

# A BADGE IN BIG ROCK

BIG ROCK ROMANCE BOOK TWO



NORA NOLAN



Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Nora Nolan  
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-058-6

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-153-8

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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## CHAPTER 1



Amy McCray had one thought and one thought only as she bounced on the stagecoach headed for Big Rock. *I've got to clear my brother of this murder charge. Please, God, help me find Hattie Payne so she can testify for Caleb.* She knew her half-brother, Caleb Carter, would never have committed such an awful crime.

She'd been on the stage forever, it seemed. When she left the train at Rawlins and got on the stage to Big Rock, she was already feeling behind in her mission. *Time's a wasting! If only she could make those horses fly. I need to get there! Move, dammit!*

The stage was nearly full. There were two older men, each alone, who spent much of the trip discussing the political ramifications of statehood for the Wyoming Territory. There was a friendly married couple, the Rev. and Mrs. Copperfield, who, by Amy's estimation, were only a little older than her own twenty-seven years. Then there was another older man traveling alone, a Mr. Wilcox, who seemed pleasant enough but was evasive when asked direct questions. Amy instinctively chose not to engage him in conversation. When she thought about it, though, she realized she was acting much the same way on this trip. She was normally outgoing, but she knew with her brother's future in the balance, she couldn't

reveal too much about why she was really headed to Big Rock. She felt her brother was a scapegoat for some of Lester Dunwoody's business associates, and she didn't know how far-reaching their grasp was. Besides, if people found out her brother was in jail, it might taint their impression of Amy, and she didn't need that, either. She needed for people to respect her enough to talk to her if she was going to help her brother.

She heard the driver let out a few loud whoops and whistles to alert the man at the Williston swing station to get a fresh team of horses ready. They could only stop long enough for the passengers to stretch their legs and perhaps visit nearby bushes for relief. Some of the swing stations along the way had buildings, some had a building in process, and some had lean-tos that were shared with the horses. Williston was of the lean-to variety.

After they stretched and got settled again on the stage, Amy knew she had about two or three more hours to Big Rock. She needed to review the facts and formulate a plan of action so she wouldn't waste time when she got there. She had everything committed to memory already and didn't need to pull out the notes in her valise. She ran through everything in her mind as the miles passed by.

Caleb had been with Hattie Payne when Dunwoody was killed. There were no witnesses to the murder.

Hattie had disappeared shortly afterward. It could have been to escape from her husband. It could have been to avoid having her name sullied if it came out during the murder investigation that she was having an affair with Caleb. It could have been that she simply wanted to start over somewhere else.

Caleb refused to name her to the authorities and forbade Amy and his friends from naming her. He didn't want Hattie's husband to have any more reason to abuse her, and besides, he wanted to protect her reputation. She knew she'd have to find Hattie and persuade her to come forward to save Caleb.

Hattie should be easy to find, because she had bright, straw-

berry-blonde red hair. Unfortunately, Amy had never met her, so she didn't know exactly what she looked like. Caleb described her as being of average height and build and pretty. Topped off, of course, with that beautiful, soft, long, flowing red hair.

Hattie told Caleb she had a sister who owned a business in Big Rock. She never told him what business it was or what her sister's name was, though, so that could make it more difficult to find her.

Hattie was deathly afraid of her husband, Edgar, who beat her unmercifully. Caleb said Edgar always suspected Hattie loved another man, and that suspicion partly fueled his rage. Alcohol fueled it more. And God only knows what other demons he had.

*I've got to find Hattie Payne. She's the key to setting Caleb free. I'll go to the sheriff's office first and introduce myself. Caleb and I have different last names, so nobody can make a connection, even if any of them do know about the case. I'll say I'm looking for my friend Hattie with red hair. And they'll tell me where I can find her. Please let it be that easy!*

Caleb didn't know of any other relatives or friends Hattie had, but it was safe to assume her sister might know her whereabouts. He also had no idea that Amy had struck out on her own on this trip to find Hattie, either. She prayed Hattie and her sister were close and that she was on the right track.

As the stagecoach rolled into Big Rock, the passengers began to stretch as much as they could in their seats and tried in vain to brush the dust from their clothing and belongings. Amy and Mrs. Copperfield dusted each other's hats and even their hair. Amy knew that the Copperfields were excited about moving to Big Rock for the reverend to take over a vacated assignment and become the new pastor of the local flock. She wished Mrs. Copperfield well as they gave each other final once-overs.

