

# Magdalena

Her Secrets Revealed

Copyright © 2023 B. B. Montgomery  
A High Pines Press Publication  
All rights reserved.  
Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the author.

\* \* \* \* \*

This book is a work of fiction. Places, events, and situations in this book are purely fictional and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental

\* \* \* \* \*

Formatting and cover design by Debora Lewis  
[deboraklewis@yahoo.com](mailto:deboraklewis@yahoo.com)

Cover photo courtesy of Shutterstock

\* \* \* \* \*

ISBN:

# Magdalena

Her Secrets Revealed

B. B. MONTGOMERY



## **Acknowledgments**

This is my best book so far. I wrote the bulk of it in November last year but with personal challenges coming into my life, it is just now coming out for you to enjoy.

I can't thank Tenita, my editor, enough. She has had to edit while listening to my woes and complaints about the roadblocks life seems to put in our paths. Her help and friendship are priceless.

Deb is awesome as my cover designer and technical support for uploading my books to Amazon. She is also a great, imaginative writer, check it out – Lewis Kirts.

Bob has been going through so much with his health in jeopardy, but he still supports me in my writing efforts. I pray every day for his recovery. There is so much to enjoy in life and I wish for each and every one of you to take time to savor the small moments in your day that make you smile.



## Prologue

*Modern Day, Jerome Arizona*

**“U**ncle! Look what I found!” Ellie burst through the open door of her uncle’s apartment at the back of the Desperation Depot.

Shotgun pushed the mute button on his remote and turned in his lounge chair to greet his niece. “What in the world have you gotten into now?”

She rushed up to his chair and took a seat on the couch close to him. He finally noticed the big, dusty box she was holding. “What’s that, Girl?”

“I’ve found the mother lode.”

“You mean you found gold in that box?”

“No, Silly, I found a box full of letters, notes, and a journal. We are finally going to find out about Magdalena’s secrets.”

Shotgun laughed at this point and reached over to lift the lid off the dusty, banged up box. He peered inside and saw that it was full of letters and such. “Ellie, you know how you get all excited about stuff and then it doesn’t pan out. What makes you think these papers and documents will tell us about our resident spirit?”

“I found them in the secret room at the top of those hidden stairs. You remember when John and I

*found it? We decided to use those secret stairs and all the hidden rooms to entice guests to pay extra for a little ghost hunting. Before we leave on our honeymoon, I felt that room should be straightened up. This was in another secret panel near the washstand. Isn't this exciting?"*

*"I love your enthusiasm, Girl. Let's see what we've got." He reached into the box and gingerly pulled out a stack of letters bound by a faded pink ribbon.*

*As they were trying to organize the big stack of papers, Shotgun Willie reflected on the events in their lives that lead to this moment. They came to Prescott, Arizona to confirm that stolen poker chips found in the attic of an old home were from the still-unsolved robbery of the old Stardust hotel and casino in Las Vegas several years ago.*

*Ellie Parker, his niece and ward had worked for the Yavapai County Sheriff's office before moving to Las Vegas to help him as his health failed. Once they returned to Prescott, he could see that her love for the former Sheriff John Clarke had not waned and with their adventures into crime fighting, decided to stay.*

*Eventually winding up owning The Desperation Depot in Jerome, Arizona and retiring from the sheriff's department, John and Ellie got married just a few days ago. Their honeymoon was supposed to be started already, but as he looked at the excitement on Ellie's face, he felt that another mystery and adventure was just on the horizon.*



## 1891 Arizona Territory

Finally reaching the train station after a long buggy ride from the ranch near Buckeye to downtown Phoenix, Magdalena bent down to hug her young son to her body, her black taffeta mourning gown rustling with her movements. Whispering in his ear, she tried to calm him, “Benji, we’ll only be apart for a while.”

His little voice could barely be heard over the noise of the huge train waiting on the tracks. “Momma, I want to go home with you and Poppa.” She gulped back her own tears.

“Son, remember Poppa got hurt really bad? You must be the man now, Poppa is gone, and I need you to be a big, strong boy. We’ll be together in just a year. That won’t be long at all. You need to go to this school and get smart for me, okay?”

Benjamin struggled to shake his head up and down. Magdalena stood up and turned to the older woman waiting there, her eyes pleading for help. “Benjamin, this is Alicia and she’ll be with you on the train. Poppa’s aunt sent her to take care of you on the train ride. Wasn’t that nice?” Alicia came forward and took his hand in hers and as Benjamin looked up, she smiled at him.

“She’ll help you. I want you to behave for her, okay?”

His brave attempt to smile, pulled at her heart-strings and she choked back her own tears. Alicia turned him toward the big chugging engine and gently indicated that he should mount the steps to their railroad car. Magdalena went along the platform to the train window and followed them as they found

their seats. Alicia spoke to Benjamin, and he turned to wave from the window. Now that the passengers had boarded, the huge engine puffed a big ball of black smoke and slowly edged away.

Aware that she couldn't stand there forever, Magdalena moved toward the train on the other track. She carried her leather grip and lowered the veil on her hat. Not wanting to draw any unnecessary attention to herself, she climbed up the steps and found a bench way in the back of the car.

The train wasn't very crowded and for that she gave a silent thank you. The early spring morning air was just cool enough to be comfortable. Living in the west valley near Buckeye, Magdalena knew that the Arizona weather could be stifling hot most of the time. She sighed as a small tear slid down her cheek. She reached into her grip and found one of her lace hankies to wipe it off. Several people were starting to find their seats, but Magdalena just closed her eyes and reflected on the events that had led her to this situation.

At the tender age of sixteen, her family desperately needed money to save their small homestead and Edward had made it obvious that he'd wanted her. With the deal made, she became his wife immediately, moving into his big ranch house with more rooms and furniture than she'd ever imagined in her young life.

More tears fell under her veil, and she wiped gently at them. Benjamin came just nine months later and soon became the center of her life. She tried to be a good wife and live up to Edward's expectations, but

he never seemed satisfied or happy with her efforts. He was never deliberately mean or cruel. It was more like the differences in age and background could not be breached. He often treated her like a child, never including her in the decisions involved in running the ranch. There were more than enough servants to do the daily tasks, so Magdalena devoted her time to raising her son. More tears fell at the choices Edward had made that now ruled her life and her actions.

She was startled by a soft voice and opened her eyes to see an older woman standing directly in front of her. "Ma'am, please pardon my interruption. Could I please impose upon you and sit here?"

Just as she was about to refuse, Magdalena was suddenly aware of a tall, well-dressed gentleman coming directly toward her. Even though she was convinced he couldn't see her eyes through her veil, she blinked to try and break the contact she felt. His stare was not intimidating but more a determined one. A strange feeling of desperation flooded over her, and Magdalena looked back to the older woman. "Please, sit. Here." She indicated the space beside herself.

"I am Elizabeth. Pardon me saying so, but I feel that you need some comfort and I hope to help." She placed her bag on her right side and scooted closely to Magdalena. Not having time to digest what the woman, Elizabeth, just said, Magdalena turned her head and pretended to stare out the window.

The gentleman had finally reached them and removed his hat. He spoke to Elizabeth. "Please forgive my boldness. I realize your lady is in mourning and

should not be approached. However, I'd like to offer you two my protection on this long ride to Prescott. It's unfortunate that the railroad doesn't offer a private car and we must mix in with the common ruffians of this world." As he waited for Elizabeth to speak, he took in her tired, rather plain appearance. The years had not been too easy on this woman, but a distinct air of kindness showed from her eyes.

"Kind sir, your offer is appreciated, and I will speak to milady privately, if you don't mind."

Nodding, he turned around and gave them their privacy. "Ma'am, I sense he is an honorable man, and we could do with his presence for our trip."

Magdalena was at a loss for words but simply gave a slight nod to her newfound companion. "I will not speak with him as it wouldn't be proper given my circumstances."

Elizabeth turned to him, "Sir, we would appreciate your company, however, milady would appreciate her privacy unbroken."

He turned and gave a warm, kind smile. "I will observe her wishes. I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Alexander Douglas."

"I am Elizabeth, companion to milady."

## Chapter One

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“Oh, my God! Uncle, do you realize what we can learn from all these letters and journals? Already we’ve found out that she married at just sixteen. I can’t imagine that.”*

*“Yeah, that’s pretty hard to think that a young innocent girl could find herself as part of a barter. Once her husband was gone, I wonder why she didn’t go back to her family instead of heading to Jerome? Or better yet, if she was taken care of by servants and lived on a big ranch, why didn’t she stay there?”*

*“You know there’s another thing. I thought only royalty or people of noble birth were referred to as ‘milady’. She wasn’t of noble birth, was she? Another thing just popped into my head, didn’t we think that she came from Mexico?” As an afterthought, Ellie added, “Hey, I’m going to get a beer. Do you want one before we continue?”*

### 1891 Arizona Territory

It seemed to take forever, but suddenly the train jolted on the rails, and she grabbed for the edge of her seat. Elizabeth put her hand out and Magdalena

gratefully took it to steady herself. The jerking soon stopped as the train got moving faster down the track. She tried to occupy her thoughts with the scenery changing instead of the handsome man sitting directly across from them.

“Ma’am, are you doing alright?” The whispered words were barely heard over the commotion of the train and the other passengers’ conversations.

“I pray that I’m going to be. I’m so confused about everything that’s happened.”

“I hope to be of help to you. Your path does not appear to be easy ahead.”

“Saying goodbye to my son was extremely hard. I think you might be right about my future.” Magdalena’s words came out sharper than she’d intended due to her anxiety. “I’m sorry to be so abrupt, but my life has been completely turned upside down in just a very few days.” She felt Elizabeth’s grasp on her hand tighten slightly in a comforting manner. Magdalena looked to see how much of their conversation was being heard by Alexander. His gaze was not on them but rather he had turned and was facing the front of the car.

Alexander suddenly changed positions as though he sensed her gaze, but he spoke only to Elizabeth, “I see someone I need to talk to, so if you ladies will excuse me.” He tipped his hat and added, “I’ll be within sight if you need me.” With that she watched his backside and felt in her gut that he could be part of the trouble that lay ahead.

“I, too, have had my life interrupted. I am not ashamed to say that I watched you say goodbye to

your young son, and it pulled at my heart.” Elizabeth tried to explain, “I would like to help you, if you would allow me.”

“How could I refuse such kindness? Let’s just rest and try to enjoy our trip, such as it is. Are you going to stay in Prescott?” Magdalena attempted some small conversation.

“I have no definite plans. I felt the need to get out of Phoenix. I hear that the small town of Prescott is a beautiful place with huge pines and cool air. Aren’t you staying in Prescott?”

“No, my husband’s aunt has made arrangements for me to stay and help her in Jerome.” Magdalena missed the look of dismay on Elizabeth’s face as she was watching Alexander speaking with some men at the front of the train car. “She runs a home for young ladies and has offered me a position to help her with them.”

When she didn’t get a response from Elizabeth, Magdalena turned to face her. “I haven’t had anyone to talk with in a very long time, but I am hesitant to burden a virtual stranger with my problems.”

“We have quite a long ride, Ma’am, so if you feel the need to share your thoughts with me, I can assure you that your secrets will be completely safe with me.”

“For reasons I cannot explain, I feel myself trusting you. Thank you.” She turned to look out the window and found the scenery changing as the train chugged its way out of Phoenix towards Prescott. The turmoil of the last few weeks since her husband’s death had finally caught up as Magdalena felt her

eyes slowly closing. She tried to fight it, but the lack of sleep was too powerful, and she allowed her head to slump on the back of the seat, finally giving into her nap.

Elizabeth pulled a small lap quilt out of her bag and gently put it across Magdalena's lap. A sense of purpose filled her heart, and she suddenly realized her destiny was with this beautiful, strong woman.

It was only a short hour or so when Magdalena suddenly startled awake. "Oh, my! I must have dozed off. Please forgive my rudeness."

"Ma'am, you need to save your strength. I watched out for you while you rested." Elizabeth spoke softly.

Magdalena looked at Alexander sitting quietly on the bench across from them. "I must take this hat off. Is that allowed? I'm not sure what the proper etiquette is for my mourning."

"I think it's alright if you remove the veil from your face, but I think you should keep the hat on for now. That much will give you some fresh air."

Magdalena reached up and started to lift the veil from in front of her face. She was conscious of his eyes on her movements but chose to ignore him. With the veil lifted and smoothed back over her bonnet, she took a deep sigh. She was nervous but Magdalena refused to let it show. She'd loved Edward in her own way, but to feel a widow's grief was something she couldn't properly portray.

Her face was devoid of any makeup and the only piece of jewelry she had on was a small locket pinned to her black crepe collar. It held a grainy, yellowed photograph of her son sitting on Edward's lap. Most



of her jewelry had been sold to pay for her trip to Jerome with the exception of a ring and matching necklace along with a watch that had belonged to her father. Edward's aunt had offered to pay for the ticket, but Magdalena strongly felt the need to depend only on herself as much as possible.

She felt him staring but directed her glance out the window and ignored his rudeness. Her long black hair was pulled tightly in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her face was a smooth alabaster white. Edward had insisted that she wear long sleeves, gloves, and a hat that covered her entire head and shoulders when outdoors. There were times when he wasn't around that she defied him, like an insolent child and allowed the sun to shine down on her beautiful features. Her eyes were so blue, at times they appeared violet.

"Ma'am, are you hungry? I have some fruit and biscuits that I would be happy to share." Elizabeth offered.

As she turned to answer her companion, her eyes locked with his. I don't think I like this situation, she thought to herself. Not knowing what to do, Magdalena gave him a hard stare trying to make him turn away. He did but not before she saw his slight grin.

"I'm fine for now. Thank you." She patted Elizabeth on the arm. "I appreciate your kindness."

The scenery hadn't changed much yet, but she could feel the train start to climb in altitude. From Phoenix to Prescott, they would gradually go from around 1200 feet to just over 5,000 feet. The flat, almost barren desert would give way to the tall pine trees and high mountainsides. All her young life had

been spent living on the ranch in Buckeye, a hot desolate almost unforgiving land. Magdalena had read books and heard stories about the beautiful forests in northern Arizona and was looking forward to seeing it for herself.

“Have you been to Prescott before?” She asked Elizabeth.

“No, ma’am. I’ve only lived in Phoenix.”

“Where will you stay when we get there? Do you have some relatives that will help you?”

Elizabeth hesitated before responding. “I believe that I will find the perfect place for me. Thank you for being concerned.”

“How will you get to Jerome? You know the train doesn’t go there yet.”

“Edward’s aunt is sending a wagon to pick me up and take me to her in Jerome. I don’t exactly know who is going to meet me, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Magdalena spoke with more confidence than she was feeling.

“It’s starting to get stuffy.” Magdalena went to remove her shawl but stopped short of taking it off completely. Aware that Alexander was watching her movements, she just allowed it to fall behind herself. This incident suddenly reminded her of Edward and his attempts to control her behavior. Another memory popped into her head. As she was preparing for her wedding, her mother took her aside and told her that a good wife was an obedient one. Magdalena didn’t understand it at the time, but over the years married to Edward, she learned quickly that doing

things the way he wanted saved getting a stern lecture.

Shaking these troubling thoughts away caused a reaction from Elizabeth. "Ma'am, are you alright? Is there something I can do to help you?"

"No, no. Let's just enjoy our trip."

"I'll bet we can play a game. Let's look out the window. You look on your side and I'll watch out mine. We'll see what kind of wildlife we can see. The one that finds the most wins!" Elizabeth clapped her hands in glee.

Her playful, almost childlike enthusiasm was hard to resist. "Okay, we'll play. But what will the prize be for the winner?"

His deep voice interrupted their conversation, "Ladies, I'll provide the prize for the winner." Both women were startled at his interruption and offer.

Forgetting her mourning state, Magdalena's curiosity piqued, she asked, "What prize do you propose?"

"I have some wonderful butterscotch candies. I'll gladly give them to the winner." He waited for their responses.

"Thank you, sir. I think that would be a great prize." Elizabeth took the lead to save Magdalena from further inappropriate conversation with this stranger. "Let's start now."

They each stared intently out their respective windows. The landscape was starting to transition into more of a high desert scenery with taller juniper bushes and less cactus. The Palo Verde trees were still tall and green with their long spiny thorns. Magdale-

na quickly cried out, "Oh, look, there's a rabbit under that tree!"

Elizabeth turned to see the small rabbit hopping around in the shade. "Oh, it seems that you got the first one. I shall have to try harder."

For the next few hours and miles, the ladies indulged in their competition with delight. Alexander's laughter grew with each wildlife discovery. Presently, Magdalena could feel the train reducing speed. "Why are we slowing down?"

"I believe we have a short stop just ahead in Morristown." Elizabeth responded before Alexander could. "We can get off the train, if you would like and stretch our legs for a bit."

"I would enjoy that. Maybe we could get something to eat."

"I'm not sure there would be anything available. Sometimes a person can get a light meal and other times nothing is ready." Alexander finally spoke. "This stop is just a necessity sort of thing."

Magdalena turned her head to hide her embarrassment at his words about such a personal topic. He stood up and turned up the aisle.

"That was a respectful thing for him to do. I do believe he is a true gentleman, ma'am." Elizabeth confirmed what they both had been thinking.

Magdalena shook her head. "I'm just so confused. My poppa took care of me until I married Edward and then he took control over my life. I've never lived anywhere other than with my family. We were ranching people. The only social thing we did was round ups and a barbeque each year. I helped my mother, but I

wasn't allowed to attend the dance." She chuckled but sarcasm rather than humor was inflected. "Can you imagine that? I hardly even talked with a boy, let alone touch or kiss one and then suddenly I'm a married woman."

Elizabeth remained quiet, sensing her lady's need to voice her thoughts.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't speak such thoughts aloud; let alone to someone I barely know." Magdalena pulled her veil back over and covered her face once again. She stood up as the train came to a complete stop. Leaning over and looking out the window, she saw a two-story white building. People from the front cars were already disembarking and she found herself eager to get out of the car into the fresh, clean air.

"Are you ready, ma'am?" Elizabeth was by her side.

Magdalena made sure her veil was in place and retrieved her shawl from the bench. "Let's go and see what this place is all about." The two women exited the car and under the mid-morning sunshine, walked toward the building beside the track. She tried not to seek out Alexander but failed as her eyes seemed to magnetically find him standing amongst a group of men near the front of the train. They seemed to be laughing and enjoying their escape from the confines of the railroad cars.

"Ma'am, would you like to see if they have something to eat?" Elizabeth offered.

"You know, I would love a cup of tea, and perhaps a piece of bacon or two. I am ashamed to admit but I love my breakfast bacon."

“Let’s go then. It’ll be fun seeing what they offer.” Elizabeth led the way into the Morristown station. As they stepped inside, she immediately noticed the little tables adorned with lace tablecloths and linen napkins. An older man wearing an apron waved them over to a table in the corner by a window.

“Ladies, may I offer you something to drink?” He attempted a small bow.

“I would love a cup of hot tea and one of those sweet biscuits if you please.” She didn’t see any sort of breakfast meats. Magdalena spoke firmly.

“The same for me, please.” Elizabeth added.

The man bowed and quickly left them. Magdalena looked around the room. “I wonder where the lavatory is located?”

“Ma’am, I think they are out that door and around to the back of the building. Shall I accompany you?”

“No, that’s not necessary. I’ve got to get used to taking care of myself. I’ll be right back.” Magdalena stood and found her way to the door indicated by Elizabeth.

She found the lavatory but looked around before entering. She thought about her safety but seeing that she was the only person in the vicinity, went ahead and opened the door. Surprised by the cleanliness of the facility, Magdalena went further into the room. There were several stalls with curtains covering the openings allowing for privacy. She’d never seen such a space and marveled at the thought that went into designing such a comfortable situation for the traveler.

As soon as she was done, Magdalena hurried back to the table and Elizabeth. Her tea was waiting as well as the sweet biscuit she'd ordered. "You need to use the facility. I've never seen such a thing in my life."

"I shall as soon as I see you back on the train."

"I can do that by myself." When she saw the look of determination on the other woman's face, she added. "Elizabeth, please understand. I appreciate your help and kindness, but with everything that's happened to me lately, I feel a great need to learn how to take care of myself."

"Ma'am, I can understand your need for independence. I will try to respect that in the future." She added, "I will go to the facilities and meet you in the car."

They parted ways and as soon as Magdalena went out the door and saw the sun shining brightly in the sky, she felt a sudden urge to lift her face to the heavens. Walking to the other side of the tracks and looking around to make sure that no one was near, Magdalena lifted her veil and raised her beautiful features up to soak in the warming light. Breathing deeply, she allowed herself a childish smile. While she was enjoying her private moment, she was totally unaware that familiar eyes were watching her.

Alexander stood in the distance admiring her stunning beauty. This was a woman to be reckoned with, a woman to admire, but more likely a woman that could be his undoing.

As she stood there, Magdalena felt peace. Maybe this disaster can become a good thing, she thought pensively. She thought about the last eight years with Edward. The only true joy in her life was her small

son. Leaning her head to the side, she allowed her thoughts to wander onto darker things. If Benjamin hadn't come into her life, would she have stayed with Edward? Her loyalty to her father and mother would have influenced that sort of decision but at this moment she didn't have to find an answer to that dilemma.

She was startled from her reflections by the whistle of the train. Turning to go and board the train, but before pulling her veil down, Magdalena suddenly saw him in the distance. Alexander was staring in her direction. Thank God she wouldn't need to see him once she left Prescott for Jerome. This man would be hard to deal with on a regular basis.

Elizabeth met her at the steps to the car and one by one they entered and went to their seats. Alexander came in just as the train was slowly starting to move forward. He nodded as he took his place facing them.

"If you were wondering, ladies, we have a few more hours and then we'll reach our destination. We won't have any more stops."

Elizabeth looked over and asked, "Are you staying in Prescott, sir?"

