

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# THE LADY'S MINE



A NOVEL

# FRANCINE RIVERS

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *REDEEMING LOVE*

## Praise for Francine Rivers

“Agape love has rippling effects in *The Lady’s Mine*, an entertaining romance novel in which a forward-thinking woman and a former rogue work to energize a boomtown.”

*FOREWORD REVIEWS*

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*BOOKLIST on The Masterpiece*

“[A] beautiful story.”

*WORLD MAGAZINE on The Masterpiece*

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*The Lady's Mine*

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*To my best friend and the love of my life, Rick Rivers*  
*Our life continues to be an unfolding adventure*





*Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the  
Father means caring for orphans and widows in their  
distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*

JAMES 1:27





❖ *Northern California, 1875* ❖

BLEARY-EYED AND ACHING, Kathryn braced herself again as the stagecoach rattled over a stretch of rough road. Riding second-class on the transcontinental railroad had been blissfully comfortable compared to this jarring, jouncing journey into an unknown future. Two days of torture, two nights in stage stops with a slab of wood for a bed, a single much-used blanket, something resembling stew for dinner—though the proprietors had been unwilling to tell her what meat they used—and plain oatmeal for breakfast.

It might have been wiser to spend a few days in Truckee, where she had disembarked from the train, rather than hasten on with the final leg of her trip. But her options had been limited to taking this stage or waiting a week for the next one, and staying longer in the wild town with more saloons than hotels would have been too dear. Besides, the place had been a shock. The population was primarily miners, lumbermen, and railroad men, with a frightening scarcity of women. She'd never before seen a Chinese man, but she had read how they'd crossed the Pacific by the thousands, willing to take lower wages for the dangerous work of blasting and chiseling tunnels through the stone Sierra Nevada mountains for the railroad. Now that the mammoth project was complete, the despised immigrants sought other ways to eke out a living. Several had approached Kathryn the moment she alighted from the train. She hired one to transport her trunk to suitable accommodations. Though small and wiry, the man hefted her possessions to his rickety cart and headed off at a pace she was unable to match.

Hurrying after him, Kathryn stepped around steaming piles of horse dung and over puddles, nervous at the attention she attracted. Men stared. She only saw a few women, and none dressed as finely as she. And they stared, too. Kathryn caught up to her porter as he entered a riverfront hotel. A hush fell over the lobby full of men as she came through the door. Ignoring them, she went straight to the front desk and checked in, eager for privacy, a bath, a good meal, and a bed. She had spent seven days in a passenger car, her ears assaulted with the constant racket of wheels grinding on iron tracks. Ash and cinders had blown in the window from the locomotive smokestack belching embers, burning small holes in her dark-green chambray travel ensemble. The train stopped only for coal and water, barely allowing time for a meal in a local café.

Her porter hauled her trunk upstairs and left it inside a small room with a bed, a table, and a pitcher of water. Overwhelmed with disappointment and too tired to go back downstairs and ask for a better room, Kathryn untied the ribbons and removed her hat, then sprawled on the bed. She dreamed she was back in Boston, inside the Hyland-Pershing mansion, in the doorway of an upstairs suite. Her mother, radiant with happiness, cooed over a newborn son, while Kathryn's stepfather sat on the edge of the canopy bed, a proud smile on his normally scowling face. When Kathryn spoke, neither heard her. She stood, the recently disinherited daughter, observing their joy. Had they forgotten her already?

She awoke in tears, the sunrise aglow. Groggy and disoriented, she sat up, her clothing rumpled, her hair undone. Her stomach growled, reminding her she hadn't eaten since noon yesterday. She poured icy water into a bowl and washed her face. Oh, how she longed for a bath, but how much would it cost to have a tub and hot water brought upstairs? Removing and folding away her travel ensemble, she donned a Dolly Varden dress that had been delivered shortly before she'd been told she was being sent to California.

The hotel dining room was open and almost empty. Kathryn ordered scrambled eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, and biscuits with jam. Replete, she spoke to the front desk clerk, who told her she could find the services she requested at the bathhouse next door. When she saw the line of men waiting, she knew it was not a very safe place for a lady. Dismayed, she headed back to the train station to arrange transportation to Calvada. A stagecoach was parked in front, horses being put into harnesses.

"Calvada?" The clerk shook his head. "Never heard of it."

Kathryn felt a flutter of panic. "It has mail service."