The Copperfields were the first off the stage, then Amy. She stepped away from the door of the stage, so she wouldn't block it, and found herself stretching her arms up and stretching her back into a roll, left and right, to work the kinks out of her muscles. She caught Mr. Wilcox watching her, and an uneasiness came over her.

She realized it wasn't very ladylike to contort one's body in public like that. Certainly, Mrs. Copperfield wasn't doing that. She straightened and held her head up in as much of a dignified carriage as she could manage, but she still caught Wilcox smirking, out of the corner of her eye, and seethed a little bit.

Amy asked the station master about the safety of her suitcases if she should go visit the sheriff's office for a few minutes. He assured her he'd watch them personally and pointed out the sheriff's office and jail just two buildings down. After thanking him, she headed for the jail.

When she walked in, the sheriff and the deputy both stood up from their desks. She looked around the room and saw that there were currently no prisoners in the cells. Her eyes nearly watered at the thought that, right now, her brother was in a similar cell back in Omaha.

"Ma'am, I'm Sheriff Larkin. You must have just come in on the stage. How can I help you?" He walked over to pull out a chair for her on the other side of his desk, and she noticed how tall he was—how attractive he was. She sensed how in control and how sure of himself he seemed to be.

She looked over at the deputy, who smiled and offered his name in a way of introduction. "Deputy Glover, ma'am."

*You rehearsed this. Don't mess it up. Your brother's depending on you.*

"Sheriff Larkin and Deputy Glover," she said as she gave them what she hoped was a coy smile, "my name is Amy McCray. I'm so hoping you can help me find a friend of mine. Her name is Hattie, and she has lovely light red hair. A pretty girl. I'm sure if you've seen her, you'll remember her striking coloring. She's probably been here for just a few weeks. I can't wait to surprise her. Can either of you tell me where I might find her?"

She caught the two men exchanging glances. Her impression was that they both thought something was amiss.

"Miss McCray, uh, it is Miss, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sheriff Larkin, it's Miss."

"Well, Miss McCray, can you tell me any more about your friend? That description doesn't ring a bell with me."

"Oh, surely, if you'd seen her, you'd remember her red hair. Are there that many redheads in Big Rock?" She attempted another beguiling smile but wasn't sure she'd pulled it off. Acting and exhibiting feminine wiles were two of her absolute worst talents.

The sheriff looked at her thoughtfully. "No, I don't think I've seen any redheads in town. Not redheaded women, anyway. Aaron, have you?"

"No, ma'am, I don't believe I have, either. I seem to remember a young woman coming in a month or so ago, but she was a brunette. So she's not the one you're looking for. Miss McCray, your friend might be leading you on a wild goose chase."

"No!" It was out of her mouth much more loudly than she wanted. In the small confines of the sheriff's office, it sounded to her own ears as though she'd shouted it. "No, I'm fairly certain she came here." *I need to get out of here before I blow it.*

"Ma'am, I'm afraid we can't help you, if that's all the information you have," the sheriff offered apologetically.

Amy sighed in resignation then checked herself. "Well, I thank you, gentlemen. I believe I'll just stay here in town for a few days and wait. I'm sure she'll turn up. Do let me know if you see any redheads." She stood and left as quickly as she thought was dignified, hoping she hadn't just ruined any chance of them taking her seriously.



THE SHERIFF CLOSED the door behind her and looked at Aaron. "Tell you what. Hold down the fort. I gotta check this out. That little lady's got a secret, and we need to find out what it is." He grabbed his hat, walked out, and quickened his pace until he caught up with her.

"Miss McCray, forgive my manners. I know you just arrived and

you're alone here. Let me help you get your bags to the hotel and take you to get a bite to eat. You must be tired and hungry after that stage ride."

"Oh, Sheriff, no, that's all right. I believe the hotel can send for my bags for me. Surely, I can get a bite to eat there."

*She's trying to get rid of me. Well, I won't be so easy to get rid of. I need to know why this little lady came into town. You don't travel five or six grueling days to surprise someone unless you know for certain they'll be there.*

He gave a low rumbling laugh. "Well, I'm glad I came after you, then. A bite would be about all you'd get. The hotel's a good place to spend the night, but you can't get a meal there. All they have is a tea room, and it doesn't serve enough to keep a rat alive."