Before answering, Alexander seemed to weigh what he should or shouldn't say. "I'm not staying in Prescott. My home is in Jerome. I intend to continue my journey there."

This news seemed to upset Magdalena, but it was all she could do to not let her feelings show to this stranger. She felt Elizabeth's hand reach over and pat



her on the leg. The motion helped soothe her reaction and her nerves.

“Oh, do you have business in Jerome, sir?” Elizabeth inquired.

“I’ve been sent to Jerome to conduct research to see if my family company wants to invest in the mines. I’ll be there for a few months.” His answer was directed to Elizabeth, but his eyes were on Magdalena. He seemed to be judging her reaction to his news.

She was thankful that her veil covered any feelings that might have been on her face at the revelation he just shared. What little she knew about Jerome was that it was a very small town and to be able to avoid him would not be easily accomplished.

“I’m rather tired. Elizabeth, I think I’ll try to take a little nap.”

Magdalena adjusted her grip and leaned over to rest herself on it. It was not at all comfortable, but then the whole situation was stressful, and she was convinced that any sleep or relaxation was beyond her reach.

The train ride was moving right along and without looking, Magdalena knew the elevation was changing. The air was getting cooler, and she could hear the engine chugging harder to make the grade through the start of the mountains. Will this trip never end? Strange thoughts of doom invaded her being.

She did finally fall asleep through the last few hours of the trip. Once the train started through the pines, the colder air finally caused her to rouse, and Magdalena sat up. “Are we there yet?”

“Just about, Ma’am. Look at the beautiful trees out there.”

Before she looked out the window, Magdalena took a quick glance at him. He was sitting there quietly but she knew he was assessing their situation. Since the beginning of this trip, they had had some sort of connection. She felt just like herself, he was thinking about that very thing.

“Elizabeth, which of you two won the wildlife contest?” Alexander asked.

“Oh, I believe that milady was the champion.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small brown paper package. Elizabeth reached out with a slight grin on her face and took it from his outstretched hand. She turned to give it to Magdalena, who seemed hesitant to take the bag.

“We’ll share, you keep it with you.” She finally told Elizabeth.

“Thank you, sir. It was very kind of you to offer this fine prize for our little game.”

“I enjoyed seeing your enthusiasm. It helped make a boring trip exciting.” Alexander’s words were interrupted with the screeching of the train whistle. “That means we’re coming into Prescott. It won’t be long now.”

Magdalena found herself curiously nervous. She was excited about a new adventure but also apprehensive about Edward’s aunt and the job offer. She’d never even met the woman and now it appeared her future was in this stranger’s hands. What if she wasn’t the help Aunt Rose needed? What if Aunt Rose wouldn’t keep her word about giving her the money

from Edward's estate? What if it took longer than a year to see her son again? All these unanswered questions buzzed around in her head, as she raised her hands to her temples.

"Are you in pain, ma'am?" Elizabeth's concern showed in her voice.

"I'm just nervous. I'll be fine once I can get settled in with Aunt Rose in Jerome." She tried to convince herself more than Elizabeth.

Just then the buildings of Prescott started appearing outside the windows. She noticed the tall pine trees standing magnificently between the structures. This was a small town but there were still signs of activity as she noticed people moving about.

"Oh, this is a pretty place, isn't it?" She spoke to Elizabeth. The look on her companion's face was one of sadness, not joy. "I just had the best idea. Why don't you come with me to Jerome? You said you have no one here and no place to stay. I'm sure there would be room for you at Aunt Rose's home."

With a knowing smile spreading over her face, Elizabeth readily agreed to the invitation. "Are you sure? Are you positive I wouldn't be in the way?"

"We will both have to work, but I'm confident that an extra pair of hands will be appreciated." Magdalena hoped her own doubts didn't show.

"Then I accept."

The train came to a full stop and as they stood, Alexander started to reach for Magdalena's grip. She stopped him. "I thank you sir, but I must do this myself."

He doffed his hat and slowly turned to leave them on their own. A sense of sadness enveloped her, but Magdalena knew she should be prepared to do more things on her own, making a start on a new kind of independence in her life.

As they stepped down from the train, both women looked around for a coach or buggy that would take them to Jerome. The porter brought the rest of her bags and sat them beside them. "Where are your bags?" Magdalena asked.

"Everything I need is in here." Elizabeth indicated her large duffel bag.

Magdalena saw Alexander in the distance as he loaded his things in a beautiful coach. He didn't leave right away but instead talked with some of those same gentlemen.

Turning away before she was caught staring, Magdalena searched the coaches and wagons in the area for their ride to Jerome. As she noticed a rather crude buckboard with an older man driving the team came closer to them. He stopped and addressed her, "Might ye be Madam Magdalena?" His gruff voice, dirty clothing, and toothless appearance frightened her.

When she didn't respond, he pressed. "Are ye daft?"

Holding herself upright, she finally found her voice. "I am Magdalena, and you might be?"

"They call me Jacky. Rosie sent me to gather you and your belongings. Load 'em up." He didn't move nor make any attempt to help her with her luggage.

Just then Elizabeth stepped forward. "Excuse me, sir, but this is a lady, and you should treat her with

more respect.” Her tone and demeanor brooked no argument from the old man.

“I ain’t no lackey and just who do you think you are?”

“I’m milady’s companion. Now, are you going to help her?”

“Rosie said nothing about bringing two women back to her. I ain’t hauling you, just her.” He pointed a gnarled, dirty finger to Magdalena.

“Oh, dear.” Magdalena responded to this latest dilemma. “What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to ride with me.” Alexander’s voice came from just behind her.

She turned to see him already picking up her bags and handing them to the driver of his coach. The man was putting them in the back and latching the leather cover over the bags.

“Rosie ain’t going to like this!” Jacky cried. “She’ll have my hide if I come back empty handed.”

“You should have thought of that before treating these ladies badly.” Alexander helped them into his coach and ordered his driver to move on down the road.



## Chapter Two

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**“W**hat do you think of that, Uncle? Will she fall in love with Alexander?”

“Girl, you’ve become such a romantic since you and John got back together and married. What does your inner detective say about Edward not leaving her any money?” Shotgun prompted her suspicions.

“You’re right. Why does the aunt have power over her inheritance? Another thing, who exactly is Elizabeth? Don’t you think that’s questionable too? I mean, just out of the clear blue sky, this woman pops into her life. How weird, huh?”

Just then the door to her uncle’s apartment opened and in walked her husband, John. He came straight up to Ellie and placed a searing kiss on her lips. “What are you two up to? Aren’t you supposed to be straightening the hidden room?”

“Wait till you see what I found.” Ellie answered. “John, we may have the whole story about Magdalena wrong.”

### 1891 Jerome

As Magdalena and Elizabeth walked into the tall building on Hull Street just below downtown Jerome,

they heard raucous laughter and loud voices wafting from the balcony above the main foyer.

"Who the hell are you?" A woman's voice bellowed from the hallway.

Magdalena stopped dead in her tracks, as Elizabeth stepped in front of her. "I beg your pardon. I'm Magdalena."

The woman belonging to the raspy voice came out of the shadows. "No, no way! You'll never do!"

"Aunt Rose?" Her voice trembled with a combination of fear and anger.

"I'm no aunt to the likes of you." She came closer and Magdalena could see the dark circles under her eyes, hair that looked like it hadn't been combed in days, and a stained dressing gown that barely covered her large body.

Elizabeth spoke up, "Madam, we've had a rough trip and are exhausted. This is your niece, who has suffered dearly with the death of her husband Edward. Please, reconsider and allow us a place to stay for the night."

Rose was taken aback at the soft-spoken words. "This is not a hotel, as you can plainly see. My rooms are working rooms and I don't think either of you are prepared to offer what my girls do for their guests." She laughed crudely.

Magdalena grabbed for the back of a chair to keep from fainting. "Aunt Rose, there must be some mistake. Edward always spoke so highly of you. I trusted you enough to send my son into the hands of strangers. That's why I agreed to come here and help you." She spoke from her heart.



“Blazes! You’re here to get your money and nothing more.”

Words failed Magdalena, she turned to leave but Elizabeth stopped her. “Madam, please I beg you. Can’t you see how devastated she is? You must have a small room, somewhere in the back where we might lie down and sort things out. It’s late and the streets are full of rowdies and trouble.”

Giving in, Rose grumbled her reply. “Follow me. You can stay here but we’ll have to decide what to do with you tomorrow. It’s obvious you’ll be of no use to me.”

Elizabeth grabbed as many of the bags as she could and together, they followed the mumbling woman down the same back hall. She pushed open a door showing a small bed, a little desk, and a side chair. “You can sleep in here. It’s all I got. We’ll talk in the morning.” As Rose left, Elizabeth gently pushed Magdalena close to the bed.

“Ma’am, just sit down here and I’ll gather the rest of your bags.”

Within minutes, her companion was back and shut the door behind herself, locking it as she did. “Ma’am, please take off your hat and shawl. You need to get some rest. I’ll take the chair.”

“Oh, my goodness. What in the world am I going to do? This is a brothel house. We can’t stay here, and I have no money, nor any skills with which to earn wages. My son is gone, and I trusted this beast of a woman.” She removed her hat and shawl and tried to settle her mind around the facts of her life.

The coach trip with Alexander had been very pleasant. She tried to keep to herself but as the scenery and his wonderful smile kept attacking her resolve, Magdalena found herself engaging in small bits of conversation. By the time they arrived in Jerome, night had settled on the little community.

When she gave Alexander the name of her aunt's business, she could tell by the horrified look on his face that something was very wrong. "Your aunt owns The Desperation Depot?"

"Yes, it's a home for young ladies. She helps them by educating them with books and skills they can use in society. These young women are sent to her for training as nannies, secretaries, and housekeepers. I know the name seems strange."

"Have you ever been here before?" He pushed for more information.

"No, I've never even met Edwards' aunt. These arrangements were made after his untimely death." With that she shut up, not willing to give out more family information.

"Elizabeth, have you ever been here before?" He asked.

"No, sir, I've only been in Phoenix. I understand your concerns, however. We will be fine."

"I can't in good conscience allow you two ladies to go to Hull Street at this time of night. Come with me and stay the night and then tomorrow, I'll take you to your aunt's place." He pleaded.

"No!" Magdalena's answer was adamant. "I don't wish to sound ungrateful for all the help you've given,

but I don't want to be obligated any further. We'll be fine. Please just take us to my aunt's place."

With reluctance, Alexander instructed his driver to take them to Hull Street. The closer they got, Magdalena's gut instincts told her that this was not the place she wanted to be, nor the place a lady should visit. Her determination to see this through and get back with her son became the driving force for her decisions.

As soon as he dropped them and her luggage off, Alexander did the almost unforgivable. He took her gloved hand in his and kissed the top of it. "Milady, please contact me any hour of the day or night. I'll come to get you and Elizabeth. This is no place for the likes of you."

As she watched him pull away, Magdalena looked at her hand as if she could see the imprint of his lips on her glove. She had never been treated so precious-ly but it only fueled the connection she'd felt since first meeting the handsome Alexander.

"Ma'am, we must get some rest." Elizabeth's words brought her crashing back to the present. "I have a feeling tomorrow will be an extremely eventful day."

She finally allowed the tears that had been threatening to fall. Elizabeth handed her a lacey handkerchief but other than that, allowed Magdalena to vent her feelings and emotions. As soon as she felt the tears subsiding, she spoke.

"Ma'am, may I please help you out of your dress and into your nightgown?"

“I can do it. I must get used to doing these things for myself. You can help me with my buttons, but I’ll dress myself.”

Within a few minutes they were both in their nightgowns and trying to settle down for the night. The noise from the rooms above prevented the two from enjoying some peace and quiet.

“Ma’am, are you still awake?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Unfortunately, I am. Elizabeth, what are we to do?” Her voice was saturated with all the emotions she was feeling. “How am I going to get my son back?”

“Ma’am, I can tell you’re a strong person, much stronger than you give yourself credit for and I think after a good night’s rest, we’ll think of a great plan to get your son back and make some money.”

“I hope you’re right. Elizabeth, I can’t thank you enough for being here. Your wise words comfort me.” She yawned as she finished her sentence. “Good night.”

Finally, the noise from above ceased and the two women found some much needed sleep. Magdalena’s dreams were not serene but rather disturbed. She couldn’t shut her mind off about the situation in which she suddenly found herself. Could it get any worse?

“Ma’am, there’s something going on and you need to wake up.” Elizabeth prodded.

Magdalena finally woke up enough to realize that she needed to get up and face whatever else was ahead. Standing up, she reached for her dress, but Elizabeth was already there to help her into it. When

both were dressed, they bravely exited their small room.

Several women and Jacky were gathered in the main lobby. As soon as they entered, the conversation ended. All eyes suddenly turned to the two women.

"Them there's the ones. I told you, she's the new owner." Jacky pointed his crooked finger at Magdalena.

Elizabeth stepped in front of Magdalena. "We only arrived last night. We're not sure what's going on here. Can you tell us what's happened?"

"Rose is dead." Jacky answered plainly.

"Oh my God!" Magdalena responded.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked.

"She drank herself to death!" One of the women spoke up.

"That makes you the new Madam." Jacky said.

"Why in the world would you say that?" Magdalena questioned. "I just got here last night."

"She left everything to her closest relative and that's you! I know because she had me witness her will." Jacky replied.

"What's going to happen to us?" One of the girls asked.

Soon the crowd of women chimed in with the same question.

Magdalena finally gathered her wits enough to ask, "Has someone called the constable? We need someone with authority here to certify her death." She remembered waiting for the sheriff when Edward was killed. The ranch foreman had explained the necessity for the legal formalities even on their remote ranch.

Elizabeth turned to Jacky, "You heard her. Go and get him now!"

With a scowl on his face, Jacky did as he was told. He could be heard grumbling as he went out the front door. Elizabeth turned to Magdalena, "What now, ma'am? What do you want these girls to do?"

"Go and get dressed." Magdalena asked the crowd of women, "Who oversees the meals?"

"That's Conchita. She should be in the kitchen now." One of the women responded.

"What's your name?" Magdalena continued.

"I'm called Daisy, Madam."

Magdalena visibly cringed from being called madam, but quickly regained her composure. "Daisy, go and tell her to get a meal prepared. The rest of you, do as I said and get dressed, properly dressed for our breakfast."

There was about twelve women present in various stages of undress in the room and with her orders, they started to move up the stairs back to their rooms. The lull of conversation even though it was whispers could still heard in the hall, Magdalena could only guess what the women were thinking.

She went back to the small room and finished dressing in her black regalia. Freshening the tight bun and finally splashing her face with some water from a bowl on the stand, Magdalena faced her reflection in the mirror. Trying hard to maintain her composure, she evaluated the horrific situation she now found herself in and was just about to break down when Elizabeth came back into the room.

"Ma'am, we are in deep disaster now, aren't we?"

Turning to face her companion, Magdalena could only nod her head in agreement. "Once the constable comes, we'll have to try and figure out what to do." She looked at her hat and veil and decided that she didn't need them. As she went down the short hallway back to the lobby, Elizabeth followed talking all the way.

"Ma'am, these are the things that I spoke about on the train when I told you that your path ahead was not going to be easy." She watched the various emotions cross over Magdalena's beautiful face.

"How could you know such things? Are you some sort of fortune teller? I've heard about people like that. One of the local Indian tribes near our ranch had people that could predict the future, or so the ranch hands said." Magdalena seemed to be rambling.

"My ability to sense things has been a part of me all my life. Please, I'm not a fortune teller. I'm not someone to be avoided nor to be feared. I'm here to help you."

"Help me do what?"

"I'm here to help you reach your full potential as a woman, now a woman of many opportunities." Elizabeth could see her start to take deeper breaths and a more relaxed posture.

Just then, Jacky returned with a stern looking gentleman right on his heels. "This here's the constable." He thumbed to point out the man behind him.

"Where is she?" The man ignored the two women in the room and spoke to Jacky. "Where's Rose?"

Elizabeth came forward and stepped in front of him. "Sir, this is Milady Magdalena. She is the niece of Rose."

The constable had no choice but to finally acknowledge the two women. "I'm sorry for your loss. I'm Constable Evans. We'll talk as soon as I can verify the death."

Jacky and the constable took the steps to the first landing and disappeared down a hallway. Magdalena and Elizabeth stood there not knowing how long the process would take. An older Mexican woman came from another part of the room, wiping her hands on an apron. "Madam, I'm just about done with breakfast. Where do you want me to serve it?"

"Where do you normally feed the girls?" Magdalena asked.

"We don't usually have a communal meal. I can set up the large table in the back of the kitchen." She seemed nervous as she wrung her hands on the apron over and over.

"Fine, that's where we'll eat. What's your name?"

"I am Conchita. I am the cook and maid to the Madam."

"As soon as the constable is done, we'll eat. Can you tell the girls upstairs and see if they're ready?" With just a quick nod, Conchita climbed the stairs, her voice could be heard telling the women to get finished dressing and come downstairs to the kitchen. Several loud curses were heard by the women below.

Still standing in the middle of the room, Magdalena looked at Elizabeth. "How much worse can my life



get?" She raised her hand, "No, don't answer that. I don't think I want to know."

"I wasn't going to, Ma'am. Let's just wait for the constable and then we'll eat. Once we that is over, we'll just have to see what can be done."

They didn't have to wait long at all. Jacky and the constable were tromping down the short stairs. "She's dead alright. It appears that she finally succeeded in drinking herself to death." Constable Evans looked to Magdalena and spoke firmly, "Madam, I'll need copies of the papers, you know, her will and then we can transfer all her belongings to you. I'll have the judge look them over. In the meantime, you can run the business as you see fit." He didn't wait for any answer but tipped his hat and walked out the front door.

Jacky started to leave, but her cold voice stopped him. "I'll expect the same loyalty of you, of course. If you think you can't provide that, you're welcome to leave." Magdalena hoped the firmness of her order would convince him that she meant business.

He turned and faced her with defiance in his stance, but his words were in contradiction of his emotions. "Yes, Madam, I will provide nothing less."

"Elizabeth, let Conchita know we're ready for breakfast and make sure all the girls are present. I have something to tell them." Magdalena went to her small room and took a moment to collect herself. She opened one of her bags and found a smaller black hat. Putting it on but forsaking the veil, she stepped into the hall and eventually found her way to the kitchen.

“Madam, I have the table all ready. I will put the food on when you say.” Conchita hesitated and then added, “I hope you like what I prepared.”

“I would love a cup of tea. Is that possible?”

Conchita hurried to comply with Magdalena’s wishes. She sat at the head of the big table and was just enjoying her morning beverage when several of the girls started down the back stairs. They appeared in a variety of outfits, some proper and others not so. All seemed extremely nervous and out of their element.

When one of the girls started to sit next to her, Magdalena spoke, “I’m sorry, but that is the place for Elizabeth.”

The young lady moved to the next spot amid more whispered conversation. Elizabeth appeared as did Jacky. He took the seat at the other end of the table. No one moved as the nerves were showing among all the participants.

“Conchita, we’re ready.” A younger girl helped the cook place several dishes on the table. As soon as the bowls were set, Magdalena signaled for them to eat.

It wasn’t a nice, casual meal. The conversation was non-existent and looks between the girls were frequent with everyone avoiding looking at her.

Finally, as the meal was winding down, Magdalena stood up. “Ladies, I want to introduce myself and my companion. I am Magdalena and this is Elizabeth. I would like each of us to bow our heads and reflect in a private moment for Rose. As you already know, she has passed on, but a prayer of respect is required.”

For a few minutes, no one spoke at all. Magdalena assumed each had their heads bowed in prayer. When a reasonable amount of time passed, Magdalena raised her head. All eyes were on her, waiting for her to speak. She didn't disappoint them.

"Ladies, from what I understand, I am now the owner of The Desperation Depot. Rose sent for me after my husband died." The murmurs were heard about the kitchen.

"I don't know the first thing about running a business let alone a bordello. I can only promise you that things will be a bit different to what Rose did. I'll make mistakes as you will, but we'll figure out the best way to deal with them together." She looked at the anxious faces staring at her.

"I do want to let you know that each morning, we will start our day here at this table. I'll expect you to dress in a respectable fashion." She looked around the table. "Some of you know how to do this and some of you don't. If you need some guidance, Elizabeth will help you."

Magdalena turned to leave but before she did, she announced, "This establishment will be closed for the next two weeks to honor Rose."

Elizabeth remained at the table watching the reaction of the girls. As soon as Magdalena had left the room, the conversation resumed in a very loud way. Jacky's voice was heard over the rest. "Well, if you ask me, she's darn uppity. I, for one, am not going to let that high and mighty snob tell me how to live and breathe!"

“Tarnation, Jacky you’re full of balls! You know you can’t find a better place to be than here.” One of the girls spoke to him and laughed.

“You strumpet, shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you.” He threatened.

Elizabeth finally stood up and all talk stopped. “I think the best thing for all of you is to get this table cleared and get on up to your rooms.”

The looks went from girl to girl, but eventually they each got up and cleared their dishes. As they passed by Elizabeth, several spoke but most just walked on up the back steps.

Before Jacky left, Elizabeth spoke to him. “Where are those papers located? We need to get the will to the judge.”

“Why should I help the likes of you? It seems you’re just a lackey to the princess and nothing more.”

“As one lackey to another, if we’re beholden to her kindness, it makes sense that we should help her and get into her graciousness. I don’t think it’s wise to aggravate a rattlesnake, do you?” Elizabeth commented.

His laughter could be heard through the entire kitchen. “I’ll have to keep me eyes on you for sure. Follow me and I’ll show you the office. Those papers should be in there.” He turned before leaving, “Rattlesnake, that’s funny.”

When Elizabeth knocked on the door of their small, shared room, she heard a quiet voice. “Is that you, Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I have something for you.”

“Come on in.” Magdalena was sitting on the edge of the small bed. “What do you have?”

Elizabeth handed the stack of legal documents to her. “Jacky helped me get these out of the office.”