"There must be a hundred or more mining towns in the

Sierras, miss. Some don't even have names. Calvada sounds like a border town, but you gotta know north or south."

The cover letter that had come with Uncle Casey's will mentioned two other towns. She handed the letter to the clerk, who read it quickly and nodded. "South, and it'll take three days to get there, barring accidents on the road. You're in luck. Stage leaves in an hour. If you miss this one, you'll have to wait another week for the next."

The stagecoach bounced again, slamming Kathryn's already-tenderized backside onto the bench. A six-foot, bushy-bearded mountain man named Cussler was the driver, and he shouted curses down on his six-horse team of bays as the coach raced along the mountain road. She wondered what she'd find waiting for her in Calvada.

Jolted and rocked, Kathryn thought back to the night before she left Boston. Her mother and stepfather had gone to the theater with friends. Kathryn dined in the kitchen with staff. Saying goodbye to people she loved had been heart-wrenching. Any hope of changing her mother's mind had ended the next morning when the judge joined her in the entrance hallway and informed her that he would be accompanying her to the train station to see her off. She had the feeling he wanted to make sure she got on the train and stayed on it.

Lawrence Pershing didn't speak to her until they had almost reached the station. Then he extracted an envelope from his inside coat pocket. "This document transfers your mother's rights to the inheritance to you. Whatever property your uncle possessed upon his death is yours. I doubt it's much. I've added enough money to give you a start. If you are frugal and wise," he added with a hint of sarcasm, "it will last until you find a suitable trade. I've paid your passage to Truckee. It will be up to you to find your way to Calvada from there."

A trade. What would that be? She had more education than most women, largely due to sneaking into the judge's library and pilfering books. But none of what she'd learned would provide her with a trade.

The stagecoach bounced abruptly, shocking Kathryn back to her present circumstances. She felt air between her and the seat, and then landed with a hard thud that drew an unladylike grunt. Cussler shouted profane insults at the horses and cracked the whip. When the coach swayed, Kathryn had to brace herself. Her midnight-blue skirt and jacket were gray with dust, her teeth gritty. Her head itched despite the hat covering her hair. How long until the next stop? Parched, she tried not to think about how good a glass of cold, clear water would taste.

Four others had ridden with her the first day, each getting off along the way. Henry Call, a bespectacled gentleman in his early thirties, met the coach at the last station. He joined her for a meal of questionable stew. The proprietor swore it was chicken, but Cussler said it tasted like rattlesnake. Kathryn preferred not to know, too hungry to care anyway. After the meal, Mr. Call handed her into the coach, where conversation ceased, both of them understanding that any attempt might result in a mouthful of road dust. He opened his satchel and extracted a file. Now and then, he removed and cleaned his glasses.

Cussler hollered, "Whoa," and the coach came to halt. He continued shouting, using words Kathryn didn't understand, but which turned Mr. Call's face red.

"You idjit! What do you think you're doing, stepping out in the road like that?"

A gruff, laughing voice replied, "How else am I gonna get a ride?"

"Buy a ticket like everyone else!"

"You gonna let me ride or leave me for bear bait?"

Kathryn looked at Mr. Call in alarm. "Are there bears out here?"

"Yes, ma'am. Plenty of grizzlies in these mountains."

As if the ratio of men to women wasn't worrisome enough! Now she had to worry about the animal life as well?

The stagecoach door popped open and a man wearing a sweat-stained, battered hat climbed aboard. Lifting his gray-streaked, bearded face, he saw Kathryn. "Holy Jehoshaphat! A lady!" His ruddy, aging face split with a grin. Still bent over, he took off his hat. "Well, I wasn't expecting to see anyone like you!"

Kathryn could have said the same.

The coach started off again, tossing the old man back. Sprawled beside Mr. Call, he expelled a foul word she had heard a hundred times from Cussler over the last forty-eight hours. He stuck his head out the window. "Hey, Cussler, when you gonna learn to drive? You tryin' to kill me?"

"I shudda driven over you and left your carcass in the road," Cussler shouted back.

The newcomer laughed, not the least insulted, and settled back in his seat. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am. Didn't mean nothin' by it. Me and Cussler go back a long way."

Kathryn gave him a pained smile and closed her eyes. She had a headache, along with other assorted aches and pains. It had taken all her willpower at the last stage stop not to rub her backside when she'd climbed down from the coach.

The man scratched his beard. "I always hitch a ride before the road gets hairy. Tried walkin' it once and had to hang on to a tree or get runned over."