"Well, then, I'm sure I can find a restaurant on my own. You needn't trouble yourself."

"It's no trouble at all. Matter of fact, it's my job. I'm responsible for the town's well-being, and that includes newcomers, too. Especially young unaccompanied women. It's a safe town, but I'd still rather you be with someone, at least until you're known around here. It'll be my pleasure to introduce you. Maybe someone will have seen your friend." He took her by the elbow and guided her toward the station where her bags were still sitting just outside the door. He sensed her pulling gently away from him as though she wanted him to let go of her arm. He grasped a little more firmly, subtly letting her know she wasn't going to escape him.

Sheriff Larkin told the station master that he'd get Miss McCray checked into the hotel, and they'd send someone after her bags.

When they walked into the hotel, he took over. "Wallace, this is Miss Amy McCray, and she needs a room. Can you get her set up?"

"Why sure thing, Jim. Miss McCray, how many nights do you plan to stay?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure of my plans just yet. Three or four days at the least, I should say."

"Wonderful! We'll put you in Room 4. It's a lovely room on the



second floor, overlooking the street. Unless you'd prefer a room on the back? It might be quieter."

"No, I think I would like watching the street." She smiled.

"Excellent." He lowered his voice, as if he were about to tell her someone had died. "Now, my dear, we do require a deposit in the amount of the first night's lodging." He pointed to a sign behind him.

"Oh, oh, of course." She pulled out her reticule and opened the drawstrings. The sheriff was tall enough and standing close enough beside her that he could see the contents. He saw folded sheets of paper with writing on them and enough folding money to give him pause. There must have been over \$1,500 in that bag! That little drawstring bag. She had to carefully reach in and isolate just enough cash to hand the man. Anyone watching would have known she was carrying a lot of money. He'd have to have a word with her about that. *Damn fool woman. Carrying that much money on a stagecoach! She could have lost it all.*

"One more thing, Wallace. Can you have her bags brought over from the stage while I take Miss McCray over to Mama Mary's?"

"Sure thing." He looked at Amy. "Your bags will be in your room when you return. Now would you like to take your key, or would you like to just ask for it when you return?"

"I think I'd like to take it, please."

As Amy walked away, the sheriff took some coins from his pocket and handed them to Wallace to tip for the bags. Wallace winked at him and grinned.

It was midafternoon and Mary's restaurant had cleared somewhat from the lunch rush. Mary greeted Jim affectionately and made him introduce her to the lovely young lady with him. Mary was short and round and had an infectious smile and laugh. Amy couldn't help but relax a bit with Mary, and it was enough to give the sheriff a glimpse of what he hoped was the real Amy. Still, there were questions he wanted answered.

"Mary's the best cook in town. You can't go wrong with anything here. Mary, what's on the menu to choose from today?"

"I've got the old standbys, chicken and dumplings and a particularly good batch of venison stew. I've also got meatloaf left and potatoes and I think a couple of beef steaks I could fry up for you, if you want."

They ordered, then Mary disappeared and came rushing back in as fast as her short little legs could carry her. She brought them water and tea to drink, a basket of cornbread and biscuits, and a little bowl of butter. "Now you two get started on that and I'll have your food right out."

Jim decided not to force a conversation; he didn't want the meal to seem like an interrogation. He picked up a piece of cornbread and buttered it generously. He noticed Amy did the same thing with a biscuit. "Would you like me to ask Mary for some jelly? Or honey?"

"No, this is fine, thank you." She took a bite. "Oh, this really is fine. Delicious!"

"Be sure to tell Mary. She loves to hear it." He smiled. As Mary brought out their food, Jim told her what Amy said, and sure enough, Mary beamed.

"Mary, Miss McCray is in town looking for friend of hers. Her name's Hattie and she has red hair. Have you seen anybody like that?"

She thought. "No, not a redhead. Clint's niece was here for a while, but she had brown hair. Besides, she's gone now anyway. I think there's a new girl at Tallulah's, but she's got dark hair. No, honey, I haven't seen any redheads."



IT WAS clear to Jim that Amy was disappointed Mary hadn't seen Hattie, since she was in a popular public place all day. If it was the only restaurant in town, surely, Hattie would have been in here a

time or two. Jim saw a worried and saddened look come on Amy's face. *Her hopes are dashed. What's this woman's story?*

"When was the last time you saw your friend?" Jim asked.



