



This Gun for Hire

By Jo Goodman

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"Perfectly crafted"—PW (starred review)

Jo Goodman, a premier writer of western romance and the author of *In Want of a Wife*, is back with a sensational new novel for fans of Linda Lael Miller and Joan Johnston.

He's got a job to do...

Former army cavalryman Quill McKenna takes pride in protecting the most powerful man in Stonechurch, Colorado: Mr. Ramsey Stonechurch himself. But the mine owner has enemies, and after several threats on his life, mines, and family, Quill decides to hire someone to help guard the boss's daughter. Only problem is the uncontrollable attraction he feels toward the fiery-haired woman who takes the job.

...but she's a piece of work.

Calico Nash has more knowledge of scouting and shooting than cross-stitching, but she agrees to pose as Ann's private tutor while protecting her. But between her growing attraction to Quill and the escalating threats against the Stonechurches, Calico will soon have a choice to make—hang on to her hard-won independence or put her faith in Quill to create the kind of happy ending she never imagined...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *This Gun for Hire*

"Danger, treachery, and clever subterfuge infuse this complex and multilayered story that boasts more than one despicable villain. **VERDICT** Nonstop, sometimes violent action; wicked and witty banter; tender, laughter-laced ardor; and a passel of vividly rendered characters will sweep readers deep into Goodman's adventurous Wild West. Another addition to her growing canon of must-read historicals." --*Library Journal*

"Goodman...treks to 1888 Colorado for a perfectly crafted tale of a working partnership between two competent, self-reliant sharpshooters. Quill McKenna functions as both lawyer and bodyguard to powerful mine owner Ramsey Stonechurch. When Ramsey worries that his enemies might threaten his daughter, Ann, who has decided to stay at home rather than traveling for her advanced studies, he takes Quill's suggestion to hire Katherine 'Calico' Nash, whom Quill met while she was taking down an abusive outlaw in a brothel. Calico guards Ann under the guise of being her academic tutor, and soon she captures Quill's heart as well. The two mercenaries are brought together by similar goals on the right side of the law, high mutual regard, and a little bit of fate. Their romance is much more than incidental but doesn't overshadow the excitement of the bigger story. Goodman balances the pair's toughness and tenderness, independence and teamwork, and practicality and passion in a way that never lessens one in the service of the other; they become something greater together without ever compromising their individuality."—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"When I am fortunate enough to have a great book in my hands, I typically read it straight through, even if it takes until dawn. This book I felt compelled to savor. I did not want it to end....As far as this reader is concerned, Jo Goodman can write a sequel featuring Quill and Calico and I would knock on the bookstore window at midnight to read it....I highly recommend this one." --*All About Romance* (Desert Isle Keeper Review)

"One of the premier Western romance writers, Goodman delivers a solid plot with engaging characters. There's plenty of sexual tension, and from its rousing beginning to the powerful climax, there's enough adventure to satisfy fans."—*RT Book Reviews*

"The action is raring to go from the start. Setting: a brothel. Characters: one sensual woman, one bad villain and an innocent "I'm just here to relax" man. Quill's confused and I'm confused but he's determined to see what's going to happen and willing to go with the flow and I'm laughing out loud as the scene unfolds. Add some whiskey, some rope, some guns, two villainous sidekicks, a little violence and justice is finally done. Calico has a wonderful, deadpan sense of humor and cuts Quill no slack at all. She's also handy with a gun and not afraid to use it....At this point the story becomes a 'hold your breath' kind of book. It starts so well that I almost don't want to keep reading it in case it slows or falters. On the other hand, I can't not continue because it's so good. It's got wonderful, wry, sharp banter and intelligent people." --*Dear Author*

About the Author

Jo Goodman is a *USA Today* bestselling author who has written multiple series, including the Hamilton Family series and the Thorne Brothers series. Jo lives in West Virginia.

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Chapter One

August 1888

Falls Hollow, Colorado

He watched her pause at the head of the stairs and survey the room. Her eyes swept over him and did not return. If she noticed that she had his full attention, she gave no indication. Perhaps she considered it no more than her due. Experience must have taught her that it gave a man a savoring sort of pleasure to look at her. Her pause had been deliberate, had it not? She raised one hand in a graceful, measured arc and placed it on the banister. The gesture drew his gaze away from her face. He doubted that he was alone in following it, but he glanced neither right nor left to confirm his suspicion.

She wore no gloves, no rings. Her hands needed no adornment. Her fingers were long and slender, the nails short but buffed. There was a moment, no more than that, when he could have sworn her hand tightened on the railing, gripping it hard enough for her knuckles to appear in stark, bloodless relief. Curious, his eyes lifted to her face to search for corroborating evidence that she was not quite at her ease. Nothing in her expression gave her away, and when he regarded her hand again, her fingers were merely curved over the rail, pink and perfect, and featherlight in their touch.

Quill McKenna wondered at what price she could be bought.

He had money. He had not planned to spend any of it on a whore, true, but experience had taught him that plans could, and should, change when new facts presented themselves. *She* was a new fact, and her presentation damn near took his breath away.

He was not entirely sure why that was so. As a rule, he preferred curves. Round breasts. Rounder bottoms. Soft, warm flesh in the cup of his palms. Also, he was drawn to blondes. Strawberry. Gold. Corn silk. Honey. Ash. Wheat. He liked a woman he could tuck under his chin. There was a certain comfort there, her being just so high that she was tuckable. Blue eyes, of course, liquid, lambent, and promising. He appreciated a woman who made promises, whether or not she intended to honor them. It kept him hopeful.

The woman standing on the lip of the uppermost step had none of the physical features that he typically admired. From face to feet, he counted more angles than curves. High cheekbones and a small pointed chin that was softened by the shadowed hint of a center cleft defined her oval face. Heavily applied lip rouge the color of ripe cherries accented the wide lush line of her mouth. Her eyes were almond shaped. He could not make out their precise color, but he doubted they were blue. Her hair, hanging loose behind her back, evoked the colors of night, not noon. Nothing about this woman was as it should be, and yet he continued to stare, knowing himself to be oddly fascinated.

With the exception of the brothel's madam, who wore an emerald green silk gown and matching green slippers, the whores who worked for her appeared in various states of dress—or undress, as it were. Sleeveless, loose-fitting, white cotton shifts that dipped low at the neckline seemed to be preferred, and fallen straps artfully arranged around plump arms exposed naked shoulders. The women wore the shifts under tightly laced corsets to accentuate hourglass figures. Most of the whores sported ruffled knickers that they tugged above their knees. A few wore black stockings and black ankle boots. Some wore no stockings at all and red or silver kid slippers.

Quill had spent enough time in uniform to recognize one when he saw it. The woman at the top of the stairs wore a variation of the theme. The straps of her shift rested on her shoulders; perhaps because she had not yet resigned herself to the languid, lounging posture of her sisters who occupied overstuffed sofas, wide

armchairs, and the laps of contented cowboys and miners.

She apparently had no use for a corset, and the shift hung straight to the middle of her calves. There was no flash of ruffle to indicate that she wore knickers. It was an intriguing notion that she might be naked under the shift, and the notion was supported by the fact that not only was she without stockings, she was also without shoes. Quill had no memory that he had ever found a barefooted woman immediately desirable, and yet . . .

Judging by the stirring in the room as the woman began her descent, he was not alone in his notions.