Kathryn looked out her window and pressed back with a gasp.

"If you look over the edge at the next curve, you'll see a

coach down there. Driver was in too much of a hurry. Happens every once in a while.”

Cussler cracked the whip again, urging the horses to go faster. Kathryn gulped.

“Never know when you’re gonna die.” The old-timer turned philosopher. “We’ll make it, dependin’.”

“Depending on what?” Kathryn dared ask.

“How much Cussler drank at the last stop.”

Kathryn looked at Henry Call. He shrugged. What had been in the big mug the station manager gave Cussler? She braced herself as the coach went around another curve. She couldn’t help herself. She peered out. The coach lurched and the door popped open. She gave a shriek as she pitched forward. She felt someone grasp her skirt and jerk her back. The old man relatched the door. The three sat staring at one another. Kathryn didn’t know who to thank and was afraid to guess.

Henry Call cleared his throat. “I was told Cussler is the best driver on the line. We have nothing to fear.”

The old man snorted and tucked something into his cheek. His jaws worked like a ruminating mule deer as he studied Kathryn from her high-button shoes to the brim of her beribboned bonnet with its two dusty plumes. “What kind of bird gave up those feathers?”

“An ostrich.”

“Say what?”

“Os-trich. It’s an African bird.”

“Musta cost you plenty.” He leaned over to the window and spit a stream of brown juice.

Kathryn almost gagged. The old man wasn’t finished with his perusal. Annoyed, she looked him over from his dirty hat, worn plaid shirt, weatherworn leather coat, and faded-blue canvas pants to his dusty boots. The man smelled like a muskrat,



or what she imagined a muskrat might smell like. But then, who was she to turn up her nose? She hadn't had a full bath since leaving Boston. Her whalebone stays pinched. Worse, her skin itched beneath them. Her bustle felt like a log at the base of her spine.

The stagecoach sailed along smoothly, and Kathryn relaxed until Cussler shouted, "Hang on, folks! Washboard a-coming!"

Before she could ask what the driver meant, the old-timer put his dirty boots on the edge of the seat next to her and braced himself. The coach shot up, Kathryn with it. Her decorated bonnet was the only thing preventing a skull fracture. She landed with a painful thump and an *oooff*. One bounce turned into a succession. "Ah . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . ." She clung to the doorframe, her backside getting a beating. As quickly as the abuse started, it ended.

The ostrich plumes dangled between her eyes. Her hen-cage bustle had slipped downward. Kathryn shifted on the seat, but that made her predicament worse. Both men asked if she was all right. "Yes, of course. How long until we reach Calvada?"

"Not long, I'm thinking. Before sunset, anyway. Cussler is making good time."

Kathryn resigned herself to suffer.

Henry Call tucked his papers away. "It's a long journey for a young lady on her own, Miss Walsh. You must miss Boston."

"Indeed." So far, the journey had merely served to remind her of the heavy cost of following one's convictions.

The older man brightened. "Boston! I knew you was from back East. You've got that grand air about ya. Don't have many ladies out here." He seemed mesmerized by the flat and broken feathers. "Got plenty of the other kind though."

Henry Call cleared his throat.

The old man looked at him and chewed his cud. "She's

gonna see fer herself, ain't she?" He turned back to Kathryn. "Why are you out here?"

"Seeing to family business, sir." As if it was any of his.

The old man's brows rose and he looked her over again. "No one's ever called me *sir* before. Plenty of other names, but not that one. No, we sure don't have anyone like you in Calvada. Don't take no offense at me tellin' you that. It's a pure compliment."

"They don't have many like you where I come from either, Mr. . . ."

"No mister. Just plain Wiley. Wiley Baer."

Mr. Call took off his glasses and cleaned them again before tucking them into his breast pocket. "Do you have family in Calvada, Miss Walsh?"

"I had an uncle. He died and left an inheritance."

"In Calvada?" Wiley snorted again. "Good luck with that." His eyes narrowed. "If it's worth anything, someone's already laid claim to it."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Call interjected. "I'm a lawyer. If you need help making your legal claim, feel free to come to me."

"That's most kind of you, Mr. Call."

Wiley stuck another pinch of tobacco in his cheek while eyeing Henry Call. "You might as well turn around now, instead of wasting time hangin' up your shingle in Calvada. We got more lawyers than dogs got fleas. And about as welcome."

"I'm employed, Wiley. I won't be in Calvada more than a few months before I head back to Sacramento."