As she looked over the papers, Magdalena realized it was the will along with statements from the local bank and one final important document was the deed to The Desperation Depot. She read through each one carefully before she looked up to Elizabeth.

“These papers will prove that I’m the owner of this establishment. I am officially the Madam of a bawdy house.” She broke down and cried, it seemed the tears were not going to stop. Through broken sobs, she asked, “What are we going to do with her body?”

“I made the arrangements and Jacky is going to take her to the mortician. We’ll have a proper ceremony for her in a day or two. I’ll take those papers to the judge.”

More tears fell before Magdalena could respond. “What about her room? We can’t stay in here, it’s too small and you need your own place.”

“I also talked about that to Jacky and together we’ll clean her room. It’s much larger and it’ll give you the space you require. There’s also an anteroom just next to it where I can stay and be close to you. Ma’am, please try to rest. I’ll help you get settled with all of this.”

Magdalena did just as she suggested and lay back on the small bed. When she didn’t think she could rest at all, Magdalena found herself falling fast asleep. As there was no window in the room, when she awoke, she couldn’t discern the time of day. Freshen-

ing up and putting on her shawl, Magdalena went out and headed to the kitchen.

The house was very quiet, and her footsteps were light on the wooden floors. Once in the kitchen she found the kettle still on the stove. Searching around in the cupboards, she found the tea and poured the hot water into a dainty cup.

Magdalena sat down at the head of the big table and finally noticed that it was completely dark outside. She then realized that her rest had turned into a full-blown nap. Trying hard to keep all thoughts of her predicament from invading her head, Magdalena looked about the room. Back at the ranch, she'd always felt most at home in the kitchen. She was never allowed to cook or bake but sitting at the table watching the ladies do their duties reminded her of her mother. She knew the kitchen to be the hub of a family home as a child growing up. It was one thing she'd wanted for her and Benjamin. Edward never set foot into that room except to give orders for something special or to take someone to task for not performing as he felt they should have.

The only light in the room was from the small fireplace in the corner. The embers cast a golden glow about the room. Once again, it reminded her of the times with her family before her arranged marriage to Edward. The papers she'd just looked through showed that everything Rose owned was to go to Edward, but since he was also gone, it came to Magdalena. This thought caused a shudder to course through her body.

She took a moment to pen a few thoughts in the journal she had brought from the ranch. Since her younger years at home and continuing at the ranch, she'd taken time to write about the events in her days.

Just when she thought about the possibilities of owning such an immoral place, Magdalena thought she heard a slight knock at the back door. She sat there waiting to see if she would hear it again and she did. The window did not allow her to see who might be at the back door, but without thinking of any danger, she went to open it.

"Alexander!" His name was uttered before she could stop it.

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly to his chest. Alexander was all in dark clothing and no light was in the sky tonight. "I had to come! I know this isn't proper at all and you, milady, deserve to be treated with care, but I heard about your aunt and knew you were in trouble."

Propriety be damned, she thought. Magdalena raised her lips to press them on his in a mad embrace. He returned the passion eagerly. Nothing had ever felt as good as his touch, she thought, thoroughly enjoying the kiss they shared.

Finally, he pulled back but kept his arms about her. "How are you holding up? I can't imagine you in such a place as this. You need to get out of here as soon as you can."

"Alexander, you shouldn't have come. Someone might see you."

"Let them. I needed to see if you were alright. Lenna, this isn't the place for you." He let the nickname

slide off his tongue. "I checked to make sure you were alone before I knocked."

"Unfortunately, it's more complicated than that. Alexander, I'm now the owner of this horrible place." She pulled out of his arms. "I'm now a Madam."

The look of anguish on her face matched his own. He reached for her and placed a more tender kiss on her waiting lips. "We'll have to think of something, won't we?"

"I have no money and no place to go. My dead husband made a deal with Rose that now ties me to this place. He sold my soul to the devil and there's no hope." The desperation showed in her voice and her words. "You need to go before someone catches you here. I don't want my troubles to stain you and your reputation."

"I'll go, but I'll be back. Lena, we must figure a way out of this for us." He placed another passionate kiss warming her lips and then disappeared into the dark of the night.

She stood there on the back porch, trying to see him if she could. Her lips were still burning for his touch but suddenly the shame of her behavior flooded her mind. I'm as bad as these girls, she thought miserably.

"Ma'am, what are you doing out here?" Elizabeth's voice sounded behind her. "Come inside. It's not safe out here."

Startled by her voice, Magdalena turned quickly back to the darkness, but knew that Elizabeth couldn't have seen him, could she?



## Chapter Three

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“Oh, my God! The plot thickens. Maybe he’s the reason she haunts this place, unrequited love.” Ellie’s words were almost a whisper.*

*“Well, at least we know how she became the Madam to this old bawdy house.” Her uncle confirmed what they both were thinking.*

*“What are you two talking about?” John sat down on a chair and picked up some of the letters.*

*Ellie and Shotgun brought him up to date on the things they’d been reading. “So, you see, this is a way of piecing the past together. I’ve always felt that Magdalena was good, after all, she saved us more than once. What a terrible first day in Jerome. Her aunt dies and she becomes the owner of a house of ill-repute. I wonder what happens next. What will she do about her son? We really didn’t know anything about her, did we?”*

*“We need to read on, don’t we?” John spoke.*

### *1892 Jerome*

*“Ma’am, Daisy is sick.” Elizabeth came into the office where Magdalena was working on the books. She*

put her pencil down and looked up with a tiredness showing in her eyes.

“What is it now?”

“You look exhausted. It can wait. I’ll deal with her.” Elizabeth started to leave.

“Wait! I’m sorry. I just can’t believe I’ve been doing this for a year now. The troubles never seem to end.” Magdalena indicated that she should sit down in the chair across from her. “Tell me what you think it is.”

Elizabeth hesitated but finally responded. “I think she has a venereal disease. What do you want to do about it?”

Magdalena took a deep breath before answering. “I’ll go and talk with Myron. I’ve been wanting to set up some medical services for the girls and now is as good a time as any.”

“Dr. Carrier won’t mind?”

“I’ve had some conversation with him in the past about taking care of the girls.” She stood up. “I can’t stand looking at this stuff anymore anyway.” She indicated the paperwork cluttering the desk.

“You seem restless today. I can talk with the doctor if you want.” Elizabeth offered.

“No, no, I need to get some fresh air.” She grabbed the small black hat with a veil that just covered her face.

“Ma’am, forgive my insolence, but isn’t it time for you to give up the mourning attire?”

“As long as I’m in charge of this, this business, I shall be in mourning.” With that Magdalena walked

out and into the sunshine of the day. She headed on foot up the hill to Dr. Carrier's office.

She stepped into the waiting room and immediately all conversation ceased. She was finally getting numb to this reaction from the general population of Jerome. With her backbone stiff and her head held high, Magdalena walked up to the receptionist. "I shall like to see Myron."

The young lady cleared her throat, "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm sure if you tell him that I'm here, Myron will make some time for me." She looked down at her and waited.

Before she reacted, the young lady looked around at the people in the waiting room, checking the looks on their faces. She finally stood up and put a phony smile on her face. "I'll let the doctor know you're here."

Magdalena didn't turn around, didn't listen to any of the whispers but instead stood there upright and proud as can be. It wasn't long at all when the receptionist came back and opened the door to allow Magdalena entrance to the backrooms. She wanted so badly to turn around and give them all a haughty stare but resisted.

She was ushered straight to the doctor's office. He was waiting there for her and greeted her enthusiastically. "Magdalena, it is wonderful to see you. Please sit down."

"Myron, it's been too long."

"How can I help you?"

"I want to set up a program for my girls. Daisy needs some attention right away, but instead of reacting, I want to anticipate." She waited for his reaction.

"I think that's wonderful. You would be the only..." He hesitated.

"I would be the only Madam to do that?" She finished what he was too embarrassed to say.

"Please forgive me. I don't think of you in that capacity. I think of you as a friend." His tone was sincere.

"I know, Myron, I know. I don't think of myself that way either."

"How about I come to the house and treat Daisy? I could also examine the others and start files on them. That way I could start some preventive procedures for them." He was making notes as he spoke.

"Myron, that sounds like a great plan. When can you come?"

"I'll set it up for the day after tomorrow. I'll be there around noon. Does that work?"

Magdalena put her hand out to shake his, but the doctor came around his desk and gave her a comforting hug. "Magdalena, you are a good woman. I wish the others would take care of their girls like you do."

She just smiled in response. "See you in a day. Thank you."

As she walked out through the waiting room, Magdalena made sure she looked at each of the women. It was amusing to her to see that none of them would meet her gaze. With her head held high, she walked out into the sunshine.

"Lena."

She heard his voice and the name only he used for her. Afraid to turn around, she stopped in her tracks.

"Please look at me." Alexander said.

Slowly she turned around and her heart stopped beating. "Alexander, how nice to see you. How long has it been?"

"Please, you must understand. I wanted to see you so many times, but..."

"But what? You couldn't bring yourself to visit a whore house?"

"You look good. Are you doing well?" He tried to change the subject.

"I'm doing fine. My house is making money, my girls are happy and I'm lonely as hell." She waited for him to show he was shocked by such unladylike language.

"Can we go somewhere?"

"I don't think so, Alexander. I'm resigned to my life, but I don't think I can let it affect yours." She waited for his response.

"Please, let me send a carriage for you. We can go on a picnic or to a quiet place in the hills where we can be alone. I want to explain my absence to you."

After all this time, the memories of that night on the porch kept her going, kept her alive. Magdalena was so tempted; she could still feel his hot kiss on her lips. "Okay, send someone for me in an hour." She already hated herself for the weakness she was showing. She should be done with this handsome danger to her heart.

His face lit up at her agreement with his plans. "I can't wait. I look forward to our time alone. I want to kiss you badly."

She just smiled and turned to walk the short distance to The Desperation Depot. When she finally got inside, Magdalena went to the kitchen for a cup of tea and finally let her emotions go unchecked. I would love to feel your lips on mine, too, she thought to herself.

Elizabeth came in and joined her. "Did you get the doctor to agree to treat Daisy?"

"Yes, he's coming the day after tomorrow. He'll check all the girls out and set up a regular plan for treatment."

"Ma'am, that's great. What a wonderful idea to have regular checkups and treatments for them."

She thought about the picnic plans she'd made with Alexander. "I'm going to take a few hours off this afternoon. Can you make sure everything is taken care of while I'm gone?"

Elizabeth was suspicious. Her lady never took any time for herself and rarely even left the house. "I know that I take liberties in speaking my thoughts to you, but I've noticed you've not been yourself lately. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"There's nothing anyone can do. I must make do with my life as it is. Have you sent Jacky for the mail today?"

"I just did. Maybe a letter from Benjamin would cheer you up." Elizabeth got up and freshened the teacup in front of Magdalena.

“Yes, I’ve only heard from him that one time. He seemed content and is doing his studies. The family he’s living with is treating him well. The money I pay them monthly should see to that.”

“Why don’t you bring him home?” She regretted her words as soon as she saw the reaction on Magdalena’s face.

“This is not my home and will never be his. I can’t allow my son to know what I’ve become. He must never be ashamed of his mother or who he is or where he came from.”

“I see you as a woman of business and nothing more.” Elizabeth stated firmly.

“The world judges me differently, I can assure you. Now, could you please check on Jacky and see if he retrieved the mail from the post office.” She dismissed her companion.

“You will see that the future won’t be so harsh on what you’ve done here.” Elizabeth stated her prediction and quickly left the room.

Magdalena had gotten used to the prophecies from her over the last year. She never stated things precisely but rather suggested possibilities that would allow Magdalena to envision what could be or even what should be changed. One of the things she quickly changed was the percentage that the house took from the girls’ earnings.

She reflected back on that particular breakfast meeting. After about a month of running the bawdy house, Magdalena told the girls that she would not be taking half of their earnings. Sitting at the table just

now, she distinctly remembered the look on the girls' faces at that announcement.

Daisy was the first to speak up, "Balls, you mean you're taking more?"

At the look of disdain on Magdalena's face, she corrected her manner of speech. "Pardon me, Madam. I mean criminy! We work hard for our money and deserve more than the house does."

Folding her hands on top of the table, Magdalena spoke softly. "I totally agree with you, Daisy. Starting today, you'll get to keep seventy-five percent of your earnings."

After a huge whoop of cheers from the other eleven ladies, Magdalena held up her hand to silence them. "There are certain conditions to this change."

"Buggers! I knew there had to be a hook!" Alice was one of the quieter girls and it surprised everyone when she spoke out. They all waited for Magdalena to explain her words.

"First off, I want to tell you that I'm pleased that you've supported these morning breakfasts. I think it's important for us to see and learn all about each other on a personal basis."

She waited for that to soak in but promptly continued, "You can't do this forever. I think you all realize that and one of the ways out of this profession is to learn a new trade or get some education."

The girls started talking to each other and a buzz surrounded the occupants of the table meeting. "Madam, we can't go to school. They won't let the likes of us near their precious little ones."



“I realize that, so I’ve made arrangements for a tutor to come and work with you here at this table. I just need to talk with each of you to find out what type of classes you want and need.”

Again, the surprise and conversation went around the occupants at their meeting. A few smiles were evident, some confused looks showed on several faces, but the overall attitude was one of acceptance.

“The last thing is that we all need to take on some chores. Conchita does a great job with the meals, but she needs help with the preparation and cleaning up. The laundry is another thing that needs some assistance. “Elizabeth, would you like to take this one?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I will build a chart and each week you’ll have a certain chore to do. It will change each week, so you don’t get stuck doing something you hate.”

As Magdalena reflected on that meeting, she marveled at the way the girls adapted to the new way of business for their bordello. With just a few glitches and protests, all these months later very few corrections had to be made. In fact, word got around in the town and more of the other prostitutes were coming to her for a job.

Elizabeth came whisking into the kitchen, “Ma’am, another letter from Benjamin!” She quickly handed her the small envelope.

Magdalena couldn’t tear it open fast enough. Her little boy was almost going to be ten now and it showed in his penmanship. She read with pleasure the words he wrote.

*Dear Momma,*

*I am learning so much. I am going to be your smart little man. I miss you a lot. I do like this city. It's called Philadelphia. I hope I spelled that right. The Williams family has been very nice to me. I will write to you soon. Please write back.*

*I love you Momma,*

*Benjamin*

Tears fell freely as she read and reread the brief note. It tore at the very core of her being. She turned to Elizabeth who was waiting, watching her reactions. "I hate Edward! This is all his fault. He's a bastard and I hope he's rotting in hell! I will never see my son again!"

Elizabeth went to her and put her arms around the weeping woman. What little comfort she could offer was accepted. Magdalena cried openly and didn't fight the strong emotions she was feeling.

Upon hearing voices coming close, Magdalena pulled away and turned to the window, staring out into the spring day. "I need to get cleaned up. I'll be in my room. If you see a carriage pull up for me, just knock on my door."

She walked up the back stairs to the first landing and slammed her door behind herself. She walked straight to the chest of drawers and used the pitcher full of fresh water to splash on her face. Magdalena didn't wear any sort of makeup as she wanted to appear clean and fresh to the world around her. Straightening her black crepe dress, she looked to the

mirror and reflected. Maybe Elizabeth is right, maybe I should give up the black mourning clothes.

Shaking her head, Magdalena dismissed the idea from her thoughts. This is my true nature, she thought sadly. The only time she could relate to dressing gaily was when Edward held the ranch's yearly round-up and barbeque. He bought her a new dress with a matching hat and gloves. She felt like the belle of the ball. All of those things were gone now, all that remained was his betrayal.

There was a slight, hesitant knock at her door. "Ma'am, there is a carriage out back. The driver says he's here for you."

Grabbing the small hat and veil, Magdalena checked her appearance once again and then satisfied, left the room. Elizabeth didn't ask and Magdalena didn't volunteer any information. At the back door of the kitchen, she turned to address her companion and friend, "Elizabeth, I don't know how long I will be, but I'll be back before dark."

"Be safe, Ma'am. You are heading down a path that can be both dangerous and exciting."

"There you go again with your psychic predictions. I'll be fine." Magdalena opened the door and went out to meet the driver. He helped her into the elaborate coach, shut the door and soon they were trotting down the road.

The coachman headed up the road on Main Street and continued until they were out of town. The tall pine trees started to crowd the single lane roadway, but she spent her time just relaxing and enjoying her

time out of Jerome. For the first time in a year, she could pretend that her life wasn't in ruins.

Further up the road, in what seemed like the middle of the Prescott Forest, the coachman pulled down a rough track. It could barely qualify as a road as they bumped down into the thickest part of the forest. "Sorry, milady, but this is the only way into the master's lodgings."

She barely heard the driver's apology. "I'm fine." Was all she could reply due to the roughness of the road.

Shortly, the carriage pulled up in front of a small, but beautiful structure. At first appearances it looked like a cabin, but as she took in the entire view before her eyes, Magdalena could see that it was a quaint cottage. When the driver stopped, she started to dismount, but he came around and offered her a hand for assistance. This was how she'd imagined her life with Edward. Sadly, it had never materialized and now she felt less than human.

Before she could walk up the steps to the wrap-around veranda, Alexander appeared. Damn this heart of mine, she cursed as it started beating hard in her chest. He was magnificent and she felt things she'd never felt in all her short life.

"Lena, how wonderful of you to come." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the driver.

Arm in arm, together they mounted the few steps up and into the cottage. There was a bouquet of flowers sitting in the middle of a small table. The smell of something delicious cooking on the stove greeted her

nose. She walked in further and noticed that everything was spotless.

“Lena, I’ve missed you.” He went to take her in his arms, but she deftly avoided his touch. She caught his grin and almost hated him for his arrogance. Magdalena stalled to gain control over her emotions. She took her time to slowly remove her shawl, her hat and veil and then carefully handed them to him. He placed them on a chair by the door.

“What is this place? Am I just one of many ready for your dalliances?” She walked around trying to keep her emotions in check and a short distance between them.

“Lena, I have never had anyone here. You are the first and last. Can I get you a glass of champagne?”

“I don’t drink alcohol, perhaps a cup of tea?”

“Yes, I can provide that.” Alexander went to the corner of the open room and filled a delicate cup with hot water. He offered her the choice from several different tea flavors in a box on the sideboard.

After choosing her tea, she found a chair next to the window. He sat opposite her and sat there staring.

“Alexander, I believe you were going to explain your absence for the last year.” Magdalena got right to the point.

For a moment, he looked remorseful but finally looked her directly in the eyes. “I am the representative for my family’s business. They are located in Canada. I came here to conduct research for them to see if we want to buy the mine. It involves a lot of work and several trips back and forth from here to home. I intended to contact you once your mourning

period was over, but I was obligated to take one of those many trips.

His expression changed to one of sadness, "Lena, I wanted to see you so badly, but I confess, I felt so helpless. I didn't know what I could have done to save you from the situation you were in at the time. If that makes me weak, then I can only ask your forgiveness."

"I want to stay angry at you. I felt abandoned." She stood up and paced slowly around the room, absently picking up various things but not really seeing them.

He came and pulled her into his arms. This time, she didn't fight but melted into his embrace. His soft feather kisses on her forehead weakened her resolve. "Alexander, when I first saw you on the train from Phoenix, I knew that there was something special between us. I also knew then, and I know now that any relationship is out of the question."

She pulled back so that he could see into her eyes, into her soul. "We both know that I am not of the same social status as you. I would never do anything to harm you and that means that I need to stay away. I only came today to find out why I haven't heard from you and to tell you that."

"Please don't talk of yourself that way. You are the kindest, most beautiful woman that has been forced into a bad situation. I have spent most of the last year in Canada, but that should be over now, and my home will be here in Jerome. Please, Lena, give us a chance. We'll figure something out."

She hesitated and he took that chance to hug her tightly once again. He smelled awesome as Magdale-

na snuggled closer in his arms. Their kiss was eager and fulfilling. She couldn't seem to get enough.

Alexander was the one to finally put a little space between them. "I think we should eat our meal. If we don't slow things down, I cannot guarantee that I will remain a gentleman."

That got a small giggle from her, and she stepped out of his embrace. "I agree. Something smells delicious. What are we eating?"

"I'm afraid, my only successful dish is beef stew."

The look of surprise on her pretty face pleased him. "Are you telling me that you did the cooking? I don't know why but that surprises me. I would never imagine you cooking."

He held out the chair at the small table and waited for her to sit. "You had better wait until you taste it to see how surprised you will be."

The meal consisted of sourdough rolls and beef stew. When she had finished lunch, he stood and went to the sideboard to retrieve some small cakes for dessert. Magdalena held up her hand to stop him. "I'm full and couldn't eat another thing."

"Then I'll package them, and you can take them back to town with you." He placed several of them into a cardboard box and tied it with string.

"Speaking of that, I should be getting back. Elizabeth does very well with normal everyday tasks, but if something goes awry, I must handle it." She went to retrieve her hat and shawl.

He stood by the door and watched her movements. "You are so beautiful."

“And you, sir, must be daft.” She teased him as her violet eyes sparkled at his compliment.

“You have no idea of how truly dazzling you are, do you?” His admiration of her showed in his tone. “Will you think about our conversation? Will you give us a chance to get to know each other?”

She heaved a big sigh. “Please, can you get your driver back? I really must be going.”

Alexander went out on the front porch and rang a big, brass bell several times. “He’ll be here in a few moments.” As he stepped back into the cabin, he shut the door.

“How discreet is this man? I am profoundly serious about keeping my stain of shame from affecting you.”

“Oh, my Lena. Let me worry about that. I know your true nature and if others could see you as I do, there would be no shame. My driver is totally dedicated to me and is paid very well for his loyalty.”

She wanted to believe, she wanted to be honorable once again, her heart longed for that. Magdalena took a step closer to him and once again they indulged in the feelings of affection that were developing between them. His lips pressed passionately as his hands caressed up and down her back.

“Oh, Alexander, this is so wrong, but...” Her words came out breathlessly.

