

VIOLET, A COUNTRY  
WOMAN



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## PROLOGUE



1883, NEBRASKA TERRITORY

Violet Tillerman drove her pony cart through the small town of Kearney Junction, pulling to a stop in front of what everyone called Junction House. The Reverend and Mrs. Collins had built the house, but it also served as the community church, post office, and courthouse when needed.

The pony cart didn't belong to her any more. She had sold it to Mr. Potts, the town handyman, to use as a tool cart. She had borrowed it to run one last errand she had to do before leaving town.

Violet readjusted her best hat, and tucked most of her jet black curls out of sight. Climbing out of the back of the cart, she stepped lightly to the ground and marched into the front room of Junction House, serving today as a courtroom.

As soon as Violet stepped inside, the four most powerful men in town turned in her direction. She swallowed, curling her toes inside her shoes, and her fingers into fists, drawing them inside the cuff of her dress sleeves. She would not back down! She would not

let these men intimidate, scare or stop her. She marched down the center aisle and stood, waiting to be recognized.

Mr. Abner Moore, the richest man in Kearney Junction, took it upon himself to act as the mayor when it suited him. Now, he looked condescendingly at Violet as he banged his hand on the top of the reverend's pulpit.

"Miss Tillerman, you shouldn't be here!"

"This is exactly where I should be," Violet replied firmly.

"Young lady, you should be taking care of other matters," insisted Sal Johnson, the owner of the town saloon.

"Such as burying my brother?" Violet demanded. "I did so, not more than an hour ago! I'm here now because I was told you're holding court to sentence the man who killed him."

"That's right," Lawyer Dobbs said. "This here fellow will hang for shooting our good friend, Jude Tillerman."

"No, he will not," snapped Violet.

"Miss Tillerman, you're overwrought," Mr. Moore objected. "Why don't you let me send for Mrs. Collins? Maybe a woman can talk sense into you."

"I am not overwrought, Mr. Moore. I am angry. I came here to stop this travesty of justice!"

"Miss Tillerman, you need to settle down and let us take care of this," Lawyer Dobbs declared.

"By hanging a man?" Violet demanded. "I heard what happened! Jude was cheating and he pulled his gun first." She looked around the room at the men who were so full of themselves, with their self-important inflated egos. She couldn't mask her disgust.

"Jude Tillerman may have been my brother, but he was also a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel. By any measure, he was not a good or decent man. Each one of you knows this for a fact. If this man shot Jude, it was because Jude was dealing from the bottom of the deck, or attempting another sleight of hand! Mr. Barnes rightfully called out my stepbrother over his cheating.

"This is a case of self-defense, not murder. I won't allow you to

hang a man because you lost a drinking buddy! You knew my brother for the man he was, the same as I did. You won his ill-gotten gains from him often enough, playing poker in the back of Sal's saloon. Just because you *gentlemen* have lost a source of revenue does not mean another man has to pay for it with his life."

Mr. Moore slapped his hand down on the table, his face turning a dark, muddled red. "Miss Tillerman, you don't know what you're talking about! Shame on you for slandering your brother's good name!"

"No, Mr. Moore, shame on you! Jude Tillerman did not have a good name," Violet countered steadily. "He never cared about his honor or reputation while he was alive, so why should I, now that he is dead? My brother was quite proud of being a scoundrel. He took great delight in being able to cheat and swindle people!

"I know what kind of men you are, and I won't be silenced! The whole bunch of you have probably already discussed how long you think it will take me to lose my property and end up working upstairs over the saloon. Well, I'm not going to let it happen! I have sold our little property to Mr. Elmer Potts, and I am leaving Kearney Junction on the next riverboat.

"Reverend Collins, I'm shocked and ashamed of you for allowing these men to facilitate such a travesty of justice in your home. This is the same sanctuary used for church gatherings and your ministry!