*THINK QUICKLY, Amy. Answer, but be evasive.* "Oh, it was probably a few weeks ago."

"You aren't sure?"

"Oh, well, yes, of course, I'm sure. It was, um," she thought back to the day of the murder. "It was six weeks ago." She smiled, happy to have been able to give him an answer.

"And she didn't tell you she was leaving town?"

"Well, she said she might take a trip."

"And she didn't tell you where?"

"Um, no, she wasn't specific."

"Isn't that odd, since you're such good friends?"

"Oh, no, you'd have to know Hattie. She's flighty." She gave her most charming smile, at least she hoped it was. It wasn't.

"Umhuh. Well, where is home? Where did you see her last?"

*Don't panic. Don't say Omaha. Don't say anything that might link to Caleb.* "A little town this side of Des Moines." *Omaha is this side of Des Moines. Not exactly a lie. So, mostly true. Don't give him time to ask again.*

"Sheriff Larkin, why don't you tell me about the town?"

He looked at her oddly, as though he realized that was an awkward topic change. "Are you thinking of moving here?"

"Well, you never know. It does seem like a nice place. I rode on the stage with the Copperfields. He's the new pastor. Where is the church?"

"It's down the street and over. You can see the steeple outside. You'll definitely be able to see it from your room. There's a little parsonage for the preacher's family right beside the church. I can take you to visit them once they get settled in."

"You don't need to trouble yourself. Surely, if I can see the steuple, I won't get lost. I can find it by myself."

"Miss McCray, I told you I don't want you out running around town alone. It isn't safe for you, and it doesn't seem proper. You're still a stranger here."

*This is just too much. Who does he think he is?* "Sheriff, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I certainly don't need you to escort me."

He looked squarely at her. "I'm not asking. Now what else can you tell me about your friend Hattie?"

"There's nothing else to tell." She could tell he didn't believe her.

"I'm not optimistic you'll find your redhead. If neither Aaron, Mary, nor I have seen her, I don't hold out much hope you'll come across her accidentally. What other leads do you have? If you tell me, I might be able to help."

She sighed. "I think she mentioned once she has a sister here in Big Rock who owns a business."

"Why didn't you want to share that with me?"

"I don't know. I was hoping to find her, myself."

He looked at her for a long moment. "All right, that might help. There's Mary, here, who owns this restaurant, but that was a dead end. There's Mrs. Canfield down the road a bit; she's a dressmaker. I think she's from New York. One of the saloons is owned by a woman. The other one is owned by a married couple; that might work. Clint Keller and his wife Shirley own the general store. That's about all I can think of where a woman is an owner or a part-owner. Oh, and Harlan Harper and his wife. He has the telegraph office."

*Good to know.* "Thank you, Sheriff. I'll check all those places tomorrow. Maybe I'll have some luck."

"Whoa there, little lady. We'll check those places together. Remember what I said about you being out gallivanting on your own."

"I'll be fine by myself."

"Let me repeat, I'm not asking. You will not walk to any of those places alone. Do you hear me?"

"Really, Sheriff, I can—"

"I said, do you hear me?"

Exasperated, she answered, "Yes, I hear you."

"Good. I'll come by the hotel in the morning at 8:00 to go get breakfast. We'll plan then."

*You're an insufferable chauvinist. Is there such a thing as hate at first sight?*

The walk back to the hotel was a quiet one, each of them being frustrated with the other. Well, he was frustrated. She was more seething with a deep resentment and a sense of being thwarted in her mission to help her brother. But she couldn't tell him any more than she already had.

She walked into the hotel and thanked the sheriff for the meal, albeit a cold and terse thank you. *At least I said the words.* Wallace told her that her bags had been brought to her room. Amy asked that a bath be prepared, and Wallace let her know that a communal bath was at the end of the hall, and they'd knock on her door when the hot bath was ready. She smiled her thanks and headed for her room.

"If you aren't down here at 8:00 in the morning, I'll come to your room."

She didn't respond. Wallace looked down, shaking his head with amusement.

It was late afternoon, and no one else was milling about when the knock on her door let her know her bath was ready. She took down her hair and brushed it out. Looking out her door again and seeing no one, she felt comfortable walking to the bathroom in her robe. The water was hot, and there was an extra bucket of hot water beside the tub that she could use for rinsing her hair. She added some of her own lavender oil to the water and stepped in slowly, luxuriating in the feel of the soothing water around her. That long trip on a train, followed by the bone-jarring dusty stage-

coach ride had taken its toll. Her muscles needed some comfort. She closed her eyes and let the hot water do its magic.