Just then they heard the carriage pull up outside. It had been only a few hours for their visit, but it seemed like an eternity. Magdalena didn’t want this to end but she knew that it was only a dream, a dream that could never be for her.



One last kiss and Alexander opened the door, allowing her to walk out onto the porch. As he stood close to her side, he whispered, "I will anxiously anticipate the next time we can see each other. Please don't make me wait too long, Lena."

Pulling her veil down, she delicately stepped down the path and to the carriage. The driver was waiting to take her hand and help her climb up to the seat. She took one last long look at Alexander and felt her heart lurch. How unfair could life be? Another time, another day and they could have shared years together as a happy couple. He waved but she only looked away.

The trip to town was uneventful but as the driver pulled to the back of her building, she could see some action inside the kitchen window. Quickly, without waiting for the driver to help, she grabbed her box of cakes and dashed through the kitchen door. Dusk was just starting to settle outside but the lights in the kitchen were blazing allowing Magdalena to see that Elizabeth was trying to clean up one of the girls.

As she got closer, she could see that Margaret was bleeding from her face and there were bruises all over her arms. "Oh, my God! What happened?"

Elizabeth looked up with tears in her eyes. "The fellow she was with took a dislike to her laughter. He thought she was laughing at his little tooleywag." She kept cleaning the bloody cuts with water and soap.

"Where is this man now?" Magdalena was removing her outdoor clothes as she waited for an answer.

"The bloke is still up there. I don't think he is with anyone; he was pretty drunk. He might've passed out by now."

"Where is Jacky?"

"I'm not sure. He's usually here as the evening business starts."

"I'll look in his room." Magdalena went to the back of the hallway and knocked on Jacky's door. When she didn't get an answer, she opened it and called his name. With still no response from him, Magdalena opened the door and turned up the oil lamp on the dresser.

Just as she started to leave, she noticed his pistol on the dresser next to the lamp. Living on the ranch, Edward had insisted that she learn how to use a gun. She wasn't a crack shot, but she could certainly hit a close target. Without hesitation, she picked it up and made her way up the steps to Margaret's room at the top floor of the house.

Swinging the door open wide, she could see him lying flat on his back, snoring away on the bed. He was filthy and stunk to high heaven. Magdalena held up the pistol and kicked the bed. He moaned but didn't stir enough to wake up. She edged closer and used the gun to poke him awake.

"What, what?" He groaned at her prodding.

"Wake up, you bastard!" She shouted at him.

By now, his bloodshot eyes were completely open, and he was staring at the gun she held inches from his face. "What the hell is this?"

"You have two seconds to put your money on the dresser for Margaret and get out of here."

“Like hell!”

Magdalena raised the gun and shot in the air but swiftly brought it back down and pointed directly at the now scared face of the disgusting man. “Okay, okay. You are crazy! Watch it or you’ll hurt me.”

“No one beats up my girls and gets away with it!” She heard the shuffle of feet stomping down the hallway. She didn’t dare look away but heard Elizabeth.

“Ma’am, what are you doing?” There were more voices behind her in the hall.

“I’m taking care of a lily-livered, no account chicken thief.”

By this time, the fully dressed man was placing some bills on the dresser. Magdalena waved the gun to indicate that he should leave now. The crowd of people in the hall backed up and allowed him room to exit.

Magdalena followed close behind until he got to the front door and then stood there with the gun still pointed at him. “Don’t ever step into my place again or you’ll not live to tell anyone about it!”

“You are nuts! I oughta get the constable and tell him about you.”

“You do that! I know the constable personally and we’ll see who comes out on top of that complaint.” She didn’t back down.

Finally conceding defeat, the man went out the door slamming it viciously behind himself. The windows rattled, people cheered, and Magdalena fainted dead away.



## Chapter Four

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**“T**hat breaks my heart! She may never see her son again.” Ellie commented with her eyes tearing up.

“Look how tough that little girl has become in just a year.” Shotgun spoke like a proud uncle.

“That’s what you two got out of this? What do you think of Alexander?” John joined in the discussion.

“Part of me thinks he’s a worm, but the other part thinks there’s more to him than we know right now.” Ellie had a thoughtful look on her face as she answered.

“She’s such a strong woman. Just like you, sweetie.” John hugged Ellie closer on the couch.

“Ahh, I love you too.”

“Ah, come on. Let’s find out what happens now.” Shotgun laughed at their open display of affection.

### 1893 Jerome

“Ma’am, I’m not sure the new girl is going to work out.” Elizabeth and Magdalena were sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a morning cup of tea.

“Why do you say that? What’s her name? After two years of this, I find myself missing some details. It all seems to be blending in together.”

“Sara is her name, and you’re as sharp as ever.” Elizabeth gave her a compliment.

“Thank you, Elizabeth. I don’t know what I would do without you. What is the problem?”

“Daisy told me that she saw her stealing money out of a gent’s pockets last night. She told me about it this morning.”

“Fire her! I won’t tolerate that kind of behavior.” Magdalena was adamant.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Elizabeth knew that tone of voice and hurried to do what was expected of her.

“I’ll be here if you need me. I know you can handle this quite nicely, though.” She sipped her tea calmly.

She was sitting there quietly when Jacky came into the room. “Madam, may I have a word with you?”

“Absolutely. What do you need?”

“After that incident a few months ago, I thought you should have your own gun.” He laid a small der-ringer on the table between them. Jacky waited for her to react.

Her light laughter wasn’t what he expected. “You think I need this?” She lifted the firearm up and held it in her hand. “It is lighter than yours, isn’t it?”

He grinned at what appeared to be her acceptance. “Yes, I wanted you to have one that your delicate hand could hold.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Jacky.” She smiled as she spoke, “But I do thank you. I think this will fit in my reticule just fine. How much do I owe you for

this?" Magdalena felt she always had to stay one step ahead of Jacky. Lately his admiration of her had become more noticeable, even Elizabeth had made a comment recently about how well-groomed he had become and about how much time he tries to spend around Magdalena.

Now he acted insulted. "Can't a bloke give a woman a gift? You owe me nothing." Jacky stood up, ready to leave the room.

"Don't leave, Jacky, I thank you for the gift. I could use your help in something else, though."

"What would that be, Madam?" He sat back down and waited for her to speak.

"I need someone to make some metal boxes you know, some sort of miniature safe. About like this..." She held her hands up to show the size of the box. "Each box should have its own lock and key."

His laughter was what she expected. When he calmed down, Jacky asked for further details. "What would you be wanting those for?"

"It's another service The Desperation Depot will provide for its customers. The miners and other visitors can lock their valuables in the box while they spend time with the girls. That way the only money they lose is what they spend for themselves."

"Sounds like you heard about the new girl, Sara."

"How long have you known about it?" Her curiosity was piqued.

"I just heard about it myself. Daisy was telling some of the girls and I happened to overhear their conversation."

“In the future, I’d like it if you would come to me with that sort of trouble.”

“Sure thing, Madam. I’ll check with the blacksmith down on County Road. He should be able to build a sample and if you approve, he’ll build however many of those boxes you want.”

“That sounds perfect. Thank you for my gift, Jacky.” Magdalena got up, put the gun in the pocket of her skirt and started to leave the room. “I have things to do upstairs.”

She took the back steps up past the third floor and went to the door of the attic. Taking a key out of her skirt pocket, Magdalena opened it. She lit the oil lamp, turned to lock the door, and headed up the narrow stairs. Once she reached the attic, she sat the lamp down on a wooden crate, near the wall. Magdalena ran her hand up and down the rough surface until she found what she was looking for. A small metal lever was poking out of the wall and with a little effort, she pushed it down to allow the secret panel to slide open.

As she stepped into the hidden room, Magdalena smiled. She’d found this secret room when she came looking for the bullet she’d fired into the ceiling the day she kicked that man out of The Depot for hitting Margaret. For some unknown reason, this space pleased her. She’d worked for days to move a bed, a chair, and a few stands into the room.

Looking around, Magdalena wanted to make sure that everything was clean and comfortable. She sat down on the side of the feather bed and kicked off her shoes. She laid back and found herself giggling like a



schoolgirl. With a house full of women and visitors for most hours of the day, this area gave her a private place, a place of her own to read, to journal, rest and just generally put the nasty world she lived in out of her mind for a while.

Suddenly a thought crossed her mind, if this room existed in secrecy, are there other hidden rooms? She sat up, put her shoes back on and wandered around. The only outside light coming in was from a hexagonal window up in the peak of the roof. It didn't allow for much illumination but with the oil lamp, she could check out the walls. Running her hands over each wall, she found herself looking for another lever.

On the wall next to the secret door, she was extremely excited to finally find what she was looking for. She pushed it, but nothing happened. Her hand hurt from exerting pressure when she had another thought. Pressing down on the lever in the opposite direction, a panel slid open revealing a staircase.

Going back and grabbing the oil lamp, Magdalena decided that she needed to see where these steps would take her. For a split second, she thought about any nasty creatures that might be lurking in the area, but her natural curiosity wouldn't be satisfied unless she conducted a search.

Her black crepe dress was going to be full of dust and cobwebs, but Magdalena threw caution to the wind and followed her instincts. As she went down and down into the bowels of the building, she grew determined to find where the path would lead. The downward spiral stopped, and she found herself on

level ground. The wooden floor gave way to a dirt path, but she kept moving forward.

Magdalena ignored the thought of whatever critters might be around as she suddenly saw a small sliver of light ahead. She moved cautiously forward and with each step the light became brighter and brighter. Suddenly, she was at the end of what appeared to be a tunnel. She put the lamp down as she wanted to try and open the wrought iron gate covering the entrance. With just a little effort she pushed it open and stepped into the outside world. There were several creosote bushes in the way, but she pushed them aside so she could determine where in town she had landed.

Hearing voices coming from nearby, Magdalena hid back behind the bushes. The voices passed and she felt safe enough to peek again. Recognition dawned that she was well below The Depot toward the north end of the road. When she looked back, panic started to settle in as she couldn't see the gate she'd just come out of and knew she had to get back before she was missed. She didn't want to get caught out by herself. Hurrying back up the road, she desperately looked for the bushes covering the opening.

Just when she thought she found the entrance, she heard a voice from behind. She froze but slowly moved her hand to the pocket in her skirt and put her fingers around the pistol Jacky had given her earlier. Slowly she turned. She had started to pull the gun out of her pocket when she heard him say, "Lena, what are you doing down here on this dirty street?"

Her relief was palpable as she looked up into Alexander's brown eyes and smiling face. "You scared me half to death!" She exclaimed.

"I can see that. Where did you get that gun and why are you out here with no protection?"

She laughed aloud and waved the gun around. "Oh, but I do have protection. What are you doing down here? This isn't exactly a place I would think you would visit."

"Unfortunately, I had a business meeting with a man selling his building. We need a place for storage." His explanation seemed plausible.

She knew immediately she wanted to share her discovery with him. Magdalena grabbed his hand and encouraged him to follow her. "Come, I have a secret to show you."

She pushed aside the bushes, but a few caught at her skirt, tearing it a bit. Alexander helped her free herself and put himself in the lead. "Keep going, you'll see what I mean."

Once they came to the iron gate, the look of shock on his face was evident. "What in the world is this doing here? Where does it go?"

She stepped inside ahead of him and picked up the lamp. "Be careful, the track is just dirt and it's uneven." Magdalena put her hand back to grab his but stopped as their physical contact sent a shiver through her body. He felt it too and turned her around to face him.

She knew he was going to kiss her but fight it she couldn't. Here in the darkness of the tunnel, she could press herself freely into his embrace and take

what he was offering. She ran her hands up to feel the muscles under his linen suit. With her heart beating harder, Magdalena knew she wanted more.

“Come, I want you to see my surprise.”

Together they walked on the dirt path until it turned into wooden planks and then came the staircase. “Where are we?” His interest was aroused. Not knowing why, she put her fingers up to her lips to indicate that he should be quiet.

Once at the top of the stairs, she saw the panel was still open and stepped into her private room. Alexander’s surprise showed on his handsome face as he turned about taking in the small boudoir. “Lena, is this in your place? Are we in the attic?” His voice was merely a whisper.

She giggled and responded, “It’s not exactly the attic, but we are at the peak of the house. Look.” She went over and opened the panel that led to the actual attic. “There are panels in several places. This is the first one I’ve found.”

“How in the world did you find it?”

“I came up here several months ago after I had to get rough with one of the customers.” She seemed a bit embarrassed to tell him about the difficult moments they sometimes experience.

“I heard about that. I tried to send my driver to get you, but there were too many people about for several days afterwards. He could never get you by yourself.”

“Yes, the constable came, but I smoothed things over with him. I think other people came just out of curiosity. I wanted to find the bullet and to make sure I didn’t damage the roof when I shot the gun up in the

air. I was inspecting the attic and accidentally came upon the lever that opened this room. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I'm not sure I would call it wonderful." He looked at the meager furnishings.

"Oh, Alexander, look at it with my eyes! I have a private place to call my own. I come up here and read, rest, or just to enjoy the peace and quiet."

"I can see that now. You constantly have people around you. No wonder you would value a place to call your own." He went closer at the same time she stepped forward. They embraced tightly and kissed fervently.

"I wanted you to see it. I want to share it with you. This can be our own private place. No one knows it's here and no one can intrude. No one can see you with me and I won't bring shame to your good name."

"Oh, Lena, you worry too much about that. Knowing you has only made my life better." Between kisses, they both realized when the moment changed. He reached up and took the pins out of her hair. Her long black locks fell freely and for the first time since meeting, he saw her beauty shine.

Alexander stepped back and pulled his jacket off. He never took his eyes off hers. He moved slowly as he untied his ascot and removed it, placing it on the stand. "I'll stop if you tell me to, Lena."

"Alexander, I...I'm not..." She couldn't seem to complete her thoughts. Straightening up, she met his gaze and spoke again, more firmly, "I'm not as experienced as my girls."

His soft laughter made her smile. "Lena, we'll learn about each other together as long as you're sure."

She nodded her head. "I'm positive."

He came over and started undoing the many buttons on the back of her dress. She stepped out of the black crepe and felt freedom. Her lacey white cami-sole was the only thing underneath the heavy dress, and he smoothed his hands up and down her bare arms. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" He asked.

"No, you are actually heating my skin. Please don't stop, Alexander."

Before touching her again, he removed his vest and shirt and stood there bare chested. He was muscular and she raised her hand to touch his skin. She looked up to him, "You're hot too."

"You're making me that way." He turned to pull the covers down on the bed. "You were expecting me? These are freshly washed linens." As an added thought, he teased, "Or do you bring your other dalliances here?"

She laughed, "Okay, I deserve that. Alexander, as soon as I found this room, my only thoughts were of you and us sharing this time. Does that make me an evil woman?"

"If it does, I like this side of you." With that he removed the rest of his clothing, she allowed him to do the same with hers. They got into the bed together and he placed a searing kiss on the side of her neck. The moan in the room came from her as she reached for him. "Kiss me."

He complied and soon they were thoroughly exploring each other's bodies. The light through the hexagonal window was waning, so the romantic glow came from the oil lamp. He gently pushed her back and bent down to kiss her breasts. The sensation sent an aching down to her lower abdomen. Alexander took his place on top of her and together they enjoyed their lovemaking. Finally reaching a climax together, he rolled to his back and clamored to catch his breath.

"I didn't know it could be like that." She spoke softly, her breathing was finally starting to slow.

"Me neither." He replied.

That admission surprised Magdalena and she rolled to her side to look at him. "That surprises you?" He asked.

"Well, yes. I just believed that a man took his pleasure when and where he could. My mother told me in very vague terms that it was my duty, and I wasn't supposed to enjoy it. So, naturally I assumed that men did all the enjoying."

His laughter echoed throughout the room. "You are a wonder. I love you." With those words spoken out loud, the air in the room seemed to suddenly evacuate. She sat up and held the sheet around herself, Magdalena started to put on her underclothes. Before he could speak, she turned and faced him, "You should never speak those words to me!"

He stood and in all his naked glory went over to her. "Lena!" When she wouldn't look his way, he took her by the shoulders and turned her to him. "Lena, look at me. Love is a wonderful thing; it isn't something to be denied."

Her voice became bitter as she spoke, "Love is not something I've ever experienced. The only person I have ever loved I've had to say goodbye to, and I'll never see him again."

His hands dropped and he took a step back. "You mean your husband."

Her laugh was cynical but stopped suddenly as she noticed the look on his face. "Alexander, I never loved Edward at all. I merely tolerated him because I was expected to be a good wife. I meant my son, Benjamin. I love him more than breathing. I love him so much; I'd give up my life for him. I love him so much, I'll never see him again, so that he can never see what his mother has become." Pain and anguish etched her beautiful face as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

When he went and sat down beside her, she leaned into his strength. The tears flowed and time stood still as she indulged in her pain. He put his arm around her and held her tenderly as her crying subsided.

"I'm sorry, Alexander, I haven't been able to express my sorrow until now. Things have been happening so fast even though it's been two years since I lost Edward and my son, I just haven't let my hair down and given in to my pain."

"Shush, I'm honored that you chose me to show your true feelings." He caressed her shoulder as they sat there in the waning hours of the day.

"I must go, my love. It's getting late and you will be missed if you aren't already." He got up and started dressing. She did the same but needed his help with the buttons. He kissed his way up her back as she giggled with his touches.



“Thank you, Alexander. I feel so wonderful. I loved and cried, and you helped me find some peace today.” She placed a tender kiss on his lips.

“I will take the lamp down and leave it at the end of the tunnel. You’ll need to bring another up for when we get to meet next.”

The look on her face made him laugh. “What? You didn’t think this was a one-time thing, did you?” Milady, I don’t intend to leave you alone any more than I must.”

Being totally honest and open, Magdalena responded, “I’m so glad. I so enjoy our time together. Please be safe and cautious as you go out the tunnel. I wouldn’t want anyone else to find the entrance.”

Now fully dressed, he stood before her and placed a kiss full on her mouth. “Lena, I’ll be extremely careful. Although I don’t like the idea of that gate not having a lock. I think I’ll get one and when I come back, I’ll give you the other key. You might just need to get out of here fast one day and this could be your escape route.”

“Don’t talk like that. I can always get out the front or back door of The Depot when I need. I do appreciate your concern, however.”

They finally cleaned up the room and headed for the panel at the stairs. It was hard telling him goodbye, but Magdalena knew she had been gone too long. Finally, he held her tightly and kissed her strongly. “We’ll see each other again soon. I’ll get in touch with you somehow.” Alexander took the lamp, and she watched as the light grew dimmer as his steps took him farther down the stairs.

Finally, she pressed the lever and closed the panel to the steps. With one last look around the room, she went into the attic, making sure that the secret panel closed shut behind her.

Taking the steps as safely and quick as she could, she finally made it to the attic door. Turning to lock the door to the attic, she was startled by a voice behind her.

“Ma’am, where have you been?” It was Elizabeth.

“I’ve been checking on that old stuff up in the attic. Why? Has something happened?” She hoped the blush on her cheeks wasn’t noticeable.

“No, nothing really. I was just worried that you seemed to be missing. I can usually find you at the kitchen table or in your office, but today you weren’t anywhere I looked.”

“Well, you’ve worried yourself for nothing. I guess I should have told you I was going to tally things in the attic. You never know when we might need something from up there.” She started down the back stairs to the kitchen. “I could use a cup of tea. Would you like to share some with me?”

The look on her companion’s face told her that she didn’t believe her story, but Elizabeth complied anyway. They walked together and were soon sitting at the table. The silence was like an elephant in the room. Finally, Elizabeth spoke without looking at Magdalena.

“Ma’am, we have been together for almost three years now.”

“Yes, we have.”

“I know most of your moods and your worries. Right now, I am concerned about you. You are tempting danger and trouble.”

“What makes you say that? I’ve had nothing but danger and trouble since Edward died and left me in this life. What makes this time any different?”

“This time the choices are in your hands.”



## Chapter Five

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**“M**aybe we should go up and check out the hidden room in the attic again?” John winked at Ellie.

“Get a room you two!” Her uncle’s tease was gruff, but she knew he was happy for them to be so in love. “What do you think about Jacky giving her that gun? She didn’t seem the type of woman that would really want one.”

“I think that as a Madam in a wicked town like old Jerome, she definitely needs protection.” Ellie volunteered her opinion.

“Yes, but you’re a woman that knows how to handle a firearm, she’s not.” John responded. “Before we quit the sheriff’s department, you were tops on the firing range.”

“I’m a little suspicious about Jacky. Remember at the beginning, he didn’t want her there and now he’s handing her a gun?” Shotgun voiced his thoughts.

“Yeah, and what about Elizabeth? I think she’s psychic or something. She’s been pretty low key until now. Why has she been with Magdalena all these years?” Ellie picked up another journal and started to read.

1894 Jerome

Magdalena woke suddenly to the sounds of people shouting outside in the street. A loud knock at her door caused her to grab her dressing gown just as Elizabeth burst through. "Elizabeth, what is happening?"

"Ma'am, Jerome is on fire!"

Both women raced to the front door. As they opened the double doors, they could see flames leaping from the buildings up the street. Men were frantically fighting the fires. "What do we do?" Magdalena asked.

"There's not much we can do, Ma'am. We'll just have to leave it up to the Gods."

After all the commotion during the night, Magdalena now stood on the second-floor balcony looking at the devastation of the business district. She held a hanky over her nose to block out the smell of the still smoldering burnt out buildings. Some people were scrambling to put out little flare ups, while others were trying to salvage possessions.

"Ma'am, everyone is here." Elizabeth spoke behind her.

As she turned around, she saw the girls, Jacky and Elizabeth looking to her for guidance. "This isn't our typical breakfast meeting, but I felt it was important for you all to see what could have been our disaster too. We were lucky. We still have a place to stay, and our lives are intact."

Magdalena turned around and waved her hand to indicate the scene in front of their eyes. "It will take

all of us to help rebuild this town.” She looked regal even in her black crepe dress.