"You men will let this man go free! He is guilty of nothing except being stupid enough to get into a poker game with the lot of you! If you do not let him go, my next stop will be the Omaha Courthouse where I will report your behavior. We will see how fast they do something about your mustang court! You men have no authorization to take the law into your own hands. You will put an end to this, or the next trial will be the lot of you for murder. I might remind you men that the Governor of Nebraska has called for a crackdown on vigilante law."

Tucker Barnes couldn't believe his ears. A waif of a girl with a

soft-spoken voice was coming to his defense after he had shot and killed her brother the previous evening.

Following Violet's statement, a loud and vulgar discussion proceeded between the man who apparently wasn't a legal judge, the lawyer, who wasn't a real lawyer, the other two men, and the preacher. Four of the five men had been sitting in on the poker game when Jude Tillerman had pulled a gun on Tucker.

It was the minister who stopped the mock trial. The eyewitness reports were identical, and the men had known it when they hauled Tucker Barnes in front of their mock court. Jude Tillerman had been cheating. They all knew it. They also agreed Jude Tillerman had pulled his gun first. Reverend Collins convinced the other men to release Tucker Barnes who hightailed it out of Junction House with his destination being the stagecoach office.

"Thank you, ma'am," Tucker said when he saw Miss Tillerman purchasing a ticket for the next riverboat.

The young woman turned to face him. She was pretty, with the greenest eyes Tucker had ever seen. She didn't look old enough to be traveling unchaperoned. "I have one last piece of advice for you, Mr. Barnes."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Do the same thing I'm doing. Get the out hell out of this town!" Violet said bluntly. "As quickly as possible!"

## CHAPTER 1



1889, CALICO, CALIFORNIA

Tucker Barnes stepped off the train at Calico, California and onto the wooden platform. It had taken him eighteen hours on three different rail lines to get here. He was tired, dirty, and hungry, and *here* didn't look like much. He shouldered his gear as he walked down the track toward the stock cars to wait for the railroad workers to slide open the railcar door and drag a ramp over to it.

He jumped inside the railcar to saddle his horse, leading the large black gelding down the wooden ramp, speaking soothingly to the horse to calm it. Tucker swung into the saddle and rode the length of the main street through town, turning at the end to make his way to a street running parallel.

Tucker hadn't timed his arrival, although he had wanted to come in on a late evening train when stores and businesses would be closed or closing while the saloons and dens of pleasure would be gaining customers. It was a good time to gauge a town. In any

other place, the main street would have been called Main. In Calico, it was posted as Wall Street.

His eyes were sharp as Tucker checked the layout of the sprawling town. It followed the customary pattern with stores and businesses clustered together on one end, hotels and boarding houses situated in the middle, and saloons and cathouses at the far end. The prostitute cribs were located beyond the railroad tracks, along with the sections of town where people of color and the Chinese settled.

Tucker Barnes counted three mercantiles, plus separate stores for hardware, liquor, and tobacco, and several dozen smaller businesses. The town had three eating establishments, three hotels, and more than a dozen large square buildings all labeled as boarding houses. None of them looked well kept. He counted eighteen saloons of various sizes. They all looked like trouble except for one place called The Silver Palace. Tucker identified eight brothels, but he knew there were probably more since the majority of the population of over three thousand was men.

Calico was a mining town where men worked individual claims or toiled in the mines already in operation. Wherever a gold or silver strike was discovered, men followed. So did the men and women who wanted to take as much of the wealth out of circulation as possible without digging for it.

Calico was fair-sized, located in the Calico Mountains of southern California. It looked no different from dozens of other towns sprawled across the deserts wherever paying ore was discovered. Mining towns grew fast and disappeared just as quickly when the claims panned out. Tucker had heard over five hundred mines were producing grade silver ore in these mountains. That kind of money drew gamblers and robbers, men and women who were, in plain speak, too damn lazy to work for a living, but who were eager to pick the pockets of those that did.

Five years earlier the town had been consumed by fire and many lives were lost. The people of Calico had begun to rebuild as



soon as the last embers were extinguished because the mountains held silver and where there was potential for instant wealth, men stayed.