Quill's gaze returned to her face, and he saw that her eyes—whatever the color—were no longer surveying the room but had found their target. He tracked the direction to the source and discovered a man of considerable height and heft standing in the brothel's open doorway. It occurred to Quill that he might have mistaken the reason for the earlier stir in the room. It was certainly possible the madam, her girls, and her patrons had more interest in the man crossing the threshold than they had in the barefoot whore.

Out of the corner of his eye, Quill saw the madam step away from her place beside the upright piano, where she had been turning pages for one of the girls. She came into his line of vision as she approached her new guest. Quill recalled that he had been greeted warmly when he entered the house, but not by the madam. She had smiled and nodded at him, acknowledging his presence, but she had not left her post. Instead, one of the girls—whose name he never caught—relieved him of his hat and gun belt and escorted him to his present chair. Except to fetch him a whiskey, she had not left his side.

Clearly the madam had decided this customer deserved her special attention, although whether it was because he was a favorite or because of his considerable size and the potential threat it posed, Quill had no way of knowing. It occurred to him to put the question to the girl at his side, but then he became aware that her fingers were curled like talons around his forearm where they had only been resting lightly moments before. Posing the question seemed unnecessary. This man represented someone worth fearing.

The madam smiled brightly if a shade stiffly. She held out her hand for his hat and gun belt, neither of which he gave her. Her extended arm hung awkwardly before she withdrew it. She took a visible breath and then spoke. "We've been expecting you, Mr. Whitfield. I suppose this means you heard about our new girl, the one I found especially for you." She tilted her head ever so slightly toward the stairs.

Quill thought the gesture was unnecessary. Mr. Whitfield's gaze had been riveted on the woman on the staircase since he entered the brothel. Quill was not convinced that Whitfield had even seen the madam's outstretched arm or been aware that she wanted to relieve him of his gun.

"By God, you did, Mrs. Fry," he said under his breath. "I'll be damned."

"You will get no argument from me."

Quill suppressed a grin at the madam's cheek. Mrs. Fry had spoken softly, but she was in no danger of being heard even if she had shouted the retort. Whitfield was paying her no mind.

Whitfield lifted his hat, slicked back his hair with the palm of his hand, and then replaced the black Stetson. He sucked in his lips as he took a deep breath. He had the manner of a man calming himself, a man who did not want to appear too eager or at risk for losing control.

Quill's gaze swiveled back to the stairs. The woman was standing on the lip of the bottom step. He could see that she was not as young as she appeared from a distance. He had taken her for eighteen and no more than

twenty when she appeared on the landing. He revised that notion now, adding four, maybe five years to his estimate. There was a certain maturity in her level stare, a composure that would not have been carried so easily by someone younger, or someone inexperienced. If the madam had hoped to present a virgin to Mr. Whitfield, she had very much mistaken the matter. It did not seem Mrs. Fry would have made such an obvious error. That could only mean that something else was afoot.

Quill wished he had resisted giving over his Colt. It would have been a comfort just then to have it at his side.

Whitfield's gaze did not shift to the madam when he asked, "What's her name?"

"Katie. Katie Nash."

Whitfield's lips moved as he repeated the name but there was no accompanying sound. He nodded slightly, as though satisfied it suited her, and it struck Quill that there was something inherently reverent in the small gesture.

Mrs. Fry crooked a finger in Katie's direction. "Over here, girl, and make Mr. Whitfield's acquaintance."

Katie took a step forward, smiled.

Whitfield put out his hand, stopping her approach. "You don't have to listen to her," he said. "I'm paying for your time now. You listen to me, Miss Katie Nash, and you and I will do proper acquaintance making upstairs."

Katie Nash stayed precisely where she was.

The madam boldly cocked a painted eyebrow at Whitfield and turned over her hand, showing her empty palm. Quill thought Mrs. Fry demonstrated considerable temerity to demand payment up front from this customer, especially when it appeared she had made some effort to please him by recruiting Katie Nash for her house. Again, he was not alone in his thinking; he was aware that the girl at his side was holding her breath.

Whitfield stared at the madam's hand for several long moments. He had the broad shoulders and barrel chest befitting a man of his height. His chest jumped slightly as quiet laughter rumbled through him. Abruptly, it was over. He laid his large palm over Mrs. Fry's, covering hers completely. "You must be very certain of my satisfaction." When she did not respond, he said, "In good time, Mrs. Fry. Allow me to be the judge of how well you've done." He waited for the madam to withdraw her hand before he lowered his. He smiled, but it did not reach his eyes, and no one in the parlor was comforted by it.

It was Katie Nash who eased the tension. She ignored Whitfield's earlier edict and crossed the room to stand directly in front of him. With no hesitation, she laid her palms against his chest and raised her face. Her smile held all the warmth that his had not. "About that acquaintance making . . ."

As though mesmerized, he blinked slowly.

Katie Nash's dark, unbound hair swung softly as she tilted her head in the direction of the stairs. "I have whiskey in my room. Mrs. Fry told me what you most particularly like."

Quill did not doubt that Miss Nash was speaking to something more than Whitfield's taste in liquor. Whitfield seemed to know it, too. Quill almost laughed as the man nodded dumbly.

Katie's palms slid across Whitfield's chest to his upper arms, and after a moment's pause, glided down to his shirt cuffs. Her long fingers were still not long enough to completely circle his wrists. She held them loosely, lifted them a fraction, and then dropped the left one in favor of taking him by the right hand. "Come with me," she said. And when he did not move, she tugged and turned, and led him, docile as a lamb, toward the staircase.

Quill tracked them as they climbed. They were just more than three-quarters of the way up when he was seized by a sudden impulse to follow. He did not realize that he had in some way communicated that urge until he felt his companion's outstretched arm across his chest. He glanced sideways at her, saw the small shake of her head, and released the breath he had not known he was holding. He leaned back the smallest fraction necessary to encourage her to withdraw her restraining arm. When she did, he settled more deeply in his chair, the picture of self-control and containment while every one of his senses was alert to a danger he could not quite identify.

At the top of the stairs Katie Nash and Whitfield turned left and disappeared from view. The moment they were out of sight, there was a subtle, but unmistakable, shift in the mood of the girls, their patrons, and the madam herself. The whore at the piano began playing again, softly at first, and then more loudly as her confidence grew. Someone tittered. A giggle, pitched nervously north of high C, followed. That elicited a chuckle from one of the cowboys, then some deep-throated laughter from another.

Quill did not join in, although the woman beside him did. Without asking if he wanted another drink, she plucked the empty glass from his hand and went to the sideboard to refill it. She returned quickly, a little swing in her nicely rounded hips as she approached. Standing in front of him, she held out the glass. When he took it, she eased herself onto his lap.

"So what about you?" she asked, sliding one arm around Quill's neck as she fit her warm bottom comfortably against his thighs. "What is it I can do for you, Mr.—" She stopped and made a pouty face. "I do not believe you told me your name. I would remember." She leaned in so her lips were close to his ear. Her warm breath tickled. "I remember names. I am very good at it."

"I can't say the same right now," he said. "I don't recall yours."

She sat up, the pout still defining the shape of her mouth. "Honey. They call me Honey on account of my hair." With this, she tilted her head to one side so a fall of curls cascaded over her shoulder. She fingered the tips. "See? You can touch. It feels like honey. Soft, you know. But thick, too."

"Viscous."

"What? Did you say vicious?"

"Viscous. Thick and sticky."