Daisy was the first to speak up, “What can we do? Most of those people won’t even speak to us, let alone take our help.”

“I’ve got a plan. Jacky, get the wagon and take someone with you. Go down to Cottonwood and buy all the bricks, lumber, and building supplies you can with this.” She handed a wad of bills to him. “Bring it all back and start handing them out to those who need it.”

“Daisy, I need you to put on a dress you’d go to church in and go up the block to help Dr. Carrier. He should be at the hospital. I’m sure there’s plenty of people that need to be treated. Oh, wipe that paint off your face. I want you to blend in as much as possible.”

“What can we do?” Some of the other girls piped up.

“Conchita is going to need some help in the kitchen. We’re going to make enough food to feed all of those that got burned out. Some of you can do that. The others, well I’m going to ask you to get into your work clothes.” When she saw the giggles and looks of amusement, she clarified. “I mean something in which you can scrub floors, move burnt debris, or whatever else needs to be done to get this town back on its feet. I found some old dungarees up in the attic and I think we’ll be able to fit all of you.”

The girls started to go inside, and everyone was figuring out which job they wanted to do. Elizabeth came up to Magdalena, “Ma’am, you are truly re-

markable. The girls are all excited and eager to help, thanks to you."

"Oh, Elizabeth, I'm just doing what needs to be done. After all, another year in this hellish place is punishment enough." She sat at the kitchen table as her companion made them both a cup of tea. "I can't believe I've survived it this long."

"I think you've done better this last year, don't you?"

"Why do you say that?" She knew Elizabeth was digging for information, information about Alexander.

"You've seemed happier than before. What is your secret?"

Magdalena almost choked on the sip of tea she was taking but maintained her composure. "I don't have any secrets and if I did, I couldn't tell you. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?"

Changing the subject, she added, "I'm going to my room to change. I shall want to help with any clean up tasks, too." Magdalena stood up.

"Ma'am, you can't honestly mean you're going to get your hands dirty. It's enough that you have volunteered the help of your girls and spent plenty of money."

"You stay here and watch the house. I'll do what I can."

Once in her room, she sat on the bed and reminisced about the last year. Elizabeth was right about one thing; she had been happier. Her illicit liaisons with Alexander were like stealing little snippets of happiness, adding a small amount of pleasure to her



life. They met at least once a month in the hidden room. He sent his driver to deliver a message and she would practically run up the steps.

Her heart raced with anticipation of his arrival. She had added some decorative touches to their room and each time he commented on it, she glowed. Alexander even brought fresh flowers to fill her beautiful vase. One of the best presents he gave her was a book to read. It was called *The Haunted Hotel: A Mystery of Venice*.

She remembered teasing him that he was trying to scare her out of her own hotel. Even though it was a bawdy house now, the building could be turned into a regular hotel. They read several chapters together by candlelight before making wonderful love and enjoying their growing affection.

“Ma’am, the constable is at the front lobby.” Elizabeth’s voice sounded through the door.

“I’ll be right there.” As fast as she could, Magdalena readied herself to meet him. She went down the hallway and out to the lobby.

Putting on her best false smile, Magdalena greeted him, “Constable Evans, how can I help you?”

“I’m sure you’re aware of the devastation the fire caused to Jerome.”

“I would be a complete ninny, if I wasn’t aware of the fire in the business district, wouldn’t I?” She smiled.

“Madam Magdalena, I just wanted to personally thank you for the assistance you and your ladies are providing for the recovery. It’s a terrible thing for the

district and most of the business owners don't have any sort of emergency funds."

"It's nothing more than any good neighbor would do. Despite what I am and what this house provides, I am a woman with a heart."

He came closer and took her hand in his. "Indeed, you are a woman of kindness. I'm honored to know you." He placed a kiss on the top of her hand.

You could have knocked her over with a feather. In over five years living in this town, she'd never been treated with such respect by most of the proper citizens. If it hadn't been for Alexander and Dr. Carrier, she would never have been spoken to except for her girls, Jacky, and Elizabeth.

"I just wanted to stop by and thank you in person." The constable tipped his hat and went out the door.

"Can you believe that?" She spoke to an empty room. Still in a daze, Magdalena went back to her room, grabbed a pair of dungarees, and dressed for work. She pulled her hair back in a tight bun and slipped a scarf over her sable hair.

Walking out her door, she bumped right into Elizabeth. "Please, Ma'am, you don't need to do this. There's plenty of people working out there. I don't want you to get hurt. What did the constable want?"

"He thanked me for being kind." She waited for that to soak into her companion's thoughts. Finally seeing the surprise on her face, she added, "He even kissed the top of my hand like I was a proper lady."

"I'll be damned!" Elizabeth's crude words were out before she could stop them.

All Magdalena could do was laugh. "I'll be back in a while; I want to help the girls working on the building next door."

As she stepped out into the sunny day, Magdalena was amazed at the bustle of activity in the small mountainside town. The fire danger was greatly enhanced due to the geography of this small community. Jerome was built on the side of Cleopatra Hill. Buildings were built precariously on the steep mountainside literally stacked on top of each other and mostly made of wood. All of these ingredients were the perfect recipe for a fire that could spread easily from business to business.

Stepping carefully up what was left of the wooden sidewalk, she found Margaret loading a wooden wheelbarrow with broken glass, small boards, and other debris. "Madam, you shouldn't be out here. You'll hurt your hands."

"I'll be fine. Where did you get those?" She noticed the big leather well-worn gloves on Margaret's hands.

"Oh, that fellow over there gave them to me. He said I shouldn't damage my lily-white hands." She giggled as she pointed to the young man working just a few yards away.

"Well, I'll just be careful." Magdalena started grabbing the same type of debris and loading it in the wheelbarrow. "What do we do with this once it's full?"

"I just wave at him, and he takes it over there. They're making a big pile of trash for the wagons to haul it away."

"I wonder what they will do with it then?" Magdalena's brain was always working.

"I'm not sure. I guess I just didn't think about it." Margaret waved at him, and the young man came right away.

"It's full. I have help and I'm afraid that we're going to need you more and more." She was clearly flirting with him.

A slight blush colored his cheeks, and he stammered out a reply. "That'll be fine. I can handle it."

Magdalena was tickled as she watched young love in bloom. It was refreshing to see a more normal interaction between one of her girls and a young man. A thought occurred to her; I really don't know my girls. What brought Margaret to her chosen occupation? Did she really like working in The Depot? She seemed young, much younger than I am. That thought was sobering, and Magdalena shoved it aside.

"Can I help you?" She heard his voice and knew it well but was afraid to turn around. Finally, she realized that she couldn't very well ignore him in front of these two young people.

Facing Alexander, she smiled. "I don't think so, sir. We are doing simply fine." She noticed his usual three-piece suit was replaced with some bib overalls. With no shirt underneath, his muscles showed each time he moved his arms, causing her heart to race. His clothing was covered with dirt and soot as was his handsome face. "It looks as though you have already been working."

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm loading the debris from that huge pile into wagons. We're taking it to an abandoned mine and dumping it there." She wanted nothing

more than to kiss those wonderful lips and had to restrain herself from giving away any true feelings.

“Why would you do that?”

“Since the mine is abandoned, it could be a hazard. By filling it with all this debris, no one can accidentally fall down the deep shaft.”

“How smart of you to think of that.”

“As much as I’d like to take credit, Ma’am, someone else figured it out.” His head was bare and the thick unruly hair on his head billowed out, giving him a leonine look. It was fitting, she decided, as he was similar to the king of the jungle in her mind.

Nervously, she looked at Margaret and realized that the two young people were talking with each other and basically ignoring them. Looking back at Alexander, Magdalena realized she did love this man. She reached down and loaded another pile of rubble on the wheelbarrow. She felt the need to keep her hands and mind busy.

“You shouldn’t be out here.” His whispered voice reached her ears.

“Why not? You’re here.”

He hesitated before answering. “I suppose you’re right. As a successful business owner, it would be considered your obligation to help the community in a time of need.”

The surprised look on her face spoke volumes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I think I can say it best. I’m sorry, Lena. You have every right to be here helping, you should be here. I guess my comments were based on a personal basis not a professional one.”

They were working side by side loading the wheelbarrow full of garbage. As he reached down, his hand touched hers and for a full second or two, the flames of desire shot throughout their beings. "I think I need to get on with my work and leave you to yours." Alexander tried to be valiant. "Lena, I can't be near you and pretend that we are just strangers in this town."

"I know what you mean. I need to get on with this job as do you." Her desire for him showed in the light of her violet eyes.

"That sounds great, but I'm committed here."

Just as they both agreed that it wasn't going to work out for today, she heard Jacky's voice. He was pulling up in their wagon with a heavy load of supplies.

"Madam, I bought everything I could lay my hands on. Where do you want me to park the load?" Jacky had jumped down from the oversized cart. As he came closer, he eyed Alexander up and down. "Is this gentleman bothering you, Madam?"

Magdalena looked from Alexander to Jacky, trying to size up the situation. "No, not at all, Jacky, this is Alexander Douglas of Jerome. He was just helping me unload this wheelbarrow." She secretly wished that Jacky wouldn't call her Madam in Alexander's presence. "Why don't you park the load of supplies in front of The Depot, and we'll distribute it from there?"

"Aye, Madam. I'll do that right away." He agreed but didn't appear too eager to move from his spot.

“Thank you so much, Jacky. I’m sure that people will need those supplies as soon as possible.” She hinted for him to move.

“You sure you don’t need me?” He challenged.

“No, Jacky, I’ll be simply fine. Thank you for your offer. Mr. Douglas was just moving on to go back to his task.”

For a few split seconds, the three of them just stood there but finally Jacky tipped his hat toward her and left. She watched as he pulled the wagon down the street and parked it in front of The Desperation Depot.

“I’m sorry, Alexander.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you have someone in your life that takes protecting you seriously.”

“He came with the business. He served my aunt and when I inherited the entire mess, he just stayed.” She reflected on the fact that she just accepted all the people in her bordello. Even Elizabeth had just become part of her life in an accidental sort of way.

“Lena, I should be going. I would love to kiss you and hold you, but I respect your need for privacy. Hopefully, we can see each other in the next few days.” He visibly restrained his desire to touch her.

“Alexander, it won’t be long.” She turned back to start loading the wheelbarrow again. Margaret came up to her and helped with the task.

“Madam, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Did you ever want to get out of the business?”

Trying not to show her shock, Magdalena straightened up and looked at the young girl in front of her. "Margaret, I've never been in the business."

"But you're the Madam! I don't understand."

"Oh, sweet one. I inherited this business. I was married to Aunt Rose's nephew and when he died, I found out that she owned everything. The life I had on the ranch was all a pack of lies and now my punishment is the life I'm living right now. I never wanted this, but it's all I've got." Her gaze was steadfast and never wavered. "I've never been..." Her words stopped short.

"You never been a whore, like me?" Margaret started to turn away.

Magdalena grabbed her by the arm and turned her around so she could look her in the eyes. "Don't ever call yourself that! I don't know how or why you got into this business, but I do know that you are not a whore. You're misplaced, perhaps even stuck somewhere you don't want to be, but don't ever think of yourself that way."

"How do I get out? I've been feeling like this for quite a while now and flirting with that young man made me feel like a regular girl for the first time in a long time." Her voice showed the emotional pain she was feeling.

"Why did you get into this business?"

Margaret hesitated.

"You might as well tell me. I can't help if I don't know the truth, however bad it might be."

"It is ugly, I can assure you that." Margaret went over and sat down on a pile of boards. "My momma



was a widow but not for long. She married a two-bit no account and in no time at all he was taking his pleasures with me. Momma worked all the time and was never home much. She worked in the local laundry over in Prescott, from sunup to sundown, seven days a week. That left too much time for her husband, he didn't work at all."

"Oh, Margaret, I'm so sorry." The story of Margaret's young life was hard to hear.

"I was only thirteen." Her voice choked with the pain of her memories.

Magdalena sat down next to her and put her arms around the youngster. "I'm so sorry."

"The worst part is that when I told my momma, she didn't believe me. She took his side. I left and found my way here. Auntie Rose took me in when she found me living on the streets. She really saved me. Doing what I do is basically the only thing I know."

"Oh, Margaret. We've both become victims of Auntie Rose in one form or another."

They sat there for several minutes; Magdalena held the trembling young lady close to her. Just like me, she was a victim of other people making decisions that dramatically affected their lives.

"So, what do we do? How do we change it?" Margaret's innocent question was the very struggle that she herself had been dealing with in the five years since she became the Madam of a bordello.

"I think that doing things like helping this town rebuild, getting an education, learning new skills, but most of all, taking your future into your own hands is

a good start. Don't let others make decisions for you, make your own choices."

"That sounds so easy, but I have a feeling it isn't." Margaret voiced her opinion.

"You are so right. I am still struggling with that myself." Magdalena confessed.

Just then Jacky came walking up the street. "Madam, I have a message for you."

"What is it, Jacky?"

"Elizabeth wanted me to bring this letter. She said you would want it right away." He waved an envelope above his head.

Magdalena knew right away that it was a letter from her son. She stood up and took the letter from Jacky. "Thank you for bringing this to me. I appreciate it."

She held the precious communication in her hand. The letters came to her at least twice a year, but the information in them was less personal. She still valued any word from her precious Benjamin and would not let any negative thoughts invade her mind. Jacky walked back down the street once he handed off the communique.

"Madam, are you okay?" Margaret's question invaded her thoughts.

"Yes, yes, I am. I'm going to go to the Depot and read this letter in private." She turned to her young employee. "Are you okay with staying here by yourself?"

"Absolutely, I want to thank you for caring. I will take your advice to heart and work on getting myself

out of this place.” Margaret spoke her heart’s thoughts.

Magdalena turned to the young woman. “I want you to know that I will help you in any way I can. Neither of us want to be here in this profession and if I can help you get out, I will. Please come to me with any ideas you have.” With that, she walked down the rough street and into the door of The Desperation Depot.

She went straight to her room and with trembling hands, Magdalena ripped open the envelope. Before looking at the letter, she sat on the lounge chair. Her hands shook. Her son’s letters were coming fewer and farther between. She was losing him, and it tore at her heart. This was all Edward’s fault, she cursed him yet again. Finally, she pulled the pages out and started to read.

*Dear Momma,*

*It’s been over five years now and I find myself forgetting what your beautiful face looks like. I hope you can remember me. I have grown as I am now over thirteen years old. I’ve grown taller, just like Poppa. Mother Williams says I’m going to be quite handsome in a few years and the girls will be after me. I can only hope that you’re alright as I love the letters you send me. Please reconsider letting me come to visit you. I would love to make sure you’re okay. I love you,*  
*Benjamin*

The pain in her heart had been constant for the last five years, but just when she thought it couldn't hurt more, this latest letter tore through her emotions. Laying back on her bed, she cried unashamedly. Damn you, Edward!

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The slight knock on her bedroom door interrupted her crying jag for just a second.

"I'm fine." Was all she could muster.

"Are you sure?" Elizabeth was persistent.

"Let me alone!" Magdalena finally shouted. She waited but finally heard footsteps going away from her door. As she lay back on her bed, Magdalena grabbed the crocheted cover and pulled it up to cover herself. It wasn't that she was cold, it was that she needed some security and comfort.

She had no idea how long she'd been sleeping as her room didn't have any windows and she'd lost track of time. She did hear movement outside of her door and figured that the girls were busy with entertaining their customers. Slipping out of her work clothes and into her customary black gown, Magdalena finished cleaning up and went out to the lobby.

There were several men waiting and her piano player was plunking away at the upright in the corner. Normally his music made her smile, but today it was like an irritant on her skin. She went over to him and leaned closer so that only he could hear. "James, I feel the need to hear something less lively. Can you find a slower, less cheerful tune?"

"Absolutely, Madam." The music changed immediately to a slow, mellow number at her request.

Magdalena walked to the front door and looking back at the action in the lobby, stepped out on the front deck. The sky was dark, but a few stars dared to shine in the sky. She stepped to the wooden rail surrounding the deck and leaned against it, staring at the stars above. The busy action out on the street was interesting to watch as people moved from building to building. This business was good for her, financially. She appreciated that, but the emotional toll was too much to bear.

“Hey, hey. This here’s the one I been waiting for.” A gruff voice came from her left side.

“You can’t have that one, you fool! She’s the boss.” By now their footsteps were right behind her.

Magdalena didn’t take time to think about her reaction, she simply turned around and faced them. Putting on her haughtiest look, she first stared at one then the other.

“Come here, Wagtail. It’s time for some loving.” He grabbed her and pulled Magdalena into his grubby arms and tried to plant a sloppy kiss on her face. She struggled to free herself of his grasp.

“If you don’t release me, Sir, I’ll have to take serious action.”

His crude laughter and alcoholic breath were offensive, and she once again tried to get out of his hold. Reaching into her pocket, Magdalena pulled out her pistol. Putting it directly up to his nose, her words emphasized her intentions.

“Let go of me or you’ll not live to tell this story.” She cocked the gun as his friend tried to pull him away.

“Come on, you idiot! She means business.”

“You’re damn right! Now, the both of you get out of here and I’d better not see you on this sidewalk again.” She never moved her gun from his face.

He slowly released her and backed up. “I heard about you. You’re the Madam of this here bawdy house and everyone says you’re crazy. I believe it now.”

“That’s good, because I am not in my right mind, and I could just go wild at any time. You won’t want to be near me when that happens.” She laughed with no humor as she watched the two men run up the street, looking back to see if they were being followed.

“Madam, are you safe?” Jacky’s voice greeted her from the open door of The Depot. “I was just coming through the lobby and saw you out here. I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner. I’d have taken care of those rat-bags for you.”

She went over and sat down on the wooden bench in front of her place. “I had the gun you got for me. It did the trick. They won’t be bothering me again.”

Jacky sat down next to her. “I’m glad you had that. Madam, you shouldn’t be out here by yourself at night. It’s not safe at all.”

“Unfortunately, I realize that now. It won’t happen again.” She patted him on the knee. “Thanks again for the gun.”

## Chapter Six

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**“S**he was really a good woman, wasn’t she?” Ellie asked of the two men sitting next to her.

“It seems so, but what’s with that Jacky? I think he’s trying to move in on her.” Shotgun gave his opinion.

“Oh, he definitely is.” John agreed. “Hey, are we going to get some dinner?”

“Order a pizza. I want to see what happens next, don’t you?” Ellie snuggled closer to her husband.

“Part of me does and part of me doesn’t.” He replied.

“What do you mean?” Ellie was surprised at his response.

“I’m starting to like her, and I have a feeling that her life is going to start a downward spiral. I don’t think I want to know that.”

“Awww, you’re just an old softy. I thought being the sheriff meant you were the toughest guy in town,” she teased.

“It’s really sad about her son. He’s growing up without her and it breaks her heart. This could be her undoing.” Shotgun added.

1895 Jerome

“Elizabeth!” Magdalena’s call was heard throughout the building.

“Ma’am, you called?” Elizabeth appeared at the door of the office.

“Where’s Margaret? She was supposed to be here to finish the monthly reports.”

“I’m not sure, Ma’am. I’ll find her and send her to you.” Elizabeth left to search for the missing young lady.

Magdalena stood up and started to pace the small space in front of the desk. Margaret interrupted her restless movements.

“Sorry, Madam. I was just finishing my homework for the tutor. He comes today and I want to get a good grade.”

“I’m sure you’ll do simply fine. I am so glad that you are helping me with this bookkeeping stuff. It’s boring for me, and you seem to like dealing with all those figures.”

“Oh, I do, Madam. I can’t thank you enough for taking me out of the line of girls. This opportunity will give me the chance to get a new life.” She quickly sat down behind the desk and opened the ledgers.

“I’m going to the celebration for the new railroad station. It’s going to be quite the event.”

“Umm, forgive me for speaking out, but you can change if you want. I can handle this.” Margaret waited for a response.

“I’m already dressed. I just need to make sure that everyone is ready in the house for guests. You know with all those miners and now visitors from Prescott,



we'll be busier than ever." She smoothed down the black crepe dress as she started to leave the office. "Finish up those ledgers before you meet with your tutor and then you can come join the celebrations at the railway station, if you want."

"Thank you, Madam."

As soon as she went into the lobby, Magdalena saw that business was booming even in the early hours of the day. With the population swelling to over 15,000 inhabitants in the town of Jerome and two mines working 24-hour shifts, usual business hours could mean 24 hours a day. This meant that she was making unheard of profits, but all the money in the world couldn't bring her happiness.

"Ma'am, are you going to the celebration?" Elizabeth was by her side.

"Yes, you're welcome to join me. I'm sure Jacky can handle any problems that might arise."

"Thank you, but I'll stay here. You enjoy yourself." As an added thought, "Ma'am, please heed your decisions today. I feel trouble might be in the air."

Magdalena put her hand on her companion's arm. "I always take your warnings seriously. Elizabeth, thank you for caring about me."

"Always, Ma'am. Be careful, especially if you see your Mr. Douglas. There will be eyes upon you both."

It didn't surprise her that Elizabeth was finally bold enough to speak of her secret meetings with Alexander. As careful as they tried to be, she knew that Elizabeth had become aware of their encounters, but until now she'd never said a word. His touch still set her on fire, and she basked with immense pleasure

when they could meet. She knew he wanted more than these back door trysts, but because she loved him with every cell in her body, Magdalena would never allow her disreputable occupation to touch him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be discreet and in the back-ground. Remember, I’m still the Madam of a bordello and I can never forget that in this town.”

She grabbed her hat and veil and walked out into the crisp January day, walking down the sidewalk to the railway station. Elizabeth ran after her. “Ma’am, you might need this.” She handed her a small parasol.

The smell in the air wasn’t what one would want. With that huge increase in the occupants of this town, the number of outhouses also grew. Most people just threw their wastewater out into the streets leaving a horrible stench hanging in the air and creating a mud bog where the street should be. She had to walk carefully and try her best to stay on the wooden sidewalk.