A few of Calico's buildings had real second stories, which was unusual as most businesses used false fronts to make their buildings appear bigger and taller. A few of the buildings were constructed of sunbaked adobe brick and looked solid. Others had been thrown together with whatever scavenged materials could be found. Shanties were even hammered together from cardboard and canvas. The town had been rebuilt shoddily; one match would set off another inferno.

Tucker saw a few women on the streets. They looked like good women, probably wives, with their demure bonnets and plain dresses. They kept their heads down as they scurried to get off the streets before dark. Decent women were safe at home when the sun went down. Women found out after dark were easy pickings.

When Tucker rode by the saloons, he saw the other kind of women, standing in the doorways to lure men inside. Their skirts were too high; their tops were too low. They boldly exposed their wares to potential customers, sporting hair and paint in colors not natural to most women.

When he had finished his first look at his new charge, Tucker sat on his horse and gave the entire layout a good look-see. Calico was smack dab in the middle of the Mojave Desert. The mountains surrounding it and the town itself had both been named for the many colors in the arid terrain. The town's saving grace was the Calico and Odessa Railroad spur. As long as the mines produced silver, the railroad would be there to haul out the ore. If the mines petered out, the railroad would pull the tracks, and the miners would move on to the next big strike.

Tucker reined his horse back through town, asking for directions to the jailhouse. He was told the jail occupied the rear portion of a Wall Street business, the Calico Café and Meat Pie Bakery. The

jail was located on a side alley of the building, one of the few structures in town made of adobe brick.

His eyes took in every detail of the jailhouse as he went through a door reinforced by plates and bars of iron. A swarthy, barrel-chested man with a mustache drooping past double chins sat at the desk with his feet propped on the corner of it.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"If you are Sheriff Malcolm Cadwell, you can. I'm U.S. Marshal Tucker Barnes."

The sheriff got to his feet. "Well, howdy, it's about time someone got here. Judge Morrison wrote, asking for help, several months ago. We had another murder not more than two weeks past."

"Why don't you tell me what's going on?" Tucker invited.

"Damned if I know," Sheriff Cadwell replied. "Calico is a quiet town most of the time. We've had our fair share of killings in the past, men fighting over claims or women. What's happening now ain't got nothing to do with mines or whores. We've had four women and two men murdered."

"I'll need to see the evidence files," Tucker asked.

Sheriff Cadwell opened his desk drawer, and he pulled out several pieces of paper, handing them over to the marshal. "The fourth woman was married, but the first three were single, though one was supposed to be engaged. All four women were strangled and stabbed with something long and pointed. Booker said it wasn't a knife. Their faces were cut up something awful. Most of them didn't put up much of a fight. They didn't have any bruises or defensive cuts on their hands. Other than their throats, they didn't look like they were hurt much."

"Murder goes beyond being hurt," Tucker replied dryly. "I would like you to define *hurt much*. The faces of the victims were mutilated. The victims were strangled with such force that their throats were almost slit. Most of them had puncture wounds made from a long and pointed device. What else can you tell me?"

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Well, Roscoe Booker said

they had all been assaulted in their private parts and brutalized, but he couldn't tell if it happened before or after they were killed. He also said he couldn't tell if they were strangled first, or stabbed and cut first.

"Two of the young women didn't have beaux, and the married woman's husband said he hadn't touched her in a couple of days. The one girl, who was spoken for, hadn't met her intended yet. It was a match arranged by her parents. Her folks told me she was a good girl, pure and virtuous."

"Parents are not always the best judges of what their daughters do or don't do," Tucker remarked, not looking up from the report. "So the killer had relations with the victims either before or after he strangled them." Tucker looked up from the pages he was reading. "What about the men?"

The sheriff shrugged. "The two men were strangled and stabbed."

"Was there evidence the men had been assaulted as well?"

Sheriff Cadwell looked flustered at the question, but he nodded. "Roscoe said they had been sodomized. I didn't know what the word meant until he told me. He said there was evidence the women had been hurt real bad too."