"Oh." Her pout disappeared in place of an uncertain smile. "I suppose." She withdrew her fingers from her hair. A few strands clung stubbornly until she brushed them away. "I don't figure I would mind having your fingers caught in my hair."

"Hmm." Quill's eyes darted toward the top of the stairs.

Honey touched his chin with her fingertip and turned his attention back to her. "Forget about her. You have no cause to worry. Do you see anyone else here showing a lick of concern?"

He did not. There had been interest when she appeared, but it was Whitfield's arrival that aroused apprehension. What he felt in the room now that Whitfield was gone was collective relief.

"Quill McKenna."

"How's that again?"

"My name. Quill McKenna."

She smiled, tapped him on the mouth with the tip of her index finger. "I see. Finally." She removed her finger. "Quill. It's unusual, isn't it? What sort of name is it?"

"Mine." He remained expressionless as Honey regarded him steadily.

"Not much for words, are you?"

"Not much."

His response gave rise to Honey's husky chuckle. "That's all right by me," she said. "I'm thinking there's other things we could be doing. You want to finish that drink, maybe go upstairs, have a poke at me?"

He should have wanted her, he thought. When she first approached him, he was glad of it. Honey hair, in color and texture. An abundance of curves. Lament, cornflower blue eyes. A nicely rounded bottom that fit snugly in his lap and breasts that looked as if they would overflow the cup of his palms to the perfect degree. Spillage, but no waste. Before he saw Katie Nash, this woman would have satisfied him.

Quill finished his drink, knocking it back in a single gulp, and placed the glass on the side table. He held Honey's eyes and jerked his chin toward the stairs. She grinned, took him by the hand as she wiggled off his lap, and Quill gave her no reason to think he did not enjoy it. She drew him to his feet, letting him bump against her before she coyly turned and led him to the steps. Giving him an over-the-shoulder glance, she released his hand and began to climb.

Quill followed until she reached the top. She went right; he went left.

"My room's this way," she said when she realized he was no longer behind her. Quill ignored her and she hurried after him, looping her arm through his. She tugged hard enough to pull him up. "The other way."

"Show me where her room is." Gaslight flickered in the narrow hallway. Shadows came and went across Honey's troubled face as she shook her head vigorously. Quill was unmoved. "Show me."

"No. It's nothing but trouble for me if I do. You, too."

"I'll knock on every door." He counted them quickly. "All four."

In response, Honey doubled her efforts to hold him back by circling her other arm around his. She squeezed. "You don't understand. You're a stranger here. Let it be."

Quill looked down at her restraining arms and then at her. "I don't want to hurt you, and I will if I have to shake you off. And I *will* shake you off. Let me go." He was used to being taken at his word, but she was right that he was a stranger, and so he allowed her a few extra moments to make a decision about the nature of his character. He held her gaze until he felt her arms relax, unwind, and then fall back to her sides. "Which room?" he asked quietly.

Honey tilted her head in the direction of the room on her right. “You are hell bent on makin’ trouble, aren’t you?”

Quill had no answer for that, at least not one that he cared to entertain now, so he merely shrugged. He was not surprised when Honey, clearly disappointed by his lack of response, sighed heavily.

“Go,” she said, waving him on. “But don’t ever say you weren’t—” She stopped abruptly, startled by a thud heavy enough to make the door she had pointed out shudder in its frame. A second thud, only a slightly weaker echo of the first, caused the floor to vibrate.

Quill moved quickly, pushing at the door while it was still juddering. He expected some give in it, but there was none. He looked over at Honey. She had turned toward him, hands raised, palms out, a gesture that was meant to absolve her of all responsibility and remind him he was on his own.

Behind the door, Quill could hear scuffling sounds and labored breathing. He examined the door; saw there was no lock plate, and therefore no key. He raised an eyebrow at Honey. This time she was the one who shrugged.

Quill turned the knob again and threw his shoulder into the door. It moved a fraction, but he could feel resistance on the other side. From below stairs, he heard Mrs. Fry calling for Honey. She did not hesitate to desert him to answer the summons. Once he heard Honey offer assurances to the madam, he paid no more attention to their exchange.

When Quill put his shoulder to the door again, it moved just enough for him to insert his fingers between the door and frame and provide additional leverage.

“Good way to get your knuckles crushed.”

Quill recognized the voice immediately, and nothing about it was masculine. He withdrew his fingers.

“Very wise.”

Katie Nash did not show herself in the narrow opening, but neither did she close it. Quill did not know what to make of that. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“No one’s holding a gun to my head, if that’s what you mean.”

He wondered if that were true. He heard some more scuffling, a husky moan, and then . . . nothing. He glanced down the hallway and saw that Honey was no longer standing at the top of the stairs. He waited several long beats before he pushed at the door a third time.

The response he got for his effort was, “What do you want?”

“In.”

“I am with someone.”

“I know.”

“I do not entertain two men at one time.” A brief pause. “Unless they are brothers. I believe I would make an exception for brothers.”

“Winfield *is* my brother.”

“His name is Whitfield.”

“That’s his *last* name. Winfield’s his first.”

“Uh-huh.”

Her dry response raised Quill’s smile. He was coming around to the notion that she was just fine, but before he quite got there, he heard her swear softly. This was followed by another thud against the door, this one hard enough to shut it in his face. “Oh, for God’s sake,” he muttered, and twisted the knob and pushed.

This time he was met with little resistance, which made his entrance ungainly as he more or less fell over himself crossing the threshold. He stumbled clumsily past the woman he meant to save.

“That’s one way to do it,” she said, not sparing him a glance as she pushed the door closed behind him.

Quill straightened, regaining his equilibrium if not his dignity, and turned. He was glad she did not look up as astonishment had momentarily made him slack-jawed. She was kneeling at Mr. Whitfield’s side, testing the ropes that trussed that former tree of a man into something more closely resembling a stump. He lay awkwardly and uncomfortably curled on his side by virtue of the fact that his wrists and ankles were now bound behind him. His sweat-stained neckerchief was wadded in his mouth, secured by a piece of linen that Quill recognized as a strip torn from the hem of Katie Nash’s shift.

He watched her place a hand on Whitfield’s shoulder, shake him hard enough to rattle his teeth if he had not been gagged and unconscious, and then, apparently satisfied, raise herself so she could rock back on her heels and finally turn narrowed eyes on him.

“Well,” he said. “So it’s true.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “What’s true?”

“The ropes and gag. My brother’s proclivities in the bedroom run to the peculiar.” He thought she might smile, but she didn’t. She continued to stare at him, more suspicious than curious.

“I was concerned about you,” he said.

“Can’t think of a reason why that should be so.”

“Just now, neither can I.” Quill’s gaze darted to Whitfield and then to the clothes scattered across the floor. His gun belt hung over the headboard. The man certainly had been eager. She had managed to subdue him while he was still wearing his union suit, but even that was unbuttoned to the navel. Whitfield had a chest of hair like a grizzly. His cock was a small bulge pressing weakly against the front flap of his drawers. It occurred to Quill that stumbling through a door was a lesser indignity than being laid low with a cock curled in on itself like a slug.

When Quill’s attention returned to her, his eyebrows beetled as he scratched lightly behind his right ear. “I admit to being a tad perplexed.”

She stood, hands at her sides. “A tad?”

“A touch. A mite. A bit.”

“I know what ‘a tad’ means.”

“Good. It’s better if I don’t have to explain.”

“Words I live by.” She pointed to Whitfield. “You want to give me a hand, you being here and all? Uninvited, for a fact.”