She saw the work was almost completed on the Catholic Church. It was a grand structure not only because of its design, but it stood out among the tents and burned-out buildings. The reconstruction after the fire was taking some people more time than others.

Just as she was nearing the station, she heard a buggy pull up behind her. Without turning around, she intuitively knew it would be him. She heard his voice and her spirits lifted. She couldn’t stop the grin from covering her still beautiful face. “Lena, can I give you a lift? You shouldn’t put yourself in harm’s way. The street is a mess and with all the people around you might get hurt or worse.”

She turned around to look at Alexander, ready to turn down his offer, but seeing the handsome smile on his face, she felt her determination wavering. Striving to be strong she replied, "I'm almost there. I appreciate the offer, but I think I should be on my own." His disappointment showed.

"Very well. I shall see you there." He didn't look angry, just defeated. He urged his horses on and didn't look back.

Just as she wanted to call after him, she heard a voice from behind. "Madam, I have an arm available. May I assist you to the celebration?" It was Jacky. Putting on a phony smile, she fought the frown that might cross her face. She looked at him as he caught up with her. "Of course, I can always use the company." She put her hand on his arm and together they walked the rest of the way to the station. The crowd was growing, and she could feel the excitement in the air.

"This is quite a big day for Jerome. We can finally connect with Prescott without taking a horrible wagon ride over those mountains." She tried to make small talk.

"It could mean that we can get some supplies cheaper too." Jacky added.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that point. We can usually get things down in Cottonwood, but another source will make them realize that they must compete. It might lower prices indeed."

The crowd included all of the important people in town including the owners of the more legitimate businesses such as the stores, post office, and restau-

rants. She noticed several Madams from the other dozen or more bordellos. The officials from the United Verde and Pacific railway system were present in their top hats and official regalia.

She noticed the yellow ribbon stretched across the track waiting for the ceremonial ribbon cutting. A brass ragtag band was playing lively tunes and people were laughing and dancing. "This is a big deal for this town." She stated the obvious as she pulled her hand from his arm and opened the parasol to cover her from the direct sunlight. In Arizona, the weather could be chilly in January, but the direct sunlight can still cause a sunburn. It also gave her a discreet way of shielding her from the eyes of curious people.

"Thank you for the escort." She said to Jacky in the way of a dismissal, but he didn't seem to get the message.

"Will you look at them? No class, those painted cats. Our girls at least have a little style to themselves, don't they?"

His words startled her as he referred to them as 'our' girls. Slowly she turned to face him, "Jacky, I believe they are my girls." Without waiting for his response, Magdalena walked a few steps away. She saw Dr. Carrier and waved at him. He motioned for her to come over.

She smiled and started in his direction. She was stopped by a pull on her arm that startled her. As she turned, she saw it was Jacky. "I'm sorry if I insulted you. I meant nothing by it, Madam."

"It's fine. I'm going over to say hello to the doctor." With that, Magdalena worked her way through the

crowd of people and finally was standing next to the doctor.

“Magdalena, you’re as beautiful as ever. What do you think of this? We’re becoming an actual city.”

“That only means the end for me. You know when we get civilized, they’ll want me and my girls to disappear.” She smiled at him.

“You’re a smart enough businesswoman to find another way to make a living. By the way, I never got to thank you for sending Daisy over to help me after the fire. She was incredibly good and picked things up very quickly.”

Magdalena noticed the admiration in his words. “I’ve taken Margaret off the floor, too. She’s doing the bookkeeping for me now. I’ve found she has a real knack for numbers.”

His smile lit up. “You are such a good woman. None of the other Madams would even think of the things you’re doing.”

The blush growing on her cheeks was answer enough for him. “You know, you too have other talents. You don’t need to be running that house.”

“I’ll have to think about that. Right now, I hear the train coming in and I want to see the ribbon cutting.” Magdalena chose to ignore his suggestion. Her stray thoughts went to the letter from Benjamin. It would be wonderful to have him back in her life again, if only she could be an upstanding member of the community.

Everyone started to cheer, and the emotions of the crowd were high with excitement. The officials of the railroad stepped to the track and held up an oversized

pair of scissors. "This is to signify forward moving progress and growth for the town of Jerome!" The speaker yelled out over the roar of the throng.

The cheers went up and she could hardly hear her own voice. It was an exciting time in this small community. She searched the crowd for Alexander and soon found him standing at the edge of the station. His eyes seemed to sense her stare and their eyes locked for a few moments.

Jacky had caught up with her and as he greeted the doctor, she felt a sense of DeJa'Vu. Elizabeth had warned her of trouble for today, maybe it involved him.

The train chugged slowly into the station and the crowd cheered even louder. As the passengers from Prescott departed the train, several distinguished gentlemen joined the officials from the railroad. There were more speeches and more pats on the backs for each other. She grew tired of the pomp and circumstances and bidding good day to the doctor, wandered through the crowd. Her senses said that Jacky wasn't far behind, but she wasn't in the mood for his company today.

As she shut her parasol, Magdalena felt that he couldn't keep track of her as easily, although her black dress was usually a dead giveaway. Stepping lightly, she turned quickly and headed down between two buildings. There were still a lot of people milling about but when she felt strong arms on her back, Magdalena nearly lost it.

"Lena, come with me."

With no hesitation at all, she grabbed the hand he offered and together they dashed down the alley and into his waiting carriage. Shutting the door, she settled into the seat but not before placing a tender kiss on his cheek. "Alexander, thank you for rescuing me."

"Oh, milady, I will always be there to save you." They finally took the time to embrace and share an emotional kiss.

"Where are we going?" She asked when they finally took a breath.

"To my cabin. Is that alright with you?" He was still holding her tenderly.

"Oh, heavens yes."

His driver moved the carriage carefully through the crowded streets and out onto the country road that led them to the cabin. She hadn't been there in a while as they mostly met in her hidden room. She was happy just to be in his arms, no matter where it was.

They reached the cabin and as the driver pulled away, Alexander pulled her into his strong arms. "Lena, I miss you terribly when we can't be together."

"Me too. It's just the way things must be." Together they went into the cabin where she was greeted with a toasty fire and a tray of food. "You are too good to me, Alexander. I don't deserve all of this."

"You deserve this and so much more. Please, let me make an honest woman of you. I love you." His words were music to her ears and yet, pain etched her pretty face.

She went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Oh, Alexander, you know that we can't do that. It would ruin you and your family. We've gone

over this before. Please, let's not speak of it again. I want to enjoy these moments with you, not argue."

"I have one last thought to plant in your head. We could go to Canada, and I'd work in the family business up there. No one would need to know your past and we could start anew." Before she could protest, he put a sweet kiss on her lips. "Just think about it, okay?"

She nodded her head but released her hold on him. "I'll think about it."

"What can I get you to drink? How about some champagne to celebrate our time together?"

"A cup of tea would be fine." She went over to sit in the chair by the window looking out over the woods. "The view from this window is special. It's like we are the only people left in the world."

Alexander came and sat on the opposite chair as he handed her a drink of tea. "I wish it were only that simple."

"We've been doing this for years. We've talked about many things in our lives, but I need to know that the most important conversation is the one we're going to have right now." She looked him in the eyes, "I want to talk about my son."

"Benjamin? Lena, I'm aware of your love for your only child. What is causing you such distress today?"

"The last letter I got from him broke my heart. I have lost him and that's something that will haunt me till my dying days."

"How can I help? What do you want me to do?" Alexander leaned forward and put his hands over hers.



Her voice shook as she responded, "I want you to promise that if anything ever happens to me, you'll take care of Benjamin."

"Lena, nothing is going to happen to you. Please stop talking like that."

"You know my companion, Elizabeth? Of course, you do. She's more than a friend, she has a gift, she's a reader."

"Since we first met, I thought that she was something special. What has this to do with your request?" He wanted to get closer but didn't want to break this intimate conversation.

"Lately, she's been more specific with her concerns. I know after all these years that she only gives me enough information to allow me to use my own intuition. She knows we've been seeing each other." Magdalena waited for his reaction.

"Do you think she doesn't approve?"

"Oh, no, it's not something like that. I think she sees danger for me in the near future. She's telling me enough to encourage me to be extremely careful. With that knowledge, I need to ask you again, will you take care of my son?"

He stood and pulled her to her feet into his warm, strong embrace. "Absolutely! I am totally dedicated to you and that includes your son. I'll do whatever is needed but please don't speak of something bad happening to you again."

She pulled a small piece of notepaper from the pocket in her dress. "Here is Benjamin's information. I love you, Alexander and thank you. I can rest now, knowing that my son will have you to take care of

him. I've also listed the name of my attorney as he has the details of my financial information. It all goes to Benjamin with the stipulation that he never know how I earned my money."

"How can you prevent him from learning that?"

"He's to be told that it was his Poppa's money from the ranch."

"I don't like to talk about any of this. Nothing is going to happen to you. I won't allow it." He tightened his grip on her.

"You're so good to me." She kissed him tenderly. "I should get back. They'll be looking for me."

Alexander rang the bell and in no time at all, the driver came for them. As they passed the now nearly abandoned railway station, she turned to him. "Thank you so much, Alexander. I can't tell you how much it relieves my mind to know that I don't have to worry about things now."

As the driver stopped the carriage, she gave him one last kiss. "It was a wonderful day. We'll talk soon."

Once inside the bordello, Magdalena went straight to her office. Margaret was still in there, which surprised her.

"Why are you still here? You should have been done hours ago."

"Sorry, Madam, I found several mistakes in the receipts and wanted to track down the information."

"Did you?" She asked.

Margaret hesitated long enough to raise Magdalena's suspicions. She knew the young lady was afraid

to tell her the results of her investigation. "What did you find? Speak up."

"Madam, someone has been padding the receipts."

"Are you telling me that someone is stealing from me? Who? Who would do such a horrible dastardly thing?" When she still didn't get a response from her, Magdalena pressed. "Tell me the name of the horns-woggler!"

"It's Jacky. Some of the receipts he turns in have been altered."

"How far back did you go? How long has he been doing this vile thing?"

"I found receipts that go back as far as the fire of '94. Remember when you had him go down to Cottonwood and buy those building supplies? Well, he almost doubled the numbers."

"That, that..." She stopped herself from further expletives. Turning to Margaret, her tone softened, "Thank you so much for your hard work. I genuinely appreciate your diligence."

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you. You're so trusting and kind and then to have someone close to you betray that confidence, well, that must be terrible. What will you do?" Margaret asked but quickly added, "Oh, I'm sorry, that's none of my business, is it?"

"You go along now. I'll deal with this in my own way. Keep this under your hat, understand?" She opened the door of her office and held it for Margaret.

"I will, Madam. You have my word."

Just as she was leaving, Elizabeth came down the hall. "Ma'am."

“Elizabeth, please come in and let’s talk.”

She filled her in on the discovery made by Margaret. “What are you going to do, Ma’am?”

“I haven’t decided, but I’ll figure a way to use this to my advantage with that crusty old man.” They both giggled like schoolgirls.

“Be careful, Ma’am. He’s definitely crusty, but also wily. I wouldn’t trust that one any further than I could throw him.” Elizabeth warned.

“I will, my friend. Thank you for being there for me all these years. I wouldn’t have known how to handle it if not for you and your support.” Magdalena’s eyes teared up a bit.

With a quick hug, Elizabeth left the office. Magdalena sat at the desk and looked over the receipts and entries that proved Jacky had been stealing from the business and from her. Shaking her head, she left the paperwork lying on the desk, locked the office door and went up the stairs to her hidden room.

She took out her journal and entered several paragraphs about the most recent incidents in her life. It helped her get rid of some of the stress by writing down the details.

As she sat on the lounge by the bed Magdalena lit the lamp and grabbed the book Alexander had given her. Reading was a simple pleasure, one she thoroughly enjoyed. It gave her the opportunity to escape from her own world of troubles and unhappiness and into the woes and adventures of someone else. She fell fast asleep letting the book drop to the floor.

When she woke up, Magdalena was a little disoriented at first. Quickly realizing where she was and

that she needed to get back downstairs, she blew out the lamp and hurried down. She heard the action in The Depot and knew business was bustling. She went to the landing and looked over the railing to see the piano player plunking away with a lively tune, girls were dancing, and men were waiting.

She noticed Jacky at the bar drinking with some of the customers. Her anger stirred, but she decided now was not the right time. He looked up and waved at her. She put on her best phony smile and waved back at him. You'll get yours soon enough, she thought to herself.

Tired from all the excitement of the day, Magdalena turned and went to her own room. The fire in her small fireplace had already been lit and she went over to warm her hands. Slipping out of her stiff black crepe, she found her dressing gown and sat down on the chair closest to the fire. Leaning back, she found herself relaxing and for the first time in quite a while, felt that things would be okay. Her future could have some possibilities with Alexander's latest proposal.

Much later, she woke up and made her way to the bed, but not before locking her bedroom door. The noise from the house had subsided and she could fall back asleep easily. Her dreams were pleasant enough, not the dark dramas that usually entered her head at night.

The knock on her locked door aroused Magdalena. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. What's the problem?" She got out of bed and unlocked the door. "What's wrong?"

"You don't usually sleep this late, and I was worried about you."

"What time is it?" She asked but at the same time was checking the nightstand for the pocket watch she'd kept from her father. As she noticed it was after ten, Magdalena turned and smiled at her companion. "I haven't slept this late in so long. It feels good."

"As long as you're feeling fine. I was just concerned." Elizabeth started to leave her room. "Do you need help dressing?"

"Thank you, I can manage. I'll be out soon. Let's have a cup of tea and some breakfast, okay?"

"I've already eaten, but I could do with another cup. I'll see you in the kitchen." She shut the door after herself.

The lobby had a few men and her girls socializing. The miners in this town worked twenty-four hours a day, creating a need for her business in the same mode. It was busier at night, but not uncommon at all hours of the day. She shrugged her shoulders, determined not to let anything get her down today.

Her cup was already at the head of the table with a plate of fresh-baked biscuits. Elizabeth filled it with hot water. "Would you like something more to eat?"

"This will be fine. I'll have some of that wonderful jam that Conchita makes."

"What has put you in such a good mood?"

"I think I finally have a way out of this black world. I'll let you know when the details get figured out." When she saw the look on Elizabeth's face, Magdalena added, "Oh, my friend, you're included in my plans. Please don't worry."

“Could you find Jacky and send him to my office? I have some bad news to deliver to that little reprobate.” She stood and walked with lighter steps to the office.

In a very short time, Jacky entered without knocking. His attitude was arrogant. “You called for me, Madam?”

“Yes, did you get those lock boxes made for me?”

“I did indeed. They’re in the spare room by the kitchen.” He sat down.

“Could I have the receipt?” She held out her hand.

“Sure, but I don’t have it on me. I’ll have to get it to you later.” He seemed puzzled by her questions. “Is something wrong, Madam?”

“No, in fact, things couldn’t be more right.” She stood and faced him squarely, her posture straight and unforgiving. “Your services are no longer needed here at The Desperation Depot. Pack your things and get out now.” Her voice was calm, her face showed no emotion as she waited for his reaction.

“What are you talking about? You’re getting rid of me after I’ve done so much for you.” He stood, his face reddening with anger.

“I’ll have nothing to do with a thief and a liar. You have stolen from me and these girls for the last time. Now, get out.”

“You’ll be sorry. You’re nothing more than a hedge-creeper even though you put on those airs. I’ll make your life miserable before I’m done with the likes of you!” He pointed a crooked finger at her. “You better watch out!”





## Chapter Seven

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**I** told you I didn't like Jacky. I knew he was a sneaky rat!" Ellie pointed her finger at her uncle. "You old guys can't be trusted." She laughed at the look on his face. "You know I don't mean it."

John laughed. "You are funny, lady. I didn't like him either. He was sneaky. Hey, are you ready for another piece of pizza?" He handed her one as she nodded but kept reading.

"I wonder what kind of trouble Jacky is going to give her?" Ellie asked the question in each of their minds. "Maybe he's full of hot air and won't do anything."

"I was just wondering just how many fires were there in Jerome back then?" Shotgun asked.

"There was a fire that started down in the mine in 1894 that they say lasted twenty plus years. They tried various methods to put it out, but it burned forever."

"How could they do any mining with a fire burning down there?" Ellie was surprised at the information John just shared.

"There were over 80 miles of tunnels down there. They could just move the miners to a different tunnel

*and keep on working.” John volunteered what he knew about the mines. “I seem to remember that there were at least four terrible fires that directly burned the town. I think the next came in 1897.”*

*Shotgun rifled through his stack of papers until he found the right information. “Yeah, I think you’re right, the next fire shouldn’t happen until 1897.” He confirmed.*

### 1896 Jerome

“Ma’am, we have more trouble.” Elizabeth came into the office.

“What now?” She put down the paper she was reading.

“I would think that idiot would have grown tired of this game. It’s been over six months now since you fired him.”

“Well, at least his efforts have just caused us minimal frustrations and no real damage. What’s happened now?”

“Perhaps you could come outside and see for yourself.” Elizabeth suggested.

They both walked out the swinging doors onto the wooden sidewalk surrounding The Depot. Magdalena almost walked right into the effigy swinging from her balcony. “Oh, my!”

As she backed up, Magdalena could see what appeared to be an image of herself strung up by a hangman’s rope dangling from the top balcony. “It’s not very flattering, is it?” They both looked up at the figure dressed in a black crepe dress swaying in the

slight breeze. The head had been formed from a feed sack with big googly eyes and a frown on her lips.

“Get Raul to take it down. I’ll tell the constable regarding this latest incident, but I doubt that he will do anything about it. Jacky’s efforts are just an annoyance. So far, no real damage has been done.”

“I hope he doesn’t get more serious, Ma’am. I’m a bit concerned.” Elizabeth voiced her worries.

“No need, he’s just trying to scare me, but I don’t get scared so easily anymore. I’m going to go and work with Margaret on the books. She’s doing so great; I don’t have to do more than look over the final totals.” Magdalena spoke proudly of her young protege. I want to help her get an honorable position with a firm in Prescott.”

“You’ve done so much for the girls that wanted your help. Daisy is now Dr. Carrier’s full-time assistant and I think there may be a little romance blooming there, too.” Elizabeth reflected.

“If any of the others want out of this disgusting business, let me know.” Without noticing the glaring eyes of Jacky staring at her from across the street, she turned and went back inside.

Elizabeth started after Magdalena, but sensing something was off, she saw he was there and shot him a dark look. He quickly disappeared into the nearest saloon. Very few people would cross her, and most were leery of her abilities. Some even spoke in whispers about her powers, suspecting her to be a psychic or even worse a witch, a member of the occult. Those that didn’t know Elizabeth personally avoided her and recognized her complete dedication to Magdale-

na. She was the best protection the Madam of The Desperation Depot could have in this town.

Elizabeth went to the office and entered without knocking as the door was already open. "Ma'am, we're going to have some more trouble today."

This comment got Magdalena's immediate attention and she looked up from her paperwork to ask, "Elizabeth, what is it? Why do you think there's going to be more problems to deal with?"

Before she could answer, one of the girls came to the door of the office. "Madam, there's someone out here that wants to see you."

Before she could go out the office door, Elizabeth put her hand on Magdalena's arm. She didn't speak but as their eyes locked, the message was sent and received that this was the newest problem.

Striking a confident pose in the middle of the lobby was the most remarkable woman she'd ever seen. The woman had her back to Magdalena, but all the bright pink satin layers of her dress and the golden blond hair swept up in a halo of curls led her to believe that this was definitely trouble. Upon hearing the sound of feet on the floorboards, she turned to face Magdalena.

It was all she could do not to gasp aloud. The woman's face was painted with rouge, eye shadow and lips in the same vivid pink color of her dress. The age of the woman was a mystery due to all the makeup smeared on her face. She smiled and greeted Magdalena, "Hello there. I thought it was about time we met. I'm Bertha Brown."

"I'm Magdalena. Would you like to sit down?" They went to the small settee in the corner of the lobby.

"You are certainly not what I expected. You don't look like the Madam of the most successful bordello in Jerome."

"What can I do for you?" Magdalena ignored the comments about her looks. Secretly she was glad that her looks didn't match her business title.

"Well, I believe in taking the bull by the horns and I've heard you own the best bawdy house in Jerome."

This was not the reputation she wanted; Magdalena shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Conchita came out of the kitchen with a tray of tea and cookies. She sat it on the table in front of the two women and quickly left the room.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Don't you have anything stronger. I may look like a dainty woman, but I like a stiff belt every now and again."

"Sure, I'll get some whiskey for you. Be right back." She stood and quickly went over to the bar. Once behind it, she grabbed the bottle of her finest whiskey and a glass.

Sitting back down again, Magdalena handed her the bottle and glass. "Aren't you going to join me?"

"No, thank you. I'll just have a cup of tea, but you help yourself." She watched as Bertha poured herself a generous amount of the brown liquid and down it all in one swallow. Bertha poured another but set it on the table.

"So, how can I help you?" Magdalena asked again.

"Well, Dearie, I just bought the three acres next to your place. I plan on building as fast as I can, and I wanted you to hear it from the horse's mouth." The painted woman stared at her, waiting for a reaction.

"That's a lot of land. It must have cost you a fortune." Magdalena's response was one of surprise. "Why so much land?"

She spoke with grand gestures. "I plan to start with one building, but I know that what I have to offer will allow me to expand. I intend to be the best bawdy house in the Verde Valley, not just Jerome." She waited for those words to sink into Magdalena's head.

"Well, that's a lofty dream, Bertha. I wish you all the luck in your endeavor."

"You ain't upset? You aren't afraid I'll put you out of business?" Her painted eyes squinted up as she waited for an answer.

"Madam Bertha, I do believe there's enough business in this town for all of us. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Please call again if you would like." With that dismissal, both women stood, and Magdalena watched as Bertha huffed out.

Before she could go back to her office, Elizabeth came into the lobby. "She's trouble, Ma'am."