"You have a peculiar type of murderer on the loose," Tucker declared.

"One of those young men was said to be a pansy. I don't know for sure," Sheriff Cadwell added.

"I don't think it made much difference to the killer, do you? Both men's faces were mutilated—almost unrecognizable, and they had the word QUEER carved in their foreheads. The women's faces were cut in the same manner each time with the word SLUT carved in their foreheads. Sheriff Cadwell, you have a killer on the loose who is molesting his victims either before or after he murders them," Tucker declared.

"Sick bastard! I hope for their sake it was after."

"I'll need to talk to this Roscoe Booker. Is he the town doctor?" Tucker asked.

Sheriff Cadwell shook his head negatively. "Booker is as close as we've got to one. He calls himself a dentist, and he claims he went to a medical school. He also takes care of most folks that need burying. Roscoe is the town undertaker with a coffin-building business on the side."

Tucker snorted. "Convenient." He sighed as he removed a letter from his inside vest pocket. "Well, I was sent here to find whoever is responsible for these brutal murders and stop them. Sheriff Cadwell, you are relieved of duty. Until further notice, I'll be wearing the badge of the Sheriff of Calico, California."

Sheriff Cadwell frowned. "I thought any help I got would be working for me. What am I supposed to do?"

"Whatever you feel like doing, but you need to leave town," Tucker instructed. "I cannot take over the job of sheriff if you're still here. It would raise questions. My orders come directly from Governor Robert Waterman's office. This case and this town are my responsibility while I conduct my investigation."

"Well, hell, what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Sheriff Cadwell griped.

"Go fishing or try your hand at mining. Do whatever you want, just not here in Calico," Tucker answered. "I go where I'm sent. I work for the U.S. Marshals Service, not the town. If you have objections, you'll have to take it up with Mayor Martin Bullock or Judge Morrison."

"I have experience solving crimes, but to do my job, I need on-the-ground access. It means I have to live in your shoes and do your job. I have to get to know the townspeople and the miners. Someone out there knows something that will lead me to the killer. It's my job to stop them."

"How many people know about you being here and what you're doing?" Sheriff Cadwell asked.

"Beyond your mayor, the judge, and my superiors, no one. No

one else needs that information and you cannot tell anyone: not your wife, your best friend, or God himself. My identity as a U.S. Marshal has to remain secret. I'll be presenting my credentials to the mayor and the judge first thing in the morning."

There was a knock on the door and a pretty young woman came inside, carrying a basket. Whatever she had in the basket, it smelled heavenly to Tucker who was tired and hungry.

"Good evening, Sheriff Cadwell," the young woman said with a bob of a curtsy as she set the basket on the desk. She noticed the single empty jail cell and asked, "I thought Fred would be here?"

"I haven't done my rounds," the sheriff explained as he holstered his sidearm. "Miss Violet Ramsey, this is Sheriff Tucker Barnes. He is the new sheriff of Calico and will be taking over for a spell."

"Ma'am," Tucker greeted, tipping his hat in surprise. "We meet again."

"I'm sorry, you must have mistaken me for someone else. I don't believe we have met, sir," the young woman replied. "My name is Violet Ramsey, and I own and operate the Calico Café and Meat Pie Bakery. It's the business at the front of this building, facing Wall Street." She looked to Sheriff Cadwell. "I didn't know you were quitting, Malcolm."

"He has a family emergency," Tucker interjected.

"Yes, ma'am, it's a family problem," the sheriff agreed quickly. "I'll be back after a spell."

The young woman frowned. "I'm sorry, Malcolm. I hope whatever the problem is you can resolve it quickly. Should I leave Fred's dinner for him?"

"Leave it," Sheriff Cadwell said, smiling. "If I lock him up later, you know he will be as drunk as a skunk."

Violet Ramsey frowned. "The meals Fred Bedford gets on Friday and Saturday nights, and the breakfasts the following mornings, are probably the only decent meals the poor man has all week. If you don't lock him up tonight, have him stop by my place in the morning. Tell him to come around to the back door."