“Depends. Are you going to drop him out the window?”

“A temptation, but no. Help me get him on the bed and then tell Mrs. Fry she can send for Joe Pepper. He’s the sheriff.”

“All right.” He observed that his agreement seemed to make her more suspicious, not less. “Did you expect an argument?”

She said nothing for a moment then her cheeks puffed with an expulsion of air. “Not sure what I expect. You’re not a bounty hunter, are you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s no good,” she said, more to herself than to him.

“How’s that again?”

“I said it’s no good. You would lie about it if you were.”

“Lying doesn’t come naturally to me. I have to work real hard at it.”

“Are you working hard now?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Katie,” she said. “Call me Katie.”

“I don’t think that’s your name.” If he had not been watching her closely, he would have missed her almost imperceptible start. It pleased him that he had guessed correctly, though he took pains not to show it.

“You were sitting beside Honey downstairs. I saw you. You heard Mrs. Fry tell Whit my name.”

“I heard what she said. I am no longer certain I believe it.”

“I can’t be responsible for what you believe. Call me Katie or nothing at all. Now, you take his shoulders while I get his feet.”

It was no easy task hoisting the man she called Whit, so they dragged and carried and dragged some more, and heaved him onto the bed together. Whit made unintelligible guttural sounds but never woke up.

“He’s a big one,” Quill said. “What did you use to put him down?” When she did not answer, he surveyed the room again, overlooking the scattered clothes and gun belt this time. His eyes fell on the whiskey bottle on the bedside table and the twin tumblers beside it. Only one of the tumblers still had whiskey in it.

“Remind me not to drink from that bottle.”

“Suit yourself.” She picked up the glass that held a generous finger of liquor and knocked it back. Smiling

ever so slightly, she replaced the tumbler on the table.

Eyeing the bottle again, Quill said, "I don't suppose he is worth laying a bottle of good whiskey to waste, not when you can drop chloral hydrate into his drink."

She gave him no direct response, pointing to the door instead. "You are supposed to tell Mrs. Fry about getting Joe Pepper."

"Right. The sheriff." His eyes darted briefly to Whitfield. "He's going to come around soon, a big man like that. Will you be—" He did not finish his sentence because she gave him a withering look. "I am going now."

Quill did not have an opportunity to close the door; she closed it for him. He had not yet taken two steps when he heard the telltale sounds of a chair banging against the door and then being fitted securely under the knob. Shaking his head, he went in search of Mrs. Fry and discovered that the twin parlors on the first floor were largely deserted.

Honey, he saw, had found another lap to warm. He meant to give her a wide berth, but she put out a hand to stop him when he would have walked by. "If you're looking for Mrs. Fry, she's gone for the sheriff herself. I warned you not to interfere."

He frowned. "What are you saying? She's not bringing the sheriff here for me."

"You certain about that?"

"He's coming for Whitfield."

Honey shrugged, dropping her hand. "Two birds. One stone."

Quill looked to Honey's companion for confirmation, but the lanky cowboy had his face in the curve of her neck and was rooting like a piglet to his mama's teat. He regarded Honey's guileless expression and wondered what he could believe. After a moment's consideration, he said, "I'll take my chances."

She merely smiled and ruffled her cowboy's hair. "Upstairs, lover. You can nuzzle at your leisure."

Quill stood back as the pair got to their feet. He watched Honey pull her cowboy along just as she had pulled on him. It was as choreographed a move as any he had seen in a Chicago dance hall, and while he could appreciate, even admire, the practice needed to acquire the skill that made such moments appear spontaneous, he had a deeper regard for those moments between a man and a woman that *were* spontaneous.

He turned away before Honey and her new partner reached the stairs. No one was at the piano. The brothel was as quiet as it had been when Whit came calling. He approached a pair of whores drinking beer in a dark corner of the main parlor. Although they looked up when he came upon them, neither gave an indication they welcomed his attention. Just the opposite was true. Their expressions were identically sullen.

"Mrs. Fry," he said. "Where can I find her?" At first, Quill thought they did not mean to answer him, but then they traded glances, shrugged simultaneously, and pointed to the front door.

"She's really gone for Joe Pepper?" he asked.

They nodded, and the one with a drooping green velvet ribbon in her hair was moved to add, "Had to, what with you causin' such a fuss. The menfolk that took off kicked up dust like stampeding cattle. You cost us

some earnings there.”

The whore who wore a cameo pendant around her neck said, “The ones who stayed skedaddled to the rooms. I expect they’re under the beds, not on them.”

Quill frowned, but he said, “All right. I suppose you can tell the sheriff that I am waiting for him upstairs.”

“As if we wouldn’t,” said Droopy Ribbon.

It occurred to Quill to retrieve his hat and gun belt, but then he thought better of it. There was no sense in tempting fate, and Whit was no longer armed. That evened things out if he came around, and the Colt was useless against Katie Nash. Quill had never shot a woman, never pointed a gun at one, and if he were going to start now, he figured he would take aim at Miss Droopy Ribbon or her equally bad-tempered companion, Miss Cameo Pendant.

That thought buoyed him all the way to where Mr. Whitfield was being held, and he was still grinning when he politely knocked on the door.

“Is that you, Joe Pepper?”

“No. Not Sheriff Pepper. But he will be here directly if that eases your mind.”

“My mind is not uneasy.”

“That’s good. A clear conscience is a comfortable companion.”

“Who said that?”

“I thought I just did. Why? Did it seem profound?” Quill drew back when he heard the chair being moved aside. A moment later the door opened, although she blocked his entrance with a hand placed on either side of the frame.

“It seemed,” she said, “like something a badly behaved schoolboy would have to write repetitively. Probably under his teacher’s watchful eye.”

A small vertical crease appeared between Quill’s eyebrows as he gave her observation full consideration. A few strands of sun-licked hair fell across his forehead when he tipped his head sideways. He raked them back absently, still mulling. When he was done, his face cleared and he regarded her with guileless blue-gray eyes.

“No,” he said. “I never put chalk to a slate to write something like that. I think it is an original thought.”

“Well, damn. When I woke this morning, I did not anticipate standing in the presence of a man with an original thought, and yet here I am, practically basking in his glow. My day is steadily improving, wouldn’t you say?”

Quill grinned. “You think I have a glow?” A chuckle stirred at the back of his throat when her eyes narrowed—green eyes, he noticed, not blue, not soft, but remarkably fine in their own way, sharp and sentient, a shade sly, and framed by a sweep of thick, dark lashes. She surprised him by opening the door wider and gesturing him to enter. Afraid she would change her mind, he did not hesitate to accept the invitation.

Whit was still bound and gagged on the bed, though it was clear from the state of the covers and the angle of

his body that he had been restless in Quill's absence. "He woke?" asked Quill.

"Briefly."

Quill did not ask how she subdued him a second time. He suspected that a careful inspection of Whit's skull would reveal a lump or two. The man's revolver was no longer in its holster. Instead, the .36 caliber Remington rested on the windowsill, far outside of Whit's reach should he free himself. He did wonder for a moment if Whit was still alive, but then he observed a breath shudder through the big man and had his answer.

"I wasn't sure you would let me in," he said.

She shrugged. "I wasn't sure I could keep you out."

He nodded, looked her over. She was no longer wearing the cotton shift; or rather she was no longer wearing *only* the cotton shift. He supposed it was under her black-and-white-striped sateen dress, along with a tightly laced corset, a chemise, a flounced petticoat, a wire bustle of only moderate size, white or black stockings, suspenders to hold them up, and knickers. Courtesy of the corset and bustle, there was an illusion of curves, but Quill did not think they suited her.