Back in her room later, she realized just how tired she was. She emptied her reticule on the table and counted her money again. She left it in a stack on the table and picked up her notes and news clippings about Caleb, his arrest, and the impending trial. *Surely, there's another clue in all this. I've got to be missing something!* She lay down on the bed and settled in with her papers.

The next thing she knew, there was an insistent knock at her door. "Miss McCray?" She opened her eyes with a start and realized the morning sun was streaming in her windows. *Oh, no, not that overbearing man again. Get rid of him.*

"Sheriff, I'm afraid I overslept. You go on and get breakfast, and I'll meet you later at your office. Shall we say 10:00?"

"Get dressed. I'll wait downstairs for fifteen minutes, then I'm coming back up."

"Sheriff, no woman can be dressed presentably for the day in so short a time. I'll find you later."

"Fifteen minutes, and I'll be back with a key."

*Oh! That man!* "Fine," she spat.



ON THE OTHER side of the door, he allowed himself a grin. Damned if he wasn't enjoying this. He knew she'd bolt and go off on her own if she had half a chance. He also knew the only other way out of the hotel was down a hall off the lobby, so if he waited downstairs, he'd see any attempt she made to leave without him.



AMY BEGAN MOVING FRANTICALLY to get herself presentable. She quickly took care of her needs and washed up. Fortunately, she'd hung her clothes in the wardrobe the afternoon before, so they

were within easy reach. She had to forego the corset—no time to try to lace it up. She raked through her hair, braided it, and pinned it halo-style on the top of her head. She pulled up her stockings and grabbed her boots, silently cursing her choice of a button closure style. *Each blasted boot has eleven buttons! I don't have time for this.*

The sheriff knocked, and it wasn't a tentative knock. "I'm not dressed yet, Sheriff Larkin."

"Yes, you are." She heard the key in the lock and saw the knob turn. She was frozen in disbelief as he strode into the room.

"Sir, you have no right to be in here! It is highly improper."

"Why? You're dressed. Just finish with your boots and we'll be ready to go."

"Please turn your head."

"Ma'am, I've seen boots before." While she was frantically working to get those buttons into the corresponding buttonholes, she caught Jim taking the opportunity to let his eyes wander around the room. She knew he noticed the crumpled clippings and notes, but she thought they were too obscured by the covers for him to read the contents. Besides, he really only saw them for a few seconds.

"I noticed you had a handbag full of folding money yesterday when you checked into the hotel. You shouldn't be carrying that much money around on you. After breakfast, we'll stop by the jail, and I'll put it in my safe for you."

"Absolutely not! I want my money with me."

"Absolutely not," he echoed her own words. "Yesterday, by trying to be discreet with your money, you drew attention to the fact that you clearly had a lot of it in that bag. I knew neither Wallace nor I would accost you for it, so I didn't say anything. But if you carry that much around with you every day, you'll make yourself a walking target for any lowlife wanting easy money. You can keep out enough walking around pocket money for anything you might want to buy, but I want most of it locked away."

"What if I don't want my money in your hands?"

"There's a safe over at the bank. Tom Williamson's a friend of mine, and I'm sure he'll let you keep it there. But he'll probably charge a nominal fee."

"Oh, all right. Might as well have it at the jail. Your friend is probably as much of a pain as you are."

He looked directly at her with clear amusement that made her blush. He leaned over until he was directly in front of her face while she was still seated on the bed, fastening her boots. He plastered a big smile on his face and said, "If you think I'm being a pain trying to keep your money safe, wait until you see what a pain I can be keeping you safe."

She huffed in annoyance.

"Just wanted to make that clear, ma'am." He stood back up and stepped away.

She gritted her teeth as he watched her grab her papers and hastily put them in her suitcase. She tried her best to hide what they were. Then she grabbed the money off the table and pushed it into her reticule and tightened the drawstring.

Breakfast was a delicious meal, and Mary's cheerful disposition and musical laugh did much to soften Amy's attitude. She was glad. She knew her own tendency to fly off the handle and get carried away when angry, and she couldn't afford any missteps with the sheriff.

