she managed to escape him, hiding behind Frank who had sneaked in front of her, like a cat. Frank promptly closed the door in his face.

"Sorry, we're closed."