"Now, Miss Violet," the sheriff frowned. "You do not need an old drunk hanging around your place. It ain't fittin'!"

"Fred is a sweet old man who has been corrupted by the foul tenets of liquor. The sooner liquor is outlawed, the sooner men will stop behaving like him," Violet answered resolutely.

"Now, Miss Violet, men have a right to drink if they see fit," Sheriff Cadwell exclaimed. "Don't you go spouting your suffrage and temperance nonsense again. The last time you stirred up the ladies, Judge Morrison was about to skin the whole lot of you. He warned you to stay clear of that female rabbleroxing and leave the saloons alone. You're gonna get in a heap of trouble if you mess with the judge again."

The young woman stiffened and raised her chin. "The constitution guarantees the right of free assembly. Stopping the evil of alcohol is a worthy cause!"

"Miss Violet, why don't you find yourself a good man and settle down? If you had a little nipper or two, you would have no time for such nonsense, and a good man would set you straight!"

"There are no good men, Sheriff," Violet snapped. "They're all too busy trying to convince women we are stupid! You be sure to send Fred over to my place!"

The sheriff stood at the open door, watching as the young woman flounced out. He wore a look of puzzlement on his face. "Violet Ramsey is about the prettiest woman in these parts, but her mind has been corrupted. She's a contrary woman. Did you ever hear anything as silly as women wanting men to give up liquor?"

"I see the Women's Rights movement has come to Calico," Tucker commented with amusement.

"Not if me or the Judge has anything to say about it! That pack of women she runs around with want to outlaw liquor! They want to vote! Why would a woman want to vote?"

"Maybe because they think they are being treated unfairly?" Tucker suggested.

"It's damn foolishness! That's what it is," Sheriff Cadwell

complained. "A woman's job is to marry, and to look after her husband and young'uns!"

"I won't completely disagree with you, except some women want more. They might get it somewhere else, but out here it's not likely to happen for a while. What did you say her last name was?" Tucker asked. He had noticed Violet wasn't carrying the last name of Tillerman, a name branded into his memory.

"It won't do you no good to try cozying up to her," Sheriff Cadwell remarked. "According to local scuttlebutt, Miss Violet was engaged, but her young man died, and she ain't interested in finding another. She showed up about five years ago, bought this here building, and turned the front half into a café and bakery. She's a damn fine cook, the best in town. It's a shame there ain't no husband reaping the benefit of it. She don't seem in no hurry to get hitched. I know for a fact she has been asked plenty of times.

"I think all that rabbleroxing talk scares off most levelheaded men. She told me a revolution was coming, and if men didn't start listening it was going to be men against women. She must be going on twenty-three or twenty-four by now. She's gonna be a spinster if she don't change her ways. She claims she values her independence. Now what kind of nonsense is that? There are women who make good wives and women who make good whores. There ain't any other kind."

"She might disagree with that idea," Tucker warned.

Sheriff Cadwell shrugged. "She's right pretty to look at, and she's one hell of a good cook! She serves breakfast and lunch over at her place, closes the shop in the afternoons."

Tucker smiled. Violet's cooking skills and pies were obviously high on the sheriff's priorities. Considering the girth of his waistline, Tucker thought Cadwell hadn't let many meals get past him.

"Well, Marshal, I mean, Sheriff Barnes, if you're taking over my job, I reckon I had best show you 'round town."

Tucker spent the next few hours becoming acquainted with the town of Calico and its business owners, mostly those of the

saloons. When they returned to the jail, Sheriff Cadwell showed Tucker to the sheriff's quarters, which were two rooms on the second floor above the jail.

One look at the rooms convinced Tucker to stay the night someplace else. Sheriff Cadwell owned three hound dogs, all of which had free run of the sheriff's quarters. Dog fur and stink permeated the rooms. The jail was none too clean either. As soon as Cadwell left, Tucker intended to hire as many people as needed to clean the place, and to smoke it to rid it of fleas and anything else that might have taken up residence.