"You dressed," he said.

"Nothing gets past you."

His grin came and went like quicksilver. "The sheriff should be here soon. Mrs. Fry had already gone to get him when I went downstairs. It appears there is some confusion about her mission. Honey seems to think she's bringing Joe Pepper here for me."

"And?"

Quill pointed to the bed. "He's the one roped like a calf for branding."

"He sure is. You, on the other hand, are still free to go. You probably should."

Quill decided not to pursue it. It would require a conversation with Joe Pepper to make sense of what the women were saying. "Mind if I sit?" he asked.

"Suit yourself."

He ignored the room's only chair and sat on the oak chest at the foot of the bed. That put his back to Whitfield, but he was confident that he would feel the man stir. The room was sparsely furnished but cluttered nonetheless. The surface of the vanity was crowded with pots of creams, perfumes, and a pitcher and basin. One door of the wardrobe was ajar, stuck in that open position by a white froth of petticoats spilling out from the bottom. Hanging over the knobs was an array of limp velvet ribbons in a rainbow of colors, all except for green.

"Huh," he said. Aware that she was watching him, he lifted his head and turned to her. "This is not your room."

"Huh," she said.

"The ribbons," he said, although she did not ask for an explanation. "They belong to one of the women still

sitting downstairs. This is her room.” When she merely shrugged, he asked, “Do you even work here?”

“Today I do.”

“Are you a whore?”

“Whit certainly thinks so.”

“What am I supposed to think?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Huh.” His blue-gray eyes made another head-to-toe assessment, which he observed tested the limits of her patience. Although her placid expression remained firmly in place, Quill detected a flutter at the hem of her gown indicative of a rhythmically tapping foot.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you decided?”

“I am.”

“And?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Whether you’re a whore or not. It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh.”

He smiled because her features finally hinted at the confusion she was feeling. Her foot had stopped tapping, and he supposed that was because she needed to regain her balance. She had no idea what to make of what he said, even less idea what to make of him. That was all right. The confusion should not be solely on his side.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Are you asking for my name or seeking a broader answer to the nature of my existence?”

She retreated to the straight-backed chair he had ignored and, much like a deflated balloon, abruptly sank. A soft whoosh of air accompanied the movement. She blinked. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

“No,” he said. “Quill McKenna.” The squinty-eyed look she gave him made him steal a glance at the windowsill. The Remington revolver was still there.

“I would not use the Remington.” She turned over her right hand, revealing a bulge at her wrist beneath the long sleeve of her gown. “Derringer.”

“Ah. Some things do get past me.”

“It happens.” She settled her hands in her lap, threading her fingers together. “I am not sufficiently provoked to shoot you. Yet.”

“Good to know.”

“So, Quill McKenna, what matter of business brings you to Falls Hollow?”

“No business. Passing through.”

“On your way to . . .”

“Stonechurch. That’s near—”

“Leadville. Yes. I know where it is. Stonechurch Mining. You can’t pitch a nickel there without hitting something named after the man himself.”

“Ramsey Stonechurch.”

She snorted softly. “Ramses is more like it. The pharaoh.”

“People call him that?”

“Not to his face. Not that I ever heard.”

“You know him?”

“I know *of* him.”

“Then he has never sought your . . . um, services.”

She smiled thinly. “Um, no.”

“Have you been to—” Quill stopped, distracted by footfalls on the stairs. “Company.” He cocked his head, listened, and held up two fingers.

“Mrs. Fry and the sheriff,” she said. “This is your last chance to leave.”

Since the window was his only exit, he shook his head.

Shrugging, she stood, smoothed the front of her gown, and went to greet Joe Pepper and the madam. Her mistake, she reflected immediately, was in not confirming identities before she opened the door. It seemed that Mr. Whitfield had at least two friends, and she was confronting the pair of them across the threshold. She nodded to each in turn, one half a head taller than she, the other at eye level. Black Stetsons shadowed their broad, squared-off faces. The taller of the two had a silver-studded hatband and stubble on his chin. The shorter one’s hat sported a sweat-stained leather band. He was clean-shaven. They both carried Remington revolvers, and both guns were still strapped.

“Gentlemen,” she said, genial in spite of the fact that they were more interested in looking past her than at her. She might have been insulted if it had not served her purpose.

“He’s really here,” the taller one said. “Damn me if she wasn’t telling the truth.”

“I didn’t doubt her, not after you knocked her sense in and her teeth out.”

“Gentlemen? Who did the knocking? And who was knocked?”

The shorter one jerked his thumb at his compatriot. "Not me. Him."

"Mrs. Goddamn Fry," the compatriot said. "How about you stepping aside?"

She did not move. Her mind whirled. If this pair had intercepted Mrs. Fry on her way to the sheriff's office, that meant Joe Pepper was not coming, and with so much time having already passed, that seemed the likeliest scenario. She lifted her left hand and placed it on the door frame while she shrugged her right shoulder. The movement was as casual as it was calculated. The derringer slipped comfortably into her palm, unnoticed by either of them. She would have one shot. Her chances of making it count, should it prove necessary, were improved by the fact that the guns of both men were still strapped.

"Step aside," the taller one said again.

This time she did, pivoting out of the way before they hurried past her. It did not surprise her that Quill McKenna was not in sight. Although she primarily worked alone, and entered into partnerships with considerable reluctance, she had not forgotten her guest or the reason for his interference in the first place: *I was concerned about you*. Perhaps it was not a lie. Not only had McKenna disappeared, so had Whitfield's gun belt and gun. The chair she had been sitting on was now the resting place for petticoats, shifts, chemises, and a bright scarlet corset.

She did not permit herself to glance at the wardrobe, although she doubted Whit's friends would have noticed. They only had eyes for him.

The short one nudged the bed with his knee so that it shook slightly. Whitfield did not stir. "Is he alive?"

"Would he still be tied if he wasn't? Use your head, Amos." He looked to Katie for an explanation. "Who did this to him?"

So Mrs. Fry had not given her up. "I don't know," she said. "I was told to sit with him until the sheriff came. I did not see what happened."

He watched her closely, looking for the lie. He knuckled his stubble thoughtfully. "This is on account of that whore he tussled with the last time he was in town."

"You must mean Daria. I've only heard things, you understand. Whispered things. I am new to the house and not long for it what with the goings-on tonight."

Amos leaned forward and began tugging on Whit's gag. His fingers were clumsy on the knot, and after several attempts he gave up and yanked the strip of linen down and removed it. Whit snuffled, sucked in a mouthful of air, and began to snore. Sighing heavily, Amos straightened. "I don't see how we're going to get him to his horse. Whit's not a lightweight in any circumstance, Chick, and in this circumstance, he's a deadweight."

Chick ignored his partner and continued to direct his attention elsewhere. "What do you know about that whore's kin? Did you hear a whisper maybe that one of them was around tonight? Plenty of folks knew Whit was coming back today. Could be someone was waiting for him."

"I never heard anyone say that she had kin. Most of us don't, or we have kin that don't claim us."

Chick's dark eyes narrowed as they settled on her mouth. "You haven't taken a notion in your head to protect someone, have you?" He did not wait for a response. "Because I have to tell you, that would be as foolish a notion as there ever was. I got the sense that you're the sort of woman that Whit would want under

him. Hair color's right. He likes it dark. And you're on the bony side of thin. You put me a little in mind of his sister, fragile-like." He elbowed Amos to get his attention. "What do you think? Does she put you in mind of Whit's sister?"