"I'm not worried. Let her have all the business, then I can close this den of iniquity down. I'm going upstairs to see if Conchita's husband has put the lock boxes in place. He is really a great worker. I'm glad we got him here."

"Conchita is happy that he no longer works down in the mine. He's had several accidents that were

pretty severe. It was a great arrangement for all of us.”

Magdalena climbed the stairs to the balcony and saw that most of the boxes were already put into the wall of the lounge.

“Madam, is this how you wanted these here squirrel holes?” He pointed to the wall of lock boxes.

She giggled, “What did you call them?”

“The miners call these boxes squirrel holes. It’s like when a squirrel puts its nuts in their nests for safekeeping. I think you are doing a great thing for the miners. They work very hard for their money and to have it stolen is a bad thing.”

“Thank you, I’m glad you’re here working for us now. If you need anything, just let me or Elizabeth know. I do want you to save six of those boxes for a special place in the basement. I’ll let you know where you can mount them when you’re ready.”

He nodded his head and went back to installing the rest of the boxes. She was watching for a few minutes when a memory of living on the ranch popped into her head. Edward was exceptionally good at building things around the ranch house. When she asked him to build some bookshelves in Benjamin’s room, he readily complied. It was a grand project, and her son loved all the books and trinkets he stored on the shelves.

“I’ll leave you to your task.” She went downstairs and to the office.

Elizabeth popped in to tell her that she was going to the post office. “I’ll be back shortly. Is there anything you need me to pick up?”

“No, I can’t think of a thing.”

Finally finishing her perusal of the books, Magdalena left her office, but not before she locked the door. Since firing Jacky, she had taken security efforts more seriously. Several things were missing, and she blamed him. None of the items were valuable, but it was just the nuisance of having to replace them. The effigy of her was the most personal attack so far.

Going to the kitchen, she helped herself to a muffin and a cup of tea. Instead of sitting there, Magdalena went out the back door and sat at a little table on the porch. The weather for April was wonderful. The town of Jerome was high enough from the Verde Valley to offer some cool air even during the noon hours.

She sipped her tea and thought once again about the offer Alexander had made. He hadn’t mentioned it again in their recent meetings, but she kept the idea alive in her head and her heart. To be able to live a normal life with her son was a driving force in the decisions she made daily.

Elizabeth interrupted her thoughts. “Ma’am, I’m back and you won’t believe what I saw.”

“Have a seat and catch your breath.” She motioned for her to sit down.

“Ma’am, I saw Jacky walking arm in arm with that new Madam!”

The news was surprising. “I hope she knows what she’s getting into with that scalawag.”

“Ma’am, do you realize that he knows all about how we run this business? He could be sharing information that will help her.”



“Elizabeth, I really do wish her the best of luck. We make enough money and there’s plenty for everyone. The miners know we’re looking out for them, and they seem to be loyal to us. I’m not concerned at all.”

“Ma’am, can I be so bold as to suggest something?”

“Elizabeth, I’ve not known you to keep your thoughts to yourself. Please speak frankly.” Magdalena had a suspicion about her companion’s reluctance.

“I know it’s been quite a while since you and Alexander have been together, but may I suggest that you resist his good looks for the time being. Jacky has been watching us and it would be devastating for him to find out about your relationship.”

She hesitated before answering. “I agree. I will try to be extra careful but I’m not going to let that no-account chicken thief rule my life. Thank you for your concern. Please don’t worry.”

“I never worry, Ma’am. I know.” Elizabeth got up and patted Magdalena on the shoulder as she went back into the kitchen. Magdalena noticed that her companion’s shoulders seemed to stoop a bit more these days and the wrinkles on her face were a bit deeper. It was another reminder that they were both getting on in years.

Sitting there for a few minutes longer, she allowed her thoughts to run to her true love, for that is what he had become. For all these years now, they shared tender moments and talked about their innermost secrets in life. They laughed, cried, and dreamed about what could happen.

The door opened behind her, and a familiar voice interrupted her thoughts. "Madam, I was told you were out here."

"Daisy, how nice of you to visit." She hugged the young woman. "What brings you here?"

"I wanted you to be the first to know. Myron and I are going to be married!"

"Oh, Daisy, that's wonderful. I can see by the look on your face that you're happy. When are you two going to be married?"

"We want it to happen right away. I came because I wanted you to be there. Will you?"

"Oh, Daisy, I wouldn't miss this for anything. You represent a dream come true. Where are you holding the ceremony?"

"I've been taking the required classes and we're to be married at the Catholic Church. Please say you'll come." Daisy begged.

Magdalena laughed whole-heartedly but hesitated with her answer. "I'm not so sure I should be there; I think that would be inviting disaster for sure. I haven't been in church for years and never in a Catholic Church. Sit down. Can I get you some tea?"

"I'll get it." Daisy left for a minute but returned with a fresh hot water pot and some more muffins. "Let me refresh yours."

When she finally sat down, Magdalena spoke. "Daisy, I'm thrilled that you and Myron have found each other."

"Please, Madam, please come to our wedding. If it hadn't been for you, I would never have found this wonderful man and a great new life."

"I'll think about it. When is the joyful day?"

"It's in two weeks. I'm so happy but at the same time, I'm scared. What if I'm not a good wife?"

Magdalena reached out and put her hands over Daisy's trembling ones. "You're going to be a great wife. Myron is a good man and I'm very sure he sees the great person that you are, otherwise, he wouldn't have proposed."

"He is a good man, isn't he? I fell in love with him the first day you sent me up there to help him during the fire." The smile on her face was radiant.

"He's been incredibly good to me and the girls. I'll let you know if I can be there."

"I wish you could find love like I have. You're such a good person and deserve happiness."

"I'm sure that won't happen. My time has passed for that sort of thing." Magdalena crossed her fingers under the table.

"Didn't you love your husband?"

Magdalena thought long and hard before answering that question. "I was his wife, I had his child, but I'm not sure any of it involved love. My marriage was a business deal and not much more. Edward wasn't cruel, but we didn't have much love between us."

When she saw the look of dismay on Daisy's face, she added, "Every marriage is different. I know you and Myron will be totally in love and incredibly happy."

"Oh, I hope so." Daisy stood up, ready to leave. "Please consider coming to our wedding. I'm sure Myron would love to have you there." She placed a

kiss on Magdalena's cheek before leaving her on the porch.

Suddenly Magdalena saw Alexander's carriage drive by, and she knew he would be upstairs in their secret room. Her heart raced and she quickly looked around to see if anyone else saw that happen. This mess with Jacky was affecting her senses, making her paranoid.

Slowly, she stood up and headed back into the kitchen. Several times she looked out the window to make sure that their signal was not seen by anyone else. Her desire overruled her common sense and she started for the hidden room. She had to contain her enthusiasm to not make any unusual noise.

When she opened the door, he was already standing there in all his glory. He was magnificent and her heart overflowed with love. Straining to contain her excitement, she almost knocked him over with her hug. "I'm so happy to see you."

Their kiss was one for the ages. Her hands roamed up his strong back as he touched her in hidden places. "I've missed you so, Lena."

"I love you, Alexander. I've missed you, too." She placed another sweet kiss on his eager lips.

"You want to finish reading that book?" He asked.

She shook her head and gave him a suspicious grin.

"What do you want to do?" He teased, knowing full well what was on her mind.

They spent the next hour just loving, touching, and enjoying each other's company. Finally satisfied, they lay back and snuggled in the feather bed. "Lena, I

heard that Jacky's been giving you trouble. Someone said he hung an image of you from your balcony."

"His attempts at scaring me have only been minor. He's just angry because I fired him and he's trying to humiliate me, that's all." She tried to convince Alexander.

"I don't like it; I don't like it at all. I'm going to have a talk with him." Alexander leaned up on his elbow. "I never liked the scoundrel."

"He's really harmless. Elizabeth saw him and the new Madam talking together. She figures he'll be working for her and that'll be the end of his tricks."

"I'm not so sure. I'm going to keep my eye on the likes of that rat." He kissed her again.

"I must be going, Lena. I just had to see you, but unfortunately, I have a business meeting." The look on his face showed his distress.

"I understand. I, too, should be getting downstairs." She got up and started to get on her clothes.

As soon as they were dressed, they clung to each other in a passionate embrace. Each moment they spent together drew them deeper into the pool of love they felt for each other. It was harder and harder to let go.

As her footsteps sounded lightly on the steps, Magdalena smiled as she recalled their stolen time together. I'm going to start planning my escape from here, she thought suddenly. I want to be with Alexander and my son. With a renewed sense of courage, she stepped into the lounge. Several of the girls were with men, drinking and laughing. She waved her hand at them and moved on down to the lobby.

The piano music was loud and almost obnoxious, but she smiled at the player. With a renewed sense of direction, Magdalena went to the kitchen and grabbed a cup of tea. Heading to the office, she unlocked the door and entered, shutting the door behind her. Grabbed from behind, Magdalena was completely caught off guard as the cup crashed to the floor. A man's hands were around her waist and covering her mouth.

She fought and tried to stomp on his foot. When she finally connected, he released her, and she flew across the room. Face to face with Jacky, she put her hand in the pocket of her skirt, pulling the gun out. "Try that again, bastard, and you'll end up dead!"

"You will get yours, harlot! I'll make sure of that." He turned to go when her cold, harsh voice stopped him.

"Give me the key!" She held out her left hand, keeping the gun trained on the angry man. "Oh, and thank you again for the gun." Her sarcasm was not wasted on him.

He reached into a pocket and threw the key on the floor. "I'll get you yet!" With that threat, Jacky stormed out of the office, bumping directly into Elizabeth. She tried to stop him, but he shoved her to the floor.

Magdalena rushed out and helped her companion up. "Are you okay?"

"The question is, are you? How did he get in here? Why didn't I know he was here?" They both went into the office and finally looked around. He'd obviously been searching for something in the files. Papers were

scattered everywhere, the doors to cabinets were flung open and finally she saw the safe had been opened.

“Damn! He got all our money for the week.”

“I’ll send Raul for the constable. We can’t let him get away with this.”

Magdalena stopped her. “No! Maybe this will be the end of his attacks. We don’t need the aggravation of dealing with the law.”

“You’re not going to let him get away with this, are you?” Elizabeth was surprised at her response.

“Elizabeth, I’m working on a plan that will get us out of here. Let him think he’s won, and he’ll leave us alone. I want to have a real life with Alexander and my son. I want you to relax and enjoy life, too.”

“It all sounds wonderful.” Elizabeth’s response was a little less than enthusiastic, but Magdalena chose to ignore it. “Come on, let’s see if we can clean up this mess. It’ll be fine, I promise.” She tried to convince the other woman.

They worked for a few hours and finally got the office back in shape. Magdalena calculated the total dollar loss and together they lamented. “I’ll still pay the girls their part, but I’ll have to take the loss.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to alert the constable? He’ll put that scumbag in jail like he deserves. Please reconsider.”

“I just want to be done with Jacky. If anything else happens, we’ll bring in the law, but until then please don’t let anyone know about today.” Magdalena was firm in her response.

There was a knock at the door and one of the girls came in after being acknowledged. "Madam, can I talk with you?" Her posture was one of nervous behavior.

"Yes, please have a seat." She indicated the chair in front of her desk as Elizabeth left. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, have you seen the tent they set up in the lot next door?" She twisted her hair nervously.

"Yes, I have." Magdalena wasn't going to make this easy for her.

"Well, you know I love being here with you and all the girls." Her voice wavered.

"And?"

"I'd like to go. The new Madam is offering some great money for us to go." She finally looked Magdalena in the eye.

"Then you should do what your heart and mind tell you to do."

"I've always loved the way you treated us, but I figure that I'm only going to have this body for a few more years, and I need to make as much money as I can."

"If you're looking for my approval, I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you. I have done the best for you girls that I could but sometimes there are other factors in your life that I didn't account for, so the ultimate decision is yours." Magdalena spoke quite bluntly.

The girl stood up and faced her. She stuck out her hand, "Madam, I thank you for your kindness, but I must go."



“I respect your decision. Please clean out your room as quickly as you can. I’ll need to put someone new in there.”

“I’ve already packed most of my things. Madam Brown has a space ready for me.” She acted as though she had more to say but left the office without expressing her thoughts.

Magdalena took a deep breath trying to gather her bearings with the events in the last hour or so. Jacky needed to be contained and this new madam needed to be watched. I want to quit this business, but I want to do it on my terms and no one else’s, she thought.



## Chapter Eight

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“Oh, my God! She’s finally going to do something about her life!” Ellie exclaimed.*

*“Not so fast, Girl. She has been in this mess for over five years now. I’m not sure she has the courage it takes to get herself out of this sordid life.” Her uncle spoke his opinion.*

*“What about that rat Jacky? Do you all think he’s done with his devious plans?” John added his thoughts. “I wish I’d been the sheriff back then. That little bastard would be firmly planted in jail.”*

*“What do you guys think about the new Madam in the neighborhood?” Ellie asked.*

*“I think she could be a bad thing for Magdalena’s business.” John replied.*

*“On the other hand, I think she could finally be the trigger that gets Magdalena moving to freedom from the prostitute business.” Shotgun gave his opinion.*

### *1897 Jerome*

*“Did Raul light the fires in all the rooms?” Magdalena asked Elizabeth.*

"Yes, he did it earlier in the day. I don't remember such a cold December since we've been here." She went over to the fireplace in the office and warmed her hands.

"This is the coldest Christmas Eve I've ever known. We didn't even have it this bad at the ranch." Magdalena added. "Business seems a bit slow. It must be the freezing weather."

"I think we need to be honest with each other. Since Madam Bertha finished building her house and opened, we've lost a lot of our customers." Elizabeth gave her honest answer.

"I'm not worried. Soon, those miners will see that she's not providing the same things that we do, and they'll come back. I've noticed since we put in those lock boxes, that a lot of the customers appreciate that added touch of security."

"Yes, they do really like that. It's one thing to spend some money on pleasure, but it's quite another to have their money stolen while enjoying their fun." Elizabeth agreed.

"Don't worry we'll be fine." Magdalena tried to assure her companion. "Why don't you go out and offer some free drinks for the miners? That should make them happy."

"I'll do that. Are you going to be alright?"

"Yes, I'll come out in a few minutes. I just want to put this money in the safe. I'm so glad that we changed those locks after Jacky pulled his last stunt. I know this cash is going to be secure." Magdalena put the money in the vault and closed it tight.

Elizabeth went out to offer the free drinks and for the first time in her life, Magdalena felt the need for something more than a cup of tea. In all of her thirty years of life, she'd never had anything alcoholic except for the occasional glass of champagne with Edward at special events. She went over to the bar in her office and retrieved a bottle of red wine. Magdalena poured a small glass of the cabernet and took a quick sip.

Her dreams of a new life were still there but seemed to be dimming. She wanted so much to see her son and hold him close. His last letter was even more disturbing.

*Dear Mother,*

*I am in love. I know you must think that I am too young, but I assure you, it's true love. I wish you could know her, and she could meet you. Her name is Anna. Alas, it is not to be. I know we are too young to be married, but it is all I think of. I hope you are well.*

*Your son, Benjamin*

He was no longer her little boy, and another woman would soon be the recipient of his love. She could barely imagine what he would look like at this time in his young life. Oh, my God, did I make the right decision? Her thoughts tortured her soul, and she downed the burgundy liquid.

Shaking off her dismal thoughts, Magdalena went out to the lobby and observed the mingling of her girls and the men waiting for service. The girls had

decorated the lobby with a Christmas tree. The area was displayed with holly, mistletoe, and garlands of berries. The tables held baskets of pinecones and ribbons of red bows. It all looked very festive, but it did little to lift her spirits.

She hadn't seen Alexander in quite a while, and it grated on her nerves. She never asked for an explanation, and he never offered one. It wasn't expected.

She thought again, the night seemed just like any other except it was Christmas Eve and that made her even more saddened. As a child growing up, she could remember that her parents laughed as the family decorated the tree. When she was with Edward, they would make sure they had a party for the local ranchers and their families. Here in this house of ill repute, she found it exceedingly difficult to celebrate a Christian holiday. Jesus must be terribly angry at her.

She heard the shouts at the same time as the others in the lobby. They all ran to the swinging doors of the saloon and looked out. She was the first to step out onto the wooden sidewalk and see that up the street a flame was burning brightly in the darkening sky.

"Oh, my God!" She heard the shouts from behind. "The town is on fire!"

Chaos erupted as men and women ran out to the street. She could already see people fighting the fire that was raging like an angry wall of destruction through the town. She rushed back into the lobby screaming, "Elizabeth! Get everybody out! Elizabeth!"

Men were running out and her girls were rushing into the lobby. She instructed them, "Gather what you

can of your belongings and get out into the street! Stay away from any buildings.”

Elizabeth came rushing up to her. “Ma’am, what should we do? How can we save The Depot?”

“We can’t! Make sure everyone is out of here. I shall take the money out of the safe. Meet me in the middle of the street.” She grabbed Elizabeth by the arms. “Don’t put yourself in harm’s way. Just get to a safe spot and I’ll find you.”

“Yes, Ma’am. You make sure I see you out there.”

They separated amid all the chaos. As she ran to the office to get her books and the money from the safe, Magdalena prayed that she would be successful with her task. Grabbing everything that she could, she rushed out the office door and looking about for anyone that might be lurking, Magdalena finally went out the swinging doors at the front of her building.

The fire roared, people scrambled, and madness ruled the entire town. Bucket brigades had been formed and the men struggled to contain the unruly fires. The smell of wood burning permeated the entire scene. She turned to see her neighbor, Madam Bertha, standing in the middle of the street, waving her hands in frustration.

As she heard the building next to hers start to crumble, Magdalena knew hers was next. The flames had already started creeping closer. A sudden thought occurred. The book Alexander had given her, Benjamin’s letters and her journals were still up in the secret room. They held many wonderful memories and were precious enough to her that she ran back into the lobby and up the stairs.

Panic and the smell of acrid smoke caused her to stumble on the hidden staircase. Picking up her long black skirt, she forged forward and reached for the lever. As she opened the door, bright copper-colored flames were tearing through her private space. Seeing the book and her journals on the lounge, she put her hand over her nose and struggled to get to them before the flames consumed the entire room.

Grabbing the books Magdalena turned to the exit and found her escape route too inflamed to get out. Gathering her wits, she remembered the lever in the wall that would take her down to the tunnel and out of the back of the building. It was dark in the narrow space but at least the flames hadn't reached it yet. Her steps were frantic, and she tripped a time or two, ending down on her knees. She banged her head on the rough side of the wall, but finally gaining her footing Magdalena kept going forward.

When she felt the wooden floors give way to the dirt, Magdalena knew she was going to be all right. At the end of the tunnel, she reached to feel for the key they had put there just inside the wrought iron gate. Finding it, she opened the lock and swiftly went out. As she clamored through the bushes, Magdalena looked back up at The Depot and was devastated to see it fully engulfed in roaring, angry flames.

She hurried around the corner and up the rough street. Elizabeth would be in a panic by now and she wanted to see the damage up close. She had to go past Madam Bertha's place and was surprised to see a barrage of men working with water and buckets to keep the fire away.



Bertha was standing still in the middle of the street, but not in a panic. She had a huge grin on her face. "See, Dearie, you just have to know how to bargain! My place is going to be fine and yours...well, you can see you're out of business!" Her garish blond hair was all mussed and the robe she was wearing barely covered her body. Her milky breasts were all but spilling out of the camisole. Her laughter was a wicked sound, one Magdalena chose to ignore.

She went right past the obnoxious woman, looking for Elizabeth. All the girls were standing in the middle of the now water-soaked mud path that used to be their street.

"Ma'am, I was so worried. I couldn't find you." Elizabeth came up and hugged her.

"I'm fine. Why aren't they fighting the fire here?"

"That blond witch offered anyone that would save her building free services for life!"

"Can you imagine that?" She was not surprised at the extreme measures Bertha would take to put her out of business.

"Madam, what are we going to do? Where will we live? How can we work?" The questions started coming from the girls.

"I'm not sure, but we'll figure something out. This whole town is going to suffer. It looks like this entire block is going to be wiped out." She felt the heat from the flames and watched with horror as her building finally collapsed from the devastation.

"We need to find a place to stay and get out of here. This smoke is too thick for me to breathe." She looked around for any place they might gather and be

safe. Just as she was about to give up, she heard a familiar voice.

"Magdalena." He didn't use his pet name for her in front of the girls and Elizabeth. She saw he had been helping to fight the fires as his fine clothes were covered with soot and torn in places. The strong desire to put herself in his arms had to be dampened down.

"Mr. Douglas, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I couldn't help but see that you are in need of some assistance. What can I do?"

"I'm in need of a safe place for my girls. As you can see, we're out of a house." She fought the tears threatening to fall.

"I have a building down below yours that would work to get you and your girls out of the weather. It's not furnished but it's still standing and not affected by the fire. Follow me." He didn't take her hand, but instead started down the side street towards their secret tunnel. The flames were starting to subside as they'd devoured everything in her block and had run out of things to burn.

"Come, everyone. We'll at least have a roof over our head until I can figure out what we're going to do. Raul, you and Conchita should come with us too." The ragtag bunch of people, some without shoes, coats, and only carrying a meager bundle of belongings traipsed down to the building Alexander offered.

He unlocked the door to a small two-story building and allowed them to walk into the empty space. It was at least livable but there was no furniture, only a few crates and boxes. The girls found themselves sitting on the crates and finally taking a deep breath.

Magdalena heard a few snuffles at their situation. She turned to Alexander, "Mr. Douglas, we thank you for your generosity. We'll be out of your way tomorrow. I'll have to secure a place or a tent for us until I can get The Depot rebuilt." She stuck out her hand to shake his.

The familiar grin she knew so well was nearly her undoing. He took her hand in his, tipped his dirty hat, and handed her a key. "Stay as long as you need. I'll see if I can secure some chairs or a bed or two."