The sheriff told Tucker the town rented the back half of the building from Violet Ramsey because it was adobe brick. When the wood jail had burned down during an escape attempt, the town's leaders had tried to buy the building from Violet. She wouldn't sell. Instead, she agreed to rent them the backside of the building, insisting they make significant changes to the entire building to safeguard her side of the structure.

Calico had a thriving red-light district. At least half of the saloons had working girls. Sheriff Cadwell pointed out the establishments that were strictly cathouses. He had a working knowledge of them, and he even recommended a few of his favorites.

Tucker could have taken a room for the night at one of the saloons or brothels. Several working girls had offered to share their beds for a price, but he had reluctantly turned them all down. Shiny black curls and green eyes kept popping into his mind. He had no idea why Violet Ramsey claimed not to know him, but he was going to find out. She had pretended she'd never met him, yet Tucker thought he had seen recognition in her eyes despite her denial. Had it been a faulty memory or an outright lie?

Tucker's first fateful meeting with Miss Violet Tillerman Ramsey had changed his life. He had not been in a card game since the night her brother had pulled a gun on him. He had also not crossed the line of good versus bad. He had strayed into law



enforcement through a back door, and several years later, he had taken on the job of a U.S. Marshal.

It had been almost seven years since Tucker had seen Violet when she had been pretty in the innocent way of a little gal in her late teen years. She had been full of spit and vinegar then and, apparently, she was still a firecracker. What put the worry into him was she also fit the description of three of the four women who had been murdered in town.

The drunk who Sheriff Cadwell told Tucker spent most of his Friday and Saturday nights in his jail hadn't shown up in any of the saloons the previous night. Sheriff Cadwell had slept in his rooms above the jail, promising he and his dogs would be on the first train out of Calico in the morning.

Tucker asked for and received a recommendation for a boarding house in town, supposedly one with clean sheets. Mrs. Peabody, who ran the place, promised him the best food in town. He suspected he would have to judge who earned that title on his own. Several other people had already told him the best food in town was to be found at the Calico Café and Meat Pie Bakery.

The next morning, Tucker had decided where he wouldn't eat again. No one, other than the woman herself, touted Mrs. Peabody's cooking skills as the best. The morning had found Tucker rising early, unfortunately not as early as his landlady who had insisted on making him breakfast.

Tucker had risen early because he wanted to get the feel of the town. The livery was already open, as were a few other businesses. He noticed several horses tied to the rails in front of the saloons, probably belonging to overnight patrons of the upstairs girls.

Most storefront windows were dark, but Tucker could see a light on in the back of the shop at the Calico Café and Meat Pie Bakery. He pecked on the front window glass, but no one came to the door. When he turned the knob, it was locked. Tucker walked around to the side of the building opposite the entrance to the jail

where he was surprised to find a back door propped open with a crate.

He walked into a large kitchen with several stoves and ovens, and tables of different heights. Violet Tillerman, now going by the name of Ramsey, stood with her back to him, working by the light of several lanterns. She was rolling a piecrust while singing a song more appropriate for a saloon. Tucker glanced around the empty kitchen space, and then he walked up behind Violet with a glint in his eyes.

He drew back his hand and smacked it across her bottom with a stinging wallop.

"Oh!" Violet dropped her pie tin with a clatter, and swung around with the rolling pin in her hand.

"How dare you!"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"How dare you strike me?"

"Oh, I dare, you little fool!" Tucker growled. "What the hell are you doing in here by yourself with the door wide open? Are you trying to get killed?"

"If you haven't noticed, you idiot, it's hot in here! I have two stoves and four ovens all going at the same time! I try to take advantage of the cool morning air," Violet exclaimed. "What gives you the right to assault me?"

"Assault?" Tucker laughed. "You weren't assaulted! What you need is a good spanking!"

"Don't you dare! I'm a grown woman!" Violet hissed. "I will do as I please, and it's none of your business. I'm fully capable of taking care of myself."

"You're risking your life, which makes it my business! Four women have been killed in this town so far. You are practically offering yourself as the next victim."