"Not sayin' one way or the other. Hell, I'm not even going to think about it. The way Whit talks about her, it ain't right."

Chick shrugged. "Just an observation. It makes me wonder if you were bait, you being new to Mrs. Fry's establishment, her being a businesswoman who doesn't want her girls roughed so they can't work. You have anything to say to that?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

He grunted softly, skeptically, but then turned his back while he helped Amos tear at the knots at Whit's ankles.

"Would it help if you had a knife?" she asked as she looked on with interest.

"Yeah, it'd help," said Chick. "Do you have one?"

"No, but I can get one from the kitchen." She started to turn, but Chick barked at her to stop. She tried another tack. "Perhaps some cold water in his face would bring him around. Then he could walk out on his own."

"Well, do you have *that* here?"

"Behind you, on the vanity. The pitcher's half full."

"All right. Bring it here."

She did, holding it in her left hand so she could grip it properly without interference from the derringer. When she returned to the bed, she went around to the side opposite Amos and Chick so she was facing Whitfield. His eyes were still closed. Except for the occasional snore shuddering through him, he was quiet. Amos and Chick had been successful at untying the ropes, and Chick was unfolding Whitfield's stiff legs while Amos tried to arrange his arms in what he imagined was a more comfortable position.

Comprehending her time for action was short, she cleared her throat and held up the pitcher. Amos and Chick looked up in unison and, confronted by her genial smile, did not see the shower of water coming at them until they were wet-faced and sputtering. She threw the pitcher, aiming for Chick's head, but he sidestepped it, and it glanced off his shoulder and hit Amos squarely in the jaw. Amos yelped, palming the side of his face while Chick momentarily lost his mind and threw himself across Whit and the bed to get to her.

She raised her right hand and delivered a hard blow to the crown of his head with the derringer still in her palm. He collapsed, arms and legs splayed, pinning his friend under him. She entertained the fleeting thought that she was fortunate the pistol did not discharge because then she would have no defense against the revolver Amos was trying to draw. He fumbled with the strap in the same manner he had fumbled with the knots.

"Leave it," she said. "Leave it or I will shoot."

Amos's fingers stopped twitching. He blinked rapidly; water dripped from his eyes like tears. When he could

see clearly, he stared at the derringer and put his hands out. "Easy now. Go easy. Just tryin' to do a friend a favor. You mind if I look after Chick? You clobbered him pretty hard."

"He's fine."

"Maybe I could just pull him off Whit."

"You can try."

Amos started to reach for Chick's legs and then stopped abruptly. He straightened.

She smiled. "Uh-huh. I'll shoot."

"You ain't right. In the head, I mean. Even for a whore, you ain't right."

She declined to comment, asking instead, "Where did you and Chick leave Mrs. Fry?"

"Behind Sweeney's. We bumped into her when we was leaving the saloon. Since we was coming here anyway on account of what we heard inside, Chick decided we should escort her around back and hear what she had to say for herself. Chick's the one who knocked her around. I told him to pull his punches. You gotta know, I made him stop. We left her alive on account of that."

"All right," she said, believing about half of what he told her. "Take off your gun belt—carefully—put it on the floor and kick it under the bed."

"Aw, Jeez. Don't make me give it up, I—" He stopped. "I know. You'll shoot if I don't."

"No," she said, surprising him. Her eyes darted to the wardrobe, where Quill McKenna was finally stepping out. "But I'm fairly certain he will."

Amos turned his neck so sharply that vertebrae cracked. Wide-eyed, he put a hand to his nape and massaged the crick while he stared at the gun aimed squarely at his chest. "That looks like Whit's gun."

"It should," said Quill. "It *is* his gun." He shook off the ruffled petticoat clinging rather comically to his shoulders, caught it before it reached the floor, and tossed it toward the chair. It spread open, fluttering like angel wings, and mostly covered the scarlet corset when it dropped. He intercepted Katie's amused glance and gave her a much less amused one in exchange.

"I have you to thank for smelling like attar of roses," he told her. "Droopy Ribbon must wash everything she owns in the stuff."

"You could have hidden under the bed."

"You could have shown more caution opening the door. You did when I was doing the knocking."

"I had reason to be suspicious then."

"I wasn't carrying."

"I didn't need your help. Still don't."

"And I didn't want to give it just now. Still don't."

“So why . . .”

“Leg cramp.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Quill sneezed. “That, and I don’t like the smell of roses.”

Amos listened to this exchange, eyes darting back and forth, fascinated in spite of himself. He carefully released the gun strap, and his hand curled around the butt of the Remington. He drew the gun out slowly.

The barrel just cleared his tooled leather holster when they both shot him.

Chapter Two

Joe Pepper arrived at Mrs. Fry’s establishment soon after he learned shots were fired. He was out of breath when he reached the house, and taking the stairs two at a time further pained him. He had passed his fifty-second year a few months back and soon after he heard creaking in his left knee and spotted gray threads in his dark hair to match the ones sprouting in his mustache. His wife had commented on his thickening waistline and started denying him dessert, and although he complained, he saw the sense in it when the first thing he had to do upon confronting the scene in the bedroom was remove a handkerchief from his vest and mop his sweat-beaded brow.

Crumpling the damp handkerchief in his fist, he asked, “What in the name of all that’s holy happened here?” He made a second survey of the scene. When he was done, he had the cause of it all full in his sights and his stare did not waver. “Miss Nash,” he said, pleasant but with a slight edge. “I thought we agreed that when you came to Falls Hollow, you would drop by my office. Nothing more than a courtesy call, just to keep me informed.”

“Hello, Joe,” she said. “Do you really want to fuss about a courtesy call, or can we manage the business at hand first and share tidbits later?”

Sighing heavily, he stuffed the handkerchief back into his vest without folding it. It made a small bulge under his tin star, which he did not bother to correct as he considered anything that raised his profile as sheriff to be a good thing, especially in present company. “Business, then. Mine first.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the only other man standing in the room but put his question to Miss Nash. “Who is he?”

Quill started to take a step forward but stopped when Joe Pepper made a move for his gun. Quill fell back into place and showed his hands, palms out.

“That’s right,” Joe said. “You be real easy about coming at me. There’s facts to be established, starting with who you are.”

“Careful, Joe,” she said. “When I asked him that, he answered all queer-like. Something about the nature of his existence. I wanted to shoot him right there, but I squelched the impulse. I only mention it so you won’t hesitate when you are struck by the same urge.” She paused, glanced at Quill, then offered Joe her most sincere assurance. “And you will be.”

Quill let her smug smile pass. “Quill McKenna.” He lowered his hands when the sheriff nodded. “Just passing through.”

“Huh. Maybe you do not comprehend the concept. Passing through suggests that you keep on moving.”

“I thought exactly the same thing,” she said, pointing to herself, then to Joe, and then back to her. “Like minds, Joe. You and me. Did you ever think it could happen?”