"Who're you working for? Morgan Sanders?" Wiley put his boot up again. "He's one mean—" he glanced at Kathryn—"bird dog."

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Well, there's only two men in Calvada who'd have money enough to bring up a fancy lawyer from Sacramento or wherever you came from. Sanders or Beck, and I wouldn't want to get between those two."

"Who are they, Wiley?" Kathryn wanted to know something about the town that would soon become her home.

"Morgan Sanders owns the Madera Mine. Rents shacks to his workers. Owns the company store where they have to buy their supplies. Beck came lately, went into partnership with Paul Langnor. Good man, Langnor. Never watered his whiskey. Beck's been doing well with the saloon and casino since Langnor died. Added a hotel. Beck saw the elephant and got sick of buckin' the tiger, was smart enough to find somethin' else to do and make himself rich doin' it."

"Elephants and tigers?" Kathryn felt her anxiety rising.

Henry Call smiled. "Seeing the elephant means learning life the hard way, Miss Walsh. Bucking the tiger means playing faro. The game originated in Europe, and they used cards with pictures of Egyptian pharaohs on the back."

"Been playin' it since I came west in '49," Wiley confessed.

"Gambling, you mean." Kathryn understood now why the man appeared to have nothing more than his worn-out clothes and down-at-the-heels boots.

"Life's a gamble, ain't it? There's risk in anything you do."

Wiley Baer, the sage. "What can you tell me about Calvada?"

"Well, it sure ain't Boston!" He gave a snort of laughter. "I can tell you that much."

"Do you work in the Madera Mine, Wiley?"

"Work for Sanders? I ain't no fool. Once down those shafts, you never get out. Got a mine I work alone in the mountains. Claim goes way back to '52. Got papers to prove it. Good thing, 'cause the record office burned in '54. Burned again in

'58. I dig what I need to live on. That way the ore will last a lifetime." He eyed Henry Call suspiciously. "Nobody knows where it is but me." Ruminating a moment, he spit out the window again. "Every now and then, a man has just got to go to a bigger town." He winked at Henry. "Trouble is, I think I got lice . . ."

"Lice?" The mere mention made Kathryn itch.

"You bet. Some an inch long."

Mr. Call shook his head. "A tall tale, Miss Walsh."

"Who says?" Wiley Baer glowered at Call before giving Kathryn an innocent smile. "You gonna believe a lawyer over an honest man who's lived in these mountains for more'n twenty years? I'm tellin' you, we got ticks you can saddle and ride. The mosquitos carry brickbats under their wings so's they can sharpen their stingers. But you needn't worry, ma'am. There's a surefire way to get rid of them. I just draw a line down my middle, shave all the hair off one side, douse the other with kerosene, and light a match. The critters run to the clear side and I stab them with my hunting knife." He pulled one out of the sheath at his waist and held it up so she could see the nine-inch blade.

She gave him a droll look. "You'd better have good aim."

Wiley laughed. "You betcha." He winked again, at her this time.

"Are there many women in Calvada, Wiley?"

"Women? Yes, siree. About twenty, I'm guessing, if the last count stands. Not many ladies, though, and no one like you, that's for darn sure." He looked her over again. "Are you spoken for?"

"I beg your pardon?" Kathryn blushed, surprised he'd ask such a personal question.

"Are you engaged or married?" He raised his voice as though

she hadn't heard his query over the rattle of harnesses and pounding hooves.

"No."

"Well, that good news will spread like wildfire." He grinned. "If you want a husband, you can have one by nightfall."

Was that a California proposal? "No, thank you."

"Men out here are hankering for wives. And you look like a prime candidate."

She supposed he meant it as a compliment, but she felt like a juicy steak on a plate. "I didn't come out here to find a husband. I came to claim an inheritance and have charge of my own life."

"You'll need protection."

Was he offering it? "I'll buy a gun."

The stagecoach swayed sharply, and Kathryn grabbed hold of the window frame. Every muscle in her body screamed for relief.

"Wake up, folks!" Cussler shouted. "Coming round the bend to Calvada."

Mr. Call checked his case. "Will someone be meeting you, Miss Walsh?"

"I'm to contact Mr. Neumann when I arrive."

Wiley spit the plug of tobacco out the window. "Herr Neumann?"

"Yes. Do you know the gentleman?"

"Came near to cutting my ear off last time I went to his barbershop."

Judging by the length of Wiley Baer's hair, that had been several years ago.