*The sheriff. What is it about that man that keeps me so flustered? He's just another man, and they're all alike. Well, maybe not exactly alike. He's so decisive and sure of himself, and other men can be so...so...well, I don't know what, exactly, but they aren't like him in that way. The way he looks at me makes me think he can see right through me. Or read my mind. Or imagine me in my dainties. Lord have mercy, Amaryllis! You've got a job to do and you can't afford to think like that right now. Concentrate on what you have to do.*

They walked toward the jailhouse and kept the conversation to light pleasantries. They were still talking about train travel in general when Deputy Glover burst through the door with another



man following closely behind. "Sheriff, some kind of trouble out at the Hickam place. Vandalism and some dead livestock. I'll go check it out."

"All right, send for me if you need me."

When they got inside, Jim pulled out a chair for Amy. He sat down behind the desk and asked her to get out her money so he could count it and write her a receipt. Amy insisted on keeping \$100 in her bag. Although he argued that was far more than she could possibly need, he let her win this particular battle. "I guess losing \$100 is preferable to losing \$1500," he said. He wrote her a receipt, put the rest of her money in an envelope, and disappeared into the back room for a few minutes.

*I need for him to leave me alone for a while so I can check out this town and look for Hattie.* "Sheriff, don't you need to go out to the Hickam ranch? That sounds like a very serious problem, I mean, with dead livestock and all."

"It's definitely a serious problem," he called out from the other room. "But Aaron is the perfect man to handle it. Matter of fact, we had a ring of rustlers and murderers around here not long ago, and Deputy Glover was a major part of capturing eight of those lowlifes. I've got the utmost faith in him. He's a good man."

Her shoulders slumped. *Well, it was worth a try.*

The sheriff came back into the room and sat down. "All right. Let's come up with a plan of action for this morning. We need to visit the general store to see Shirley Keller, Mrs. Canfield at the dressmaker's, and Tallulah at the Buckin' Bronc. And we'll drop in the Big Rock Poker Palace—that's the other saloon—the one the Bakers own. George and Betty Baker. Oh, the Harpers, too. Harlan and Martha. I forgot about them. Now is there anything else you can tell me that'll help? I do have experience with detective type work. The more I know, the more I may be able to help you find your, uh, friend."

"Oh, no, no. Just what I told you." She fiddled with a crease in her skirt, sensing that he questioned her words.

"Uh huh."

The general store was the closest, so they started there. Clint called out a greeting to Jim when they walked through the front door and a bell overhead rang. "Howdy, Sheriff, what can I do for you today?"

"Hi, Clint, I'm hoping you can help Miss McCray, here, find a friend of hers. The missing woman is named Hattie and she has reddish hair. She's about the same age as Miss McCray. Have you seen anyone matching that description?"

"No, I can't say that I have. Let me see if Shirley's waited on someone like that while I was out." He opened the door that connected their attached lodgings and called out for his wife to come.

"Well, hello, Sheriff Larkin." She gave Amy a warm smile and took her hand. "Hello, dear, I'm Shirley. Is there something I can help you folks with today?"

"I'm Amy McCray. I'm looking for a red-haired woman about my age by the name of Hattie. I believe she said she had a sister here in Big Rock. If you aren't that sister, I really hope you can remember if you've seen anyone matching that description. It's very important to me."

"Oh, no, dear, I only have brothers. I can't recall anyone with red hair coming in, man or woman, now that I think about it. I'm so sorry. I do wish I could have brought you good news."

Amy smiled sadly. "Well, thank you anyway. If you do see someone like that, please let me know. I'm staying at the hotel. Please don't tell her, though. I want it to be a surprise if possible."

"Of course, dear."

Sheriff Larkin said their goodbyes and gently guided Amy out the door. "Why is it so important that it be a surprise?"

"Oh, everyone loves surprises. Don't you?"

"Not when I've spent five or six days traveling in discomfort and really want to find someone. Now tell me the truth."

"I am."

"Then tell me the rest of it."

"I don't know what you mean."

He stopped walking and turned her to face him directly. "Miss McCray, there's something you aren't telling me. I can see this isn't any ordinary trip to find a friend. That's been clear since yesterday when you first walked into my office. You're just a little too secretive and you're clearly hiding something. Now, are you going to tell me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She tried to turn to start walking again, but he held her.

"You will tell me. I can help you, you know."

"There's nothing to tell. Shall we move on along to the dress-maker's?"