"I am not! I have managed my bakery for five years without any problems or your advice! Calico is a nice place except on the weekends when the miners come into town and waste their pay on

liquor. If the town closed the saloons and the brothels, this would be a respectable community!"

"That's not likely to happen. Calico is a mining town or didn't you notice that little detail when you set up your business here?"

"Of course I noticed. It doesn't mean the good people of this town can't change. Calico needs temperance laws! Excuse me, but I need you to leave! I have bread and pies to bake. I must do the majority of my baking early in the mornings before my customers arrive!"

"Dang it, woman, aren't you listening? If you have to be in here working, you need someone with you for protection."

"I have an assistant, not that it's any of your business. She must be running late this morning!" Violet exclaimed. She noticed the sheriff badge pinned to Tucker's vest, the one screaming authority. "If you're through yelling at me, *Mr. Barnes*, would you please move out of my way? I have pies to bake!"

Tucker stepped forward with a gleam in his eyes as Violet raised the heavy rolling pin. Her threat meant nothing to him. With one quick movement, he wrenched the implement out of her hand.

"Why did you pretend you had never met me before?" he demanded.

"Because I have no intention of telling anyone about my history. No one in Calico knows I was related to Jude Tillerman, and I would prefer them not to know."

"Why?"

"Why is it any of your business?" Violet demanded.

"I'm the sheriff," Tucker declared, stepping closer to her. "Humor me."

Violet inched away from him. "Jude Tillerman was a scoundrel, a card shark, and a swindler!"

"He was your brother."

"Stepbrother," she said slowly and clearly. "There was no blood connection. Everyone knows me here as Violet Ramsey, which is my real name. My stepbrother managed to get around, and he

swindled, and cheated a lot of people. For some reason, those people seem to think I should be held responsible for his actions and his debts. I am not! Tillerman was his last name, not mine.”

“The rumor in Kearney Junction was that you weren’t his sister, but were shackled up with him.”

Violet gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh! We were not! Jude was my stepbrother! I was a child of eight when my father married his mother. They both died in a cholera epidemic and Jude was forced to either take care of me or give up all hope of getting his hands on an inheritance left to me by my father.

“As long as he didn’t involve me in his illegal schemes, living with him was better than being locked away in a convent school. He went his way, and I generally found a local school to attend when I was younger. As I grew older, I was able to find a job in a mercantile or a hotel kitchen. Jude is gone, Sheriff, and I do not want my association with him known.”

“He was a gambler!” Tucker declared.

“Yes, and he cheated. He was also a procurer of ill-gotten gains,” Violet retorted impatiently. “Jude was a con-man and a thief. He was convinced he would have access to my inheritance as soon as I became of age. He could have kept me in a boarding school, but by keeping me with him, he received a yearly allowance to provide for me. I didn’t expect my stepbrother to be so stupid as to get himself killed. I was wrong.

“From the time I was fourteen to seventeen, I lived with my stepbrother and we moved every couple of months, usually one step ahead of the law, or a tar and feathering. When I came to Calico, I told everyone I had been engaged and had lost my fiancé, to keep from being bothered by men.”

“You’re quite the little liar, aren’t you? I still don’t understand,” Tucker remarked. “What’s wrong with men?”

Violet blushed. “It’s not your business to understand!”

He raised a single eyebrow.

Violet took a deep breath and blew it out, ruffling the fringe on

her forehead. "If it was one thing I learned from being saddled with my stepbrother—I do not want a man around telling me what to do, bossing me around, and complicating my life! If men assume a woman is in mourning, it will keep them away for a while!"

"If I remember correctly, you were not doing a whole lot of mourning for your stepbrother."

"I didn't approve of his schemes or of his cheating people. Speaking frankly, Sheriff, my stepbrother was not a man worth mourning. At least with his passing, I was set free!"

"I assume you were able to claim your inheritance?" Tucker asked.

"Yes, I did, and I used the money to open this café. I owe no one any explanations, Sheriff. It's my life, and I do as I please. I have a good business here in Calico. I do not need you to spoil it!"