"Lousy barber. Good man. When he's sober. If he ain't in his shop, you'll find him at Beck's Saloon."

Kathryn flinched at several loud bangs. "Was that gunfire?"

"Yep." Wiley scratched his beard. "Sounds like a Smith &

Wesson. Shooting ain't unusual in Calvada. Men get a little ram-bunctious with whiskey under their belts." He leaned out the coach window as it went around a bend. "Don't see any bodies lyin' in the street." He sat back. "Could be worse. I seen six men chasin' a dog down Chump Street once. They was so drunk none of 'em made the mark. 'Course, a man mindin' his own business in the dry goods store got a bullet through his head."

Kathryn didn't know whether to believe him or not. Henry Call didn't say it was a tall tale. What sort of place was Calvada? "Did the sheriff arrest the men?"

"Wasn't no sheriff."

"Surely there is some sort of law . . ."

"Yep. Men gathered at the saloon, discussed the matter. Decided his death was an act of God. A pity, but we all gotta go sometime."

Kathryn stared. "And that was all they did on the deceased's behalf?"

"Nope. Had a couple of drinks in his name, took up a collection, and had him buried in a new suit the next day."

Just as Kathryn was about to make a comment, she was struck by a stench so foul, she gagged. She covered her nose and mouth. "What on earth is that horrible smell?"

Wiley Baer's half smile turned rueful. "Like I said, Calvada ain't Boston. You'll get used to the smell in a coupla days." Three more shots rang out as the coach lurched to a stop. Had a stray bullet hit Cussler or one of the horses? Wiley opened the door and jumped down. He looked around and peered back in. "Must've rained again. Mud's past my ankles. Better get out on the other side, ma'am. Town's got sinkholes so deep men have disappeared and become part of the road."

The air was heavy with eau de sewage, mud, and horse dung. Another shot rang out. Glass shattered. Men shouted.

It sounded like a riot had broken out in the saloon across the street. Wiley sloshed through the muck. "Comin' from Beck's place. Shootin's over, is my guess."

Mr. Call climbed out of the coach and stood on the boardwalk. He offered Kathryn a hand. Trembling, knees weak, she hopped onto the boardwalk, where Wiley Baer stood scraping pounds of oozing, odiferous mud off his boots. Across the street, the swinging doors flew open and a man windmilled out. He fell backwards off the boardwalk and skidded into the middle of the street. A tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair came through the doors after him.

"That thar is Matthias Beck. And he looks pure hostile right now."

Kathryn watched the man step off the boardwalk, stride to the middle of the street, and haul the man up from the mud. She flinched each time he punched the poor fellow: once, twice, and again before letting him drop. Men poured out of the saloon and stood along the boardwalk, cheering him on. Grabbing the man by the back of his neck, he half dragged him to a horse trough and dumped him in. The man bobbed up, sputtering. Beck shoved him down. Up and down the wretch went, as if Beck was doing laundry.

Horried, Kathryn watched. "Why are those men laughing? Shouldn't someone stop that bully before he drowns that poor man?"

Henry Call shook his head. "Best to stay out of the situation when you don't know what happened."

When she looked at Wiley, he raised his hands. "Don't look at me. I ain't gettin' in between."

"Men!" Kathryn muttered in exasperation as she stepped to the edge of the boardwalk. "*Stop that this minute! Leave that man alone!*"

She caught the attention of every man standing outside the saloon, but Beck barely paused or glanced in her direction. The man's arms flailed as Beck pushed him under again, then pulled him up and draped him over the side and left him retching. When the man had emptied his stomach, Beck grasped the front of his shirt and spoke to him nose-to-nose.

The man managed to climb out of the trough, but his feet slipped, and he sprawled in the mud again. Rolling over, he crawled toward the boardwalk as Beck turned and looked straight at Kathryn.

*Oh, dear.* She gulped.

"Oh, no!" Wiley moaned. "Here he comes. Good luck, and it was nice meetin' ya." Chortling, he jumped down into the muddy street and helped a young man unharness the horses.

Kathryn's heart beat faster with each step Matthias Beck took toward her. She instinctively moved back when he stepped up onto the boardwalk. She reminded herself that she had faced down Judge Lawrence Pershing many times over the years. Beck didn't say anything. He just looked at her. She felt her lungs constrict, and her hand fluttered to her stomach. Disturbed by unaccustomed sensations, she turned away quickly, looking for her trunk.

"Well, well, Henry . . ." Beck spoke in a deep Southern drawl. "You didn't tell me you were bringing a lady."