“Not in this lifetime,” said Joe. “Start explaining. And keep it—” He broke off, turning toward the open door in response to whispering and shuffling in the hallway. He stepped out of the room and looked pointedly at the three whores jockeying for a position where they could hear everything. Even as he stood there blocking their view, they tried craning their necks and standing on tiptoes to see over his shoulders. “Has someone gone to Sweeney’s like I said when I came in? Yes? No?” When they all nodded, he said, “Good. Wait downstairs. Mrs. Fry will need tending when she’s brought back. If Doc Maine does not accompany her, fetch him. Otherwise, don’t go anywhere, and consider the house closed for the night. Do you understand?” There was grumbling but no mutiny. He watched them until they started down the stairs, and then he backed into the room and closed the door.

Joe was still shaking his head when he turned. His lips curved downward at the corners. He pressed a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, rubbed it while he closed his eyes. After a moment, he said, “Sweeney stopped me. He found Mrs. Fry out back of his saloon and took her inside. He had already fetched Doc Maine for her, and she was being tended when Sweeney pulled me in. She had trouble talking, what with her jaw being broken and her mouth all swolled up, but between her and Sweeney, I could understand enough to learn it was Chick Tatters and Amos Bennett who laid hands on her.”

He pointed to the man lying facedown between Quill and Katie. There was blood on the floor, a small pool near the man’s right thigh, and another at his left shoulder. Two wounds, neither of them fatal, although given the man’s repetitive and annoying moaning, Joe found himself wishing one of the shots had finished him off.

“Amos?” he asked. “Did you shoot him, Katherine?”

Before she could answer, Quill said, “I knew you were not a Katie. Katherine. That suits.”

Joe chuckled. “Like a hair shirt suits. I only call her Katherine or Miss Nash when I want to raise her hackles. Fair is fair since I am sincerely peeved. She prefers Calico.” He grinned toothily at her. “Isn’t that so . . . Katherine?”

Quill turned sharply toward her. “Calico Nash? You are Calico Nash?”

She gave Joe Pepper a withering look. “See? This is your fault. He said it did not matter if I was a whore, but this seems to matter.”

The sheriff shrugged. “He would have come to it sooner or later.”

“Calico Nash,” Quill repeated under his breath. “I always imagined you would be—”

She grimaced. “A man?”

“No. Taller. Amazon warrior tall.”

Calico stared narrow-eyed at Quill while she held out a hand to the sheriff. “Give me your gun. Mine’s spent and the urge is back.”

Now Joe Pepper laughed outright, and he admitted to himself that it felt good. Still, to be safe, he kept his

gun holstered and waved at Calico to put her hand down. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"We both shot him," she said. "Shoulder's mine. Mr. McKenna put his bullet in Amos's thigh." Hearing his name, Amos Bennett emitted a pitiful moan. Calico pressed the toe of her shoe close to the wound in his leg. "Will you stop that? It is unbecoming. You are not going to bleed to death." She permitted him a short grunt when she toed him a little harder, but after that he was quiet and she removed her foot. "It was sorely tempting to kill him, Joe, after what he told us happened to Mrs. Fry, but you can see that it was more or less an eye for an eye."

"More or less," Joe said dryly, his eyes swiveling to Quill.

"Is that your story, Mr. McKenna?"

"I was concerned about Mrs. Fry, but I shot him because he was attempting to draw on Miss Nash."

Calico snapped at him. "You want to raise my hackles, too? Call me Miss Nash again and see what happens." Beneath her skirt, her toe started to tap. "Here's how it is, Joe. Mrs. Fry hired me to remove Nick Whitfield as a threat to her girls. He is the one snoring on the bed, but you probably know that. He used his belt to beat Daria Cole within an inch of her life."

"I do know about Nick Whitfield. I know about Miss Cole, too."

"Mrs. Fry said you did. She also said you told her you could not do anything."

Joe Pepper shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Whit was already gone by the time I got wind of what happened. I could not spare a deputy at the time, and as you might imagine, there were no volunteers among Mrs. Fry's regular customers to go after him."

"Couldn't spare a deputy?" she asked. "What about you? Or didn't you think a whore was worth the effort?"

Joe's chin came up and he gave her an eyeful of admonishment. "Careful, Calico. I still hold the keys to the jail." He took a deep breath and released it slowly. "We were dealing with an outfit of rustlers from over Shelton way, stopping trains by pulling up tracks and taking cattle directly from the cars. But I don't suppose Mrs. Fry mentioned that."

"She did. She thought Daria should be your priority."

"Because Daria Cole makes money for her. Let me tell you something, Calico, the way Mrs. Fry looks at her whores is not so different than a rancher looks at his cattle."

"And ranchers vote."

"Yes, they do. It's just the way things are. Now, if you want to change it, maybe you should carry a placard that reads 'Votes for Women' instead of a gun. Are we done?"

Calico was not mollified in the least, but she agreed to end it with a curt nod.

Joe continued, "I never told Mrs. Fry I wouldn't do anything about what happened to Daria. I told her she would have to be patient." He held up his hand when Calico would have interrupted him. "I will admit that I could have been more diplomatic. I couldn't hear myself think for her screaming at me, the harridan. I stood it as long as I could and then I escorted her to the door. I spoke to Doc Maine later and learned for myself about the extent of Miss Cole's injuries, and then I went to speak to Miss Cole herself. She was against me

pursuing Whitfield. She hardly had any flesh on her back, but *she* was the one not in favor of bringing him in.”

“She was afraid.”

“Yes. Afraid he would blame *her*, come after *her*, beat *her*.”

“Mrs. Fry told me Daria left town.”

“That’s right. When she was well enough to travel, she took off. I don’t think she told anyone where she was going, or if she did, no one’s saying, which is just as well to my way of thinking. You see, Calico, Mrs. Fry hired you to remove Nick Whitfield as a threat to her future earnings, not to right the wrong that was done to Daria Cole.”

“I know that, Joe. I am not naïve. I also know there is no righting that wrong, but avenging it appealed to me. That is why I took the job.”

Joe Pepper was quiet for a long time as he judged Calico’s expression against the sincerity of her motives. “All right,” he said, satisfied with what he observed. “What’s the rest? And don’t leave him out.” He pointed to Quill in the event Calico had doubts about whom he meant.

Calico touched the side of her head. “Do you mind? I want to take this wig off. It is giving me a headache.”

Joe shrugged. “Fine. I figured it was part and parcel of your foray into whoredom.”

“Whoredom, Joe? You are reading too many dime novels.”

“Probably.”

Calico sat down at the vanity and began plucking pins from under the ebony wig. She intercepted Quill McKenna’s frozen stare and heard the sheriff’s deep chuckle. She caught Joe’s eye in the mirror. “I guess he didn’t know.” She lifted the wig, tossed it on top of the vanity, and removed the thin white cap that held her own hair in place. She shook out her hair, raked it with her fingers, and then pulled it forward over her right shoulder and began to plait it.

“It’s red,” Quill said. “You’re a redhead.”

Calico said to Joe, “He and I established earlier that not much gets past him, but I suppose he felt the need to prove it to you.”

That made Joe’s grin deepen. He almost felt a little sorry for Quill McKenna. The man still had not made a full recovery. “Close your mouth, Mr. McKenna. There’s no telling what you’ll trap there. Besides, with Calico it’s mostly better to go along with what comes along.”

Quill nodded slowly. “I suppose.” She was a *redhead*. Here was the final proof that she was genuinely outside his usual tastes. The fact that she was carrying a pocket pistol did not set him back on his heels as much as discovering she was a redhead. And not just any shade of red. Not a shade that might be mistaken for auburn, nor one that might highlight a chestnut. No, her hair was Irish red. Bright. Coppery. The flame atop a candle taper.