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair and again took her elbow to help her step down to the street and walk across to the other side. They walked another couple of blocks or so to where the businesses melded into a more residential area. One lovely white clapboard house had a sign out front that said simply Mrs. Canfield, Dressmaker. The sheriff had never been inside the house before and felt a little ill at ease among the fabric swatches and laces and trims. Mrs. Canfield listened to Amy's little speech and sweetly explained that her only sister was named Lucille and she lived in New York City with her grown son. *Another dead end.*

They thanked Mrs. Canfield and headed next to the Buckin' Bronc. It was back across the street, a block up, and down a side alley. It wasn't in an open and airy setting, and now she thought she understood why the sheriff might not want her to go there by herself. She wasn't sure she'd even want to try, but she'd never admit that to him.

As they neared the door, they could hear boisterous voices. Some sounded drunk already, and it wasn't even lunchtime yet. They heard a slurred voice from inside say what might have been "Go bring Hattie down here! We want to play Faro!"

Amy turned her head to Jim and was about to rush in when he

held her back. He whispered, "Let's listen a minute, see what we can learn from out here." It was all he could do to restrain her.

Another voice, a woman's voice, yelled from across the room, "She's still sick, upstairs."

"That's Tallulah, the owner," he whispered.

"Is she still sick? She can't still be sick." The drunken voice trailed off, and they didn't catch the rest of what he said.

"Please, let's go in! I've got to know!"

"All right, let me introduce you to Tallulah first when we get in there. Let's not spook her." Jim felt sure that if she'd come alone, she'd have rushed in and probably made a fool of herself.

They went in and drew stares from the few men in the room. Young ladies were a rarity in the Bronc. At least ones dressed like Amy. Jim walked her over to the bar where Tallulah stood.

"Hello Sheriff, what can I do for you today? I must say it's highly unusual for you to bring a young lady in here." She smiled at Amy. "I'm Tallulah."

"Amy McCray, and I'm pleased to meet you. I'm here looking for a friend of mine named Hattie. I have reason to believe she might be here in Big Rock."

Jim noticed that she held back on a few details this time.

"Lulah, if that pretty gal deals Faro, hire her right now!" That drew cheers from the other drunks at his table.

Tallulah answered, but Jim's trained eye detected a hesitation, maybe deception. "Well, you're so close, it's a real pity. We have a Mattie who works here dealing Faro, but she's up in her room. She's had a fever and chills for a couple of days. Coughing, too. Doc Parker wants her to stay up there for a couple more days."

"Oh, I really would like to see her! Would it be all right if I went up?"

"I don't think she'd appreciate somebody barging in when she's sick. Besides, hon, her name's Mattie, not Hattie."

"I really must see her!" Amy was a couple of steps toward the stairs before Jim caught her and stopped her.

"Tallulah, I appreciate the information. We'd like to speak to Mattie anyway. Please tell her we'll be back tomorrow and we sure hope she's feeling better by then. Does the doc know what's wrong with her?" Jim asked.

"Not for sure. Could be pneumonia. Could be a bug. Liz and I are taking turns trying to get her to drink and keep her sponged down. Doc's got her on willow bark tea to help with the fever."

"We're sorry to hear that. We'll be back tomorrow to see if she's well enough to see us. Thanks again." He took Amy's elbow again, this time more firmly, and guided her out. They left there, never realizing that Mr. Wilcox was loitering outside and had seen and heard everything. The sheriff hurried her back up the street to the jail. Neither of them spoke until they were both seated at his office. "You want to explain yourself?"

"What do you mean? That has to be her! It just has to be!"

"We don't know that."

"I can feel it!" She stood up and paced. "It has to be her. Didn't Mary say Tallulah hired a new girl a few weeks ago? And don't you think it's a little coincidental that her name is Mattie?"

"Amy, it's not that far-fetched. They're both common names."

"You called me Amy."

"Yes, I did. Call me Jim." He flashed a very charming grin.

"Well, Jim, I don't think it's a coincidence. I can't wait to go back tomorrow."

"You know, we didn't even make it to the Big Rock Poker Palace. Let me take you to lunch and we'll go there afterward. Let's cover all the leads you have, just in case. Don't want to put all your eggs in the Buckin' Bronc basket."

"Let's celebrate. I'll buy."

"Don't you know it's bad luck to celebrate before it's a done deal?"

"Fine. You buy." She smiled her first true, real, honest, optimistic smile since she'd been in town. She could tell by the look on his face that he liked it.