Stiffening, Kathryn turned back and looked up. "I'm not his lady."

"Even better." He grinned in a way that made her want to slap his face, especially when it caused a rush of heat to course through her.

Henry cleared his throat. "Matthias, this is Miss Kathryn Walsh. She's come to settle—"

"I'm sure Mr. Beck isn't the least bit interested in *my* business."



"Oh, I'm interested in everything about you."

Kathryn ignored him.

"She's from Boston," Wiley volunteered.

"And looks it." Beck's gaze moved down and back up, lingering on the ostrich feathers dangling in front of her face. She controlled the urge to take off her hat and whack him with it.

"She's got a letter from Herr about some inheritance," Wiley piped up.

"Wiley Baer!" she protested. Why did her two coach companions think her business was any of Beck's?

"I'm afraid Herr Neumann isn't in a condition to talk business or anything else at present," Beck told her.

Kathryn tipped her chin. "And how would you know that, sir?"

"He passed out at my bar an hour ago. I had him carried home. He'll sleep it off by morning. In the meantime, perhaps I can be of service?" His tone was serious.

"Thank you, but I don't think so."

"You don't seem to approve of me, your ladyship."

The title grated. "I don't know anything about you other than you own that place across the street, and you beat up that poor man and almost drowned him in the trough."

"He felt like celebrating a win at the faro table and started shooting. Thankfully, he didn't kill anyone."

That information did change matters, but she still didn't approve of a public beating in response. "Wouldn't it have been better to turn him over to the constable for disturbing the peace?"

"Boston," Wiley said. "Got a sheriff yet, Matthias?"

"Not yet."

Wiley scratched his chest. "It was nice ridin' with you, missy, but I'm gonna have myself a stiff drink, bath, good meal,

and go visit the Dollhouse.” He turned and headed for Beck’s Saloon.

Kathryn frowned. Dollhouse?

“Walsh.” Beck frowned. “You couldn’t be related to City Walsh.”

Kathryn looked up at him. “City? My uncle’s name was Casey Teague Walsh.” *Casey Teague. C. T.* Maybe these people did know him as City.

All hint of humor left the man’s face. “Sorry to tell you, but there’s no pot at the end of the rainbow.”

She blinked, feeling her stomach drop. So much for any grand dreams, not that she had been possessed of any. The judge wouldn’t have handed over a gold mine.

“Well, whatever there is will have to do.” She gave Henry a nod. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Call. If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen.” She went into the stage office and asked if she could store her trunk and where she might find a hotel.

“My place across the street is the best in town,” Beck said from behind her.

Her pulse shot up. She kept her eyes glued on the station manager. “There must be another hotel . . .”

“The Sanders Hotel is a couple of blocks down on the right, but I wouldn’t recommend it for a lady like yourself.” Beck stood in the doorway.

“But you think a saloon is appropriate?”

“The saloon is downstairs, your ladyship. The rooms are upstairs, fully furnished, each with a lock on the door. You’ll be safe under my roof.”

The heat in those eyes made her think otherwise. “No, thank you, Mr. Beck.” She picked up her carpetbag and headed for the door. He didn’t move.

“I’ll see that Herr is sobered up while you get settled in.”

Her stomach growled loudly, and she blushed.

His mouth tipped. "And I'll show you a good place to eat."

"Please move aside, sir."

His face stiffened. "You are not going to the Sanders Hotel."

Her stepfather had often used that imperious tone on her, and it always roused her own considerable temper. She gave him a cloying smile. "Is this the way you drum up business, Mr. Beck, by accosting women at the stage station?"

Beck stood aside and gave her a mocking bow. She could feel the heat from his body as she stepped around him cautiously.

"You'd be better off at your uncle's house," he said when she had taken a few steps.

Hope rose within her. "There's a house?"

"Not exactly."

"Would you kindly tell me where to go?"

"I'd like nothing better." He jerked his chin. "A few doors down to the left. Between the Bear's Head Saloon and Barrera's Fandango Hall."

She stared at him, swallowed convulsively, and gave a slight nod. "Thank you, Mr. Beck." She felt him watching her as she followed his directions.

"Say hello to Scribe for me," he called after her.

Pausing, Kathryn turned. "Scribe?"

"The boy worked for your uncle. He's been living in the place since City died. Nowhere else to go. Tell him to come to my place." He turned to Henry, said something quietly, and escorted him across the street.