Tucker sighed. "I'm not here to upset your life, Violet Ramsey. I wasn't aware that you lived in Calico. I'll keep your secrets, but my job is to protect the citizens of this town. That includes you. I do not want you or any other woman in town to be hurt or worse. If you are working early hours, you should have someone with you, or else keep the doors locked. You need to take precautions." Tucker waited for an answer or a promise, all he saw was annoyance on Violet's face.

"If it will make you feel better, Sheriff Barnes, I'll buy a gun for protection."

"Do you know how to shoot a gun?"

"Well, no, but if a man can shoot one, there is no reason a woman can't learn!"

Tucker closed his eyes in frustration and, for a few seconds, his mind was flooded with the strangest notions. He wanted to spank some sense into Violet Ramsey, and he wanted to kiss her into submission. He shook the thoughts out of his brain, at least for the present. "What time are you free?"

"I close the café between two and three in the afternoon. It takes

another hour to clean the kitchen, and do the prep work for the next morning," Violet answered.

"Can you ride?"

"Of course I can ride!"

"It's not an unreasonable question," Tucker retorted impatiently. "Many women don't. A lot of fathers and husbands do not want them to learn, preferring their womenfolk to use a buggy or a wagon. I'll swing by after three. I'll bring a gun you should be able to handle without shooting off an appendage!"

"Oh, well thank you," Violet exclaimed. She smiled at Tucker, although her reaction seemed to anger him.

"Don't thank me yet," he growled. "I'll teach you how to shoot, but I won't be an easy taskmaster. Be ready when I get here."

Tucker left to finish his early morning rounds of the town. He had just started his day, and he was already feeling cranky. He scratched at his right palm, it was itching like crazy.

He had known Jude Tillerman was a gambler, but he hadn't known Jude had been dragging his stepsister around the country. How could he have known? His one-time meeting with Violet was when she had been a pretty girl of sixteen or seventeen, and she had saved his neck from a noose. She had been left to fend for herself because Tucker had killed her stepbrother in a crooked card game.

Violet had grown into a gorgeous young woman with flashing green eyes, not to mention a sassy mouth and temper. Regardless, Tucker owed her his life, and he was going to keep an eye on her. It was his duty, he told himself. It had nothing to do with her being so dang pretty. She was proving herself to be a contrary female. He had a job to do; he didn't have the time or the inclination to deal with an annoying girl. Especially one who needed a good spanking.

Tucker's stomach gave a pang, and he stopped at the Conway Mercantile to buy a packet of bromide compound as he vowed never to eat at Mrs. Peabody's boarding house again. He took a dose and then, on the recommendation of the mercantile owner, he

walked to Chinatown to find a family who hired out for cleaning. He needed to square away his new quarters. After making the arrangements, he returned to the mercantile where he bought a new bed mattress, a blanket, and a goose feather pillow. He would figure out what else he needed later.

Tucker tried to see Judge Morrison, but the man claimed he was too busy to talk to him. It was understandable since the judge had four counties under his jurisdiction. Tucker accepted the explanation until he saw the judge strolling into a brothel not twenty minutes later. The newly appointed sheriff kept an eye on the place, observing Judge Morrison leave the establishment more than an hour later. Now, it made sense why the laws in Calico were so relaxed about the prostitutes and cathouses.

He spent the better part of the day meeting the townspeople and trying to explain why Sheriff Cadwell had left so suddenly. His instructions were to not arouse suspicion in the community, but to gather information and evidence leading to the guilty party who was killing residents of Calico.

Tucker discovered most of the citizens were seemingly unaware of any wrongdoing in their town. If they were aware, they were unwilling to talk about it. When he casually mentioned the name of one of the dead women or men, the responses he received were unusual. The residents of Calico either didn't remember the victims or they thought they had left town to visit relatives. It seemed strange to Tucker that people were stupidly ignoring what was happening around them. Were they purposely closing their eyes to murder?