"That won't be necessary, although I do appreciate your offer. I'll send Raul out to look for supplies for us. Thank you again for your kindness." Those violet eyes of hers looked at him, sending a different message of love and desire.

He left and Magdalena went to her girls. "Try to find some place to rest. I know it's not the best situation to be in, but we are all alive and unharmed. I'll take care of us, I promise."

To Raul she said, "Here is some money. Please go and try to find us some food and perhaps some bedding. We'll stay here tonight and then tomorrow, I'll figure out a plan."

"Ma'am, are you even sure you want to rebuild?" Elizabeth whispered so the others wouldn't hear. "Maybe this is the opportunity for you to get out of this business."

"That thought occurred to me, but what about them?" She pointed to the girls and Conchita. "I feel a responsibility for their welfare. They have no family, no one, just us." She sighed and took a deep breath.

“Ma’am, you’re tired. Find a place to sit while we wait for Raul to come back. This is not something you have to decide right now.” Elizabeth gently pushed her to an available wooden box and Magdalena finally sat down, leaning back against the wall. This must be the storage building Alexander was buying the day she discovered the tunnel.

She sighed with despair. Their hidden room was gone and for now so were their stolen moments. This gave her great sadness. The only joy she’d found in life was her love for Alexander. Maybe, she continued with her wayward thoughts, Elizabeth was right. It might be the right time to let it be and go away with Alexander.

The noise from the fire and all the people trying to stop it wafted in through the walls and windows. Even though the fire had finally died down, there was much to do to keep other structures safe from any floating embers.

“This is one hell of a Christmas.” One of the girls spoke out. “We’ve lost everything!”

“You have your life, Alice.” Magdalena tried to comfort her with a positive message.

“That ain’t much now, is it?” The glum look on her face portrayed her emotions. “I know you mean well, Madam, but I think I need to go and talk with Madam Bertha. Her building is still standing.”

“If that’s what you think you must do, then by all means, go. I won’t stop you.” Magdalena’s voice held no malice.

The door opened just then, and Raul and Conchita came in with arms loaded with blankets, pillows, and

some food boxes. Elizabeth and several of the girls went to help them with their goods.

“Madam, wait till you see what I got for you.” Raul spoke proudly as he stepped back outside.

She stood and started to help the girls divide the things. He came in carrying a wooden rocking chair. He set it in front of her and dusted it off with his handkerchief. “Isn’t that nice? I thought you looked tired and needed some comfort.”

She touched his arm and sat down, smiling at his thoughtfulness. “Raul, thank you. This is comfortable.”

“Madam, I’ll have us a meal prepared in a few minutes. It won’t be a hot meal, but I think you’ll like it.” Conchita took her packages and placed them on the top of a box under the window. She busied herself with putting a meal together for all of them.

“How’s the fire doing?” she asked Raul.

“They have most of it out, but the damage to main street is terrible. We weren’t the only business to suffer a complete loss. It’s going to be a while before everything can get cleaned up and the rebuilding starts.” She saw his hesitation and answered before he could ask.

“Yes, Raul, we will rebuild too. I’ll need you to go to Cottonwood and gather the supplies and take a letter to the builder down there. We need to secure his help before the others can if we’re to move fast and replace The Depot.”

Conchita brought a tin plate with some cold meat and cheese on it. “This will give you strength, Madam.”

“Thank you. You and your husband are so good to me. I am grateful to have you with me and Elizabeth.”

A blush crept up the cook’s face as she turned away to fix more plates for the others. One by one they made themselves a place to sleep and sat down to eat their meager meal. A sense of gratefulness slowly came over the survivors of the fire. The young girl, Alice, who had expressed her frustrations before looked happy to have something to eat and a place to rest.

Once everyone had finished their meal, Magdalena spoke. “I think we need to try and get some rest. If the fire is out in the morning, we’ll need to start our own clean up. I think all available workers will be terribly busy throughout the entire town. The more we can do for ourselves, the better.”

“Madam, I think I owe you an apology for my words earlier.”

“I understand, Alice. We’re all scared and unsure of what our future looks like. We’ll be fine.” She reassured all of them.

As they began to settle down, Elizabeth came over and spoke softly. “Ma’am, do you want me to make a bed for you?”

“No, I’m just going to sit here and rock. It helps me think. You go to sleep. I’ll need you to help me organize our workforce if we get to clean up The Depot tomorrow. When Raul goes to Cottonwood with some money, he’ll try to find several tents. I’m going to rebuild.”

“I’m not surprised, Ma’am. You are a formidable woman, and I knew you wouldn’t give up.” She left

Magdalena and found her own bedding. Soon there was just silence in the big empty warehouse.

Magdalena got up and walked softly to the door. She opened it and saw it was snowing lightly. That might help put out whatever is left of the fire, she thought gratefully. As she pulled her shawl tighter around her body, Magdalena tried to clear her thoughts. She could just quit. She could tell Alexander that she would marry him and go to Canada, but some unexplainable force drove her to stay and fight for her business. She hated the nature of it, but part of her liked the challenges of life as a successful businesswoman. Edward had never consulted her and treated her as a child but here she was in charge. That kind of power made her feel important and needed.

“Lena.” His voice came from the side of the building.

Without turning, she spoke quietly, “You shouldn’t be here. Someone might see you.”

“I’ll take that chance. How are you coping? Your place was completely destroyed. It’ll take tons of money and time to rebuild it.” He encouraged her, “Please come over here and talk to me.”

She walked over to meet him, looking at the door to make sure that no one was aware of his presence. Convinced that they were alone and unobserved, she put herself in his waiting arms.

“I was so worried. I couldn’t find you and I wasn’t sure you got out of that burning building.” He kissed her forehead but finally she lifted her lips to meet his. It was searing and she wished they could be in their

secret room allowing all the passion between them free reign.

“Lena, you don’t have to rebuild. You can still come away with me.” His words echoed the thoughts she had earlier.

“I must, Alexander. I am beholden to any number of people, my girls, Raul and Conchita, Benjamin, and Elizabeth. They are all dependent on me making a success of my business.” The weight of her obligations seemed unbearable at this moment.

“You are such an honorable woman. No wonder I love you with all my heart.” He kissed her passionately.

Reluctantly, she pulled back and stepped out of his warm embrace. “You must go. We’ll be out of your building tomorrow. I thank you immensely for my girls and my workers. I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t come along.”

There was an eerie glow from the street above from the fires that were still burning, and the acrid smell of smoke permeated the air. “Here, I brought you some necessities. Please allow me to help you, Lena. I have come to realize how independent you must be, but this is a time that good neighbors help each other. Please just look at it in that light.”

“I didn’t mean to appear ungrateful. I do appreciate your help and kindness.” She put her hand on the side of his face and caressed it.

“I’ll leave these items at the door so you can find them in the morning. No one will be aware of the source. Please, be careful, my dearest heart. I can’t bear knowing you’re without a home and no place to



call your own.” The pain for her loss was etched in his face.

“Alexander, I love you for all your kindness and caring. I will be fine. It’s going to be a long, tenuous journey, but I will persevere. My son’s life depends on my money to support him in his education and life.” She placed a warm kiss on his waiting lips. “Now, go. Please be careful.”

They reluctantly parted and she watched as he disappeared in the night. She noticed the pile of supplies had already been placed by the door of the warehouse but walked past it so that it could be discovered by someone else in the morning.

Magdalena sat back down in the rocker, pulled her shawl up to cover herself and tried to find some semblance of sleep.

The morning sun came through the high windows, and she found herself listening to the voices of her girls chattering quietly. “Ma’am, Conchita has made us something to eat. Did you get any sleep?”

“I got a little, my friend. We need to get moving. Where is Raul?”

“I’m here, Madam.” He came forward.

“I need you to take this money and go to Cottonwood. Oh, we do still have the wagon, don’t we?” She had second thoughts.

“Yes, Madam. The wagon and horse were down in the stable on this street. They survived the damage.”

“Then, take this and buy some tents and supplies. I want to start the rebuild as soon as I can. This is a letter to the builder we’ve used before. I’m sure he’ll agree.” She reached into the pouch she wore around

her waist. "I took this from the safe, just in case. I didn't want it to burn."

He took the letter and the money and held it close to his chest. "Madam, I will protect this with my life. I promise to do my best and secure what supplies we need." He bowed in reverence.

"I trust you to do just that, Raul. Thank you." She patted him on the arm. "Take your wife with you. We'll make do without her for the day."

She got up from the rocking chair and roused the girls. "Ladies, we have work to do. Bundle up as much as you can."

"Madam, this was outside." Raul came in carrying one of the bundles that Alexander had left. "We have an angel watching over us." He brought in the other three bundles and let the girls look them over.

"We'll be back as soon as we can, Madam."

"See what you can get out of those bundles to wear, girls. It snowed a bit in the night. I want you to be warm when we go up and look over the damage." It took quite a while for all to get ready, but soon they were walking the rough track up to the main street. As she turned the corner, Magdalena's heart sank. There was nothing left of The Depot except for a pile of smoldering debris.

"Oh, Ma'am, I'm so sorry." Elizabeth touched her arm.

She gazed with heartbreak at the devastation of the building. Each structure, next to hers, was the same and so on and so on up the block. The only building spared was the new house that Madam Bertha had built.

She noticed the constable standing just up the block. Magdalena hurried up to talk with him. "Constable Evans!"

"Madam Magdalena, it's all terrible, isn't it?" He tipped his hat in greeting.

"Yes, I don't know how we are going to get rebuilt. Is there anything special I need to know about rebuilding my place? Can I start to clear the debris?"

"The snow seemed to help put out the last of the flames. So, if you don't see any active fire, feel free to start your clean up when you want."

"Thank you, Constable. If you find anyone that needs some work, I'll be so grateful. I'll pay well." Magdalena offered.

She walked back down to where her place had been and looked at the girls. "Ladies, I need you to start digging through this mess and salvage anything that can be saved." Before they could protest, she added, "I'll be paying you the same money as if you'd be working. Please, the sooner we get this cleared, the sooner we can rebuild. The constable will send any help available our way."

Without grumbling, the girls started to work their way through the rubble. Slowly and steadily, they worked to clear the worthless debris and move it to a pile in the middle of the street. Anything of use, they put in a pile by the side of the burned out building.

The day was cold and crisp, but the work warmed them up. Magdalena and Elizabeth worked side by side, stepping further and further into the burnt pile of wood and wreckage. It was almost noon when she

saw Raul and Conchita driving the wagon up the street.

"Time for a break, girls. Take a rest." Magdalena stopped and waited for the wagon.

Raul jumped down from the coach, turned to help Conchita and then came to greet Magdalena. "Madam, we did good, I hope."

"I'm sure you did fine. Show me what you found." She went to inspect the cargo. He showed her two tents that would house her and the girls until the house could be rebuilt. He gave her an account of all the goods he was able to purchase.

"I'm pleased, Raul. Your trip was successful."

"There's more. The builder will be up here first thing tomorrow. He appreciated the generous payment that you gave him. I suspect it motivated him to move faster for you." He chuckled.

"I think we'll have to sleep one more night in the warehouse, but perhaps tomorrow we can set up one of the tents. I don't like beholden to Mr. Douglas, as kind as he's been."

As she was standing there talking with Raul, Magdalena noticed Jacky standing on the front porch of Madam Bertha's place. She could see his grinning leer even from this distance. A shiver crept up her spine at the hate pouring from his face.

## Chapter Nine

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“Oh, my God! How many of these destructive fires were there in Jerome?” Ellie displayed her shock.*

*“When you asked earlier, I became curious, and I’ve done the research on my phone. Between 1894 and 1899 there were four major fires in the downtown district.” John replied. “Each time they rebuilt but as there were no official codes, the structures were poorly made, and another fire hazard was created.”*

*“So, what did they do?” Shotgun asked.*

*“In 1899, the town incorporated. Along with that step, they were now able to create a fire district and building codes that would help prevent the continuous fire danger.” John added more information about the history of their beloved town.*

*“How sad that she didn’t decide to abandon the whole rebuilding thing, marry Alexander and get her son!” Ellie felt tears building up.*

*“I think she’s decided that Benjamin is better off without her. He seems happy and in love, even if he’s only a thirteen-year-old boy.” Shotgun put in his opinion.*

*"You might be right. I wonder how long Alexander is going to pursue their love. He might give it up, you know." Ellie was saddened by that thought.*

1899 Jerome

"Ma'am, are you going to the celebration?" Elizabeth asked. She noticed the glass of wine sitting next to her on the stand. "Can I get you a cup of tea?"

"No, I'm fine with this." She lifted the crystal glass to her lips and finished off the wine. "Yes, I'll go to the celebration if you'll come with me."

"Someone needs to stay here and watch the house. You go and have some fun for a change."

"Fun? I can't remember the last time I've enjoyed anything at all. We've had to rebuild twice in the last two years. Well, the second time wasn't as bad, but I'm worn out, Elizabeth. I should have let the whole thing go when it burned in '97." She held up her hand. "I know what you're going to say, but please spare me. I've made some extremely poor decisions and today I think I'll just wallow in my self-pity."

"Ma'am, please go and take a nap before the ceremonies begin. You will find that things will look better after a short rest."

Magdalena got up and went from the lobby to her room. Shutting the door, she removed her usual black crepe dress and sat down on the edge of her bed. Thoughts of the last two years wouldn't leave her alone. Rebuilding The Depot, the first time was difficult, but not for lack of money. It was the constant interference from Jacky that caused major delays and problems.

She had the tents set up once they cleared the lot. One she used for business and the other was for their quarters. It was a horrible arrangement, but Magdalena was determined to maintain her income. Benjamin's schooling and the payments to his host family were priorities. She would never abandon that obligation to her son.

When building started, they had to move the tents to the side of the lot and that made for awfully close neighbors with Madam Bertha. She had expanded her business as she had saved her original building by bribing the men fighting the '97 fire. The brash blonde was always rubbing her success in Magdalena's nose. Her tents looked meager next to the grand structure of Bertha's bordello.

Many times, during construction, the builder came to her and explained that the materials he needed were being stolen before he could use them. She knew that little ratbag Jacky was behind the thefts but could never prove it.

The one thing that brought her happiness is the fact that the builder was able to put in the secret rooms and staircases. She paid a huge sum of money to him to keep that information confidential. She couldn't wait for the day when she and Alexander could meet in their own private heaven upstairs. Their shared moments had slowed down during the last two years, but she blamed it on the fires, his business and the lack of opportunity.

With Jacky still constantly causing trouble, she didn't want to take the chance that he might find out

about their relationship. She could only imagine what horrible woes he would cause for Alexander.

She laid back on the bed and allowed the sweet sleep she craved sweep over her tired body. The dreams were not pleasant, but not as horrible as they could be. Magdalena gave into slumber and allowed the world to turn without her.

“Ma’am, are you awake yet?” She heard the knock on her door and got up to answer it.

“It’s time for you to go to the celebration. I’ll help you dress.” Elizabeth stepped into the room. She worked with Magdalena, dressing her in a fresh black crepe. “Ma’am, are you sure you won’t wear that beautiful blue satin dress? You’d look lovely in it.”

“No, I’m fine with this. It could be a little cool, so I’ll take my shawl. You know we can’t predict the weather in March.” She turned and asked again, “Are you sure you won’t go with me?”

“No, I’ll stay here and watch out for trouble.”

“I’ll be back shortly. I just want to hear what the new Town Marshall and council members have to say. It could mean a change of how our business runs and we need to be prepared.”

Magdalena reached for her gun, placed it in her pocket and headed out the door. When she reached the swinging doors at the front lobby, Magdalena turned once again to plead for her companion to come along. Elizabeth turned her down and with a smile, sent her out to join the ceremonies.

As she walked up the hill to the Connor Hotel, where the town council gathered to officially announce incorporation, Magdalena realized there were



more people participating than she first thought there would be. The street was blocked off and citizens of the newly designated town were gathered to celebrate.

The Connor Hotel was one of the few buildings built with blocks that had been quarried from the hills around Jerome and the bricks were fired down in Cottonwood. People laughed when David Connor spent so much money on the building of the hotel, but it was one of the finest structures in town. She was anxious to go inside to see for herself just how opulent the hotel was according to town gossip.

Electric streetlamps had been installed in the town in 1890 but very few businesses had them inside. The Connor Hotel boasted electricity inside as well and each of the twenty guest rooms had a call bell to be used for service needs. As she made her way through the crowd, Magdalena scanned their faces for a glimpse of either Alexander or Jacky. She preferred to see Alexander but knew she had to keep on her toes if Jacky was present.

Several of the more prominent women in the town were there and she endured stares and blatant comments as she passed by. Even, after all this time, Magdalena managed to shut out their hateful looks and ignore their nasty names. She was tempted to share information with those haughty women about their husband's extracurricular activities, but she held her spine straight and passed on by. Holding her head high, she stepped through the door to the lobby and immediately gazed in wonder at the luxurious furnishings.

The bar was long and full of patrons. The gold and crystal chandeliers were all lit, blazing down on the packed lobby of people. The gaming area was also crowded and the band playing in the corner could barely be heard above the noise of the room full of guests.

She was bumped from behind and turned to see who was there. It was Dr. Carrier and his wife Daisy. "Madam, how wonderful to see you here!" Daisy gave her a big hug. "How are you doing?"

"I'm well. It looks like you two are happy! I'm so glad you two found each other. I'm sorry I missed the wedding."

"We wished you could have been there. None of this would have happened if not for you." Dr. Carrier spoke kindly.

"I felt that in certain circumstances, my presence would be more harmful than good. I don't think God would welcome me in his house." Magdalena didn't speak bitterly; she just stated the facts as she saw it.

"Can I get you a drink?" The doctor offered her.

"No, thank you. I'm fine, but you go ahead. I'll keep this pretty lady occupied." Dr. Carrier kissed his pretty wife on the cheek. "I'll be right back."

"How are you doing really?" Daisy asked again.

"I'm just struggling my way through each day. I'm having regrets about some of the decisions I've made in my life but other than that, I'm fine." Magdalena's sarcasm was not wasted on her young friend.

"Madam, you need to make some changes. You deserve to find what I have with Myron. He's such a good man and I intend to keep him happy the rest of

our days together. I know that you can do that for someone special, too.”

“I’m afraid that I’ve given up on love, Daisy. You seem to forget that as a Madam of a bordello, my chances at love are extremely slim.” Just as the words were out of her mouth, she heard his voice just behind her.

“Magdalena, how nice to see you here.” He came to her side and tipped his hat to both of them. “Mrs. Carrier, you look absolutely beautiful. Where is that dashing husband of yours?”

Daisy giggled like a young maiden at his compliments. Just then the doctor showed up with drinks in hand. “Alexander! How nice to see you! I presume you know Magdalena.”

“Yes, we had the occasion to meet years ago. Her ride from Prescott to Jerome was a disaster, so I had the pleasure to give her and her companion Elizabeth a coach trip to this wonderful town.”

Magdalena grew uncomfortable being the center of attention and tried to extricate herself from the conversation. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with someone I saw at the door.” She left before anyone could stop her and as she went out onto the wooden sidewalk, Magdalena took a deep breath.

Walking around to the side of the hotel, she saw more and more people gathering. Suddenly it became too much, and she found herself stepping off onto the road and striding in the direction of her business. When she’d just gotten to the alley way between her building and the next, she felt herself grabbed and pushed into the darkness.

Her heart leapt into her throat, and she frantically tried to reach for the gun she never left behind. "Lena, stop fighting me!" He spoke harshly.

She immediately stopped her movements and looked up into his wonderful face. "Alexander, you scared me half to death! I was trying to get to my gun. You could have been shot."

The laughter coming from him was the last thing she'd expected. "You are such a surprising woman. Kiss me before someone comes by and we must stop."

She did as he asked and for the first time in a month, felt a happiness flowing down over her. "I've missed you. I've been so depressed. Oh, Alexander, I should have never rebuilt The Desperation Depot! I should have gone away with you! Forgive me, please."

"You silly, wonderful woman. There's nothing to forgive. Life has dealt us the cards we have to play. We must make the best of things." They heard voices coming past the entrance to the alley and moved farther back into the shadows so they wouldn't be seen. This gave them the opportunity to cuddle tightly to each other, a situation neither of them minded.

"I've changed the lock on the gate to the tunnel and went up to see if the way was clear. I got into the room and left you a surprise." He kissed her before continuing. "Go up there when you get time and see what it is."

"Please tell me what it is, I can't wait. I haven't even tried to go up there. It's too lonely up there without you." She boldly kissed him on his waiting lips.

“I must get back to the ceremony. They wanted me to say a few things to the crowd. Come back with me.”

“You know I can’t. Go, I’ll come in a few minutes. I want to hear your speech.” She pushed him gently to the front of the alley. They grabbed one last delicious kiss and parted.

Magdalena waited, leaning against the wall and after a few minutes, started back up to the Connor Hotel. She saw the crowd of people standing around the podium that had been set up on the street in front of the hotel. Several official looking people were seated on chairs waiting their turn to speak. She noticed Alexander right away and saw the look of recognition on his face when his eyes locked with hers. It was hard but after giving him a quick smile, she looked away.

The speeches were pretty much what she’d expected. The newly formed town council promised to reform fire and safety codes to prevent the devastating fires that had consumed Jerome over the last few years. One thing that was a bit of a surprise to her was the fact that they were emphasizing that buildings should be constructed of block and not wood. Each time the town had burned, very few businesses had their buildings insured and now this town council was insisting that that should become the standard.

Even though Jerome was ‘copper’ rich and she, like most business owners, had the funds to rebuild, the speakers warned that the economy wouldn’t always be that strong. It was something new for her to think about, but Magdalena wasn’t sure she wanted a new source of worry. The speakers following repeated

the same sort of information, but when Alexander got up, his words were about so much more.

“I see a place where all people can live and work together. We are a strong town with a powerful desire to succeed. All of these ideas are going to help us get better and grow a place for our children and their children. The future of Jerome is a bright