He watched her open a pot of cream, dip a fingertip inside, and swipe it across the edge of her brow. She used a scrap of linen to remove the black and reveal eyebrows every bit as vivid as her hair. When she batted

her eyelashes at his reflection, he knew what was coming. She wiped away the black there also and fluttered them again. A shade darker than her hair, Quill saw, but still unmistakably ginger. She chose a new cloth, dabbed cream on her forehead, cheeks, lips, and chin, and removed the last vestiges of rouge and powder.

“Freckles,” he said under his breath. “Of course there would be freckles.”

“What’s that?” she asked, swiveling on the stool to face him. “You have to speak up.”

“Nothing.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Joe Pepper was manfully trying to suppress laughter. He gave the sheriff a sour look. “It was nothing.”

Joe distracted himself by going over to Amos and hunkering down beside him. “Don’t start caterwauling again. I’m going to have a look at your shoulder and leg.” He probed both wounds. He was not as gentle as he would have been with an innocent. “Well, you’re lucky, Amos. You have hardly more than a graze on your thigh. That bullet’s lodged around here somewhere. It’s Calico’s slug that’s buried in your shoulder, but since that came from her peashooter, it didn’t do much in the way of damage. Doc might not even want to take it out.”

“I want it out,” Amos whined.

“You’re not going to get weepy, are you? I hear some commotion downstairs. That’s probably the doctor now with Mrs. Fry. We’ll get him up here directly. In the meantime, you are sprawled on the floor like a cheap rug. One of us is bound to trip over you. How about you get yourself to that corner by the window where you will be out of the way?”

“It hurts to move.”

“It will hurt worse if Mr. McKenna moves you. I would do it, but my knee aches something fierce and it’s making me cranky. There is no telling how badly I would hurt you. Now get.”

Amos pushed himself onto all fours, listing heavily to the side of his uninjured shoulder, and half crawled, half dragged himself to the corner. He sat up, drew his good leg toward his chest, and dipped his forehead to his knee.

“Good,” said Joe. “Stay there. You have no friends in this room that can help you.” Joe put out a hand for Quill to help him to his feet. His knee popped as he rose. “Thank you, Mr. McKenna.”

“Quill.”

“Thank you, Quill.” Joe moved to the opposite side of the bed so he could get a better look at Whit and Chick Tatters. They were a sorry sight. “I am still waiting, Calico.”

“Well, Mrs. Fry knew that Whit was partial to a particular kind of girl. Daria told her about a photograph that he showed her. He was real taken with the girl in it—who it turns out might be his sister—and said he wanted Daria to be more like her. Dark hair, shy smile, slim. Daria could not be any of those things, and when he had enough of what she *could* offer, he took his strap to her.”

Joe darted a look at the wig. “And you could be all of those things to him.”

“After a fashion. Mrs. Fry let it be known she had a new whore and waited for word to reach him.”

“So you reeled him in. How long have you been hiding out here waiting for him?”

“A week. No, eight days. You have no idea how glad I was to hear he had arrived and to finally catch sight of him from my window. You also cannot imagine the boredom. They do not even have any books here. And I displaced Marisa Shreve so she had to share a room with Onisha Gilbert, and that did not endear me to either of them, no matter that I was here to help.”

“All right,” said Joe, striving for patience. “So he came, you brought him up here, and then . . .”

She pointed to the bedside table. “The whiskey’s fine if you want a drink. Use the glass on the left. There might be a little chloral hydrate in the other.”

“Ah. You drugged him.”

“I might have hit him on the head a couple of times.”

“A couple of times?”

“Um, let me think. Twice with the butt end of the whiskey bottle to put him out when the drops only knocked him to his knees, and two more times later with the butt of his Remington when he started to thrash around on the bed. See? A couple of times. Twice.”

“Interesting ’rithmetic.”

She laughed softly, shrugged helplessly.

“And Chick and Amos?” asked Joe.

“Mrs. Fry never told me about them.”

“They weren’t with Whit the last time he was here, but I knew they ran with him, which I would have shared with you if you had stopped by my office and told me what you were up to.”

Calico went on as if he had not spoken, which she found was a better strategy in dealing with Joe Pepper than entertaining an argument. “They showed up after they heard someone at Sweeney’s talking out of turn. That’s what I got from what they said. There were a fair number of men here when Whitfield arrived. They did not all stay afterward.”

Quill said, “I heard it was a stampede to get out.” He shrugged when they both stared at him. “At least that’s what one of the girls told me.”

Calico gave her attention back to Joe. “I imagine one of the girls said something about what was going on, maybe to calm some nerves, and it was repeated at Sweeney’s. Amos and Chick overheard, decided to see for themselves, and bumped into Mrs. Fry when they left the saloon. They obviously have been here before because they knew who she was, and that got her taken off the street and beaten in the alley.”

“Where was she going?”

“She didn’t tell you? She was looking for you.”

Joe scratched his head. “To take Whitfield off to jail?”

“We-ll,” Calico said, drawing out the word. “Eventually.”

“Eventually?”

“She went for you before she was certain I had Whit in hand.”

Quill raised his hand a fraction, drawing the sheriff’s attention. “I believe Mrs. Fry wanted you to take me away,” he said. “I admit I am still in the dark about that. I followed Miss Nash, er, *Calico*, to her room after she took Whitfield upstairs.”

“You know him?” asked Joe. “His reputation?”

“No. Never heard of him.”

“But you were concerned?”

Quill nodded, pleased that he was understood at last. “Exactly.”

Joe cocked an eyebrow at Calico. “I guess he really didn’t know who you were.”

“Exactly,” she said, echoing Quill. “He was interfering. That’s why Mrs. Fry went to get you. When he followed me upstairs and carried on outside my room, I can assure you *that* is when the menfolk scattered. They did not want to be seen in the house if Whit got out.”

“Understandable.” He looked down at Whit. “He has been known to rampage. Kind of sorry looking now, what with Chick pinning him down like an unnatural lover.” Joe knuckled his chin, thoughtful as he regarded Quill. “Good intentions don’t precisely excuse your interference, although they do explain it. Maybe if Mrs. Fry had reached me before we arrived at this juncture, I might have been moved to take you in for a spell, just to keep the peace with her, you understand. I believe I mentioned she’s a harridan.”

Quill was sympathetic. “You did.”

Joe’s chest swelled as he filled his lungs with a deep breath. He released it slowly, heavily, as if it had weight and consequence. “Well, we are at this juncture, and I am inclined to let your interference pass. That all right with you, Calico?”

“It will have to be. You are the sheriff.”

“So you do remember. I am never sure.” He pointed to Chick. “What did you do to him?”

“Beat him about the head with my peashooter.”

Joe laughed. “Well, he’s twitching now. Quill, how about you pull him off Whit? Did I see a rope on the floor somewhere?”

“It’s over here,” said Quill. “Enough length to bind them both, separately or together.”

“Oh, together. Yes, I like that. I surely do.”

* * *

It took some prodding to bring them around, but eventually Nick Whitfield and Chick Tatters were on their feet, and after a humiliating shuffle down the main street of Falls Hollow, they were untethered so they could stumble into their individual cells.

Quill accepted a whiskey from the sheriff when it was offered. He was concerned that Joe Pepper's mood was too self-congratulatory, but when the man raised his glass and spoke, what he said was, "To Calico Nash. She does not disappoint." Quill tapped his glass to Joe's and they both drank.

"Another?" asked Joe.

Quill shook his head. "I've had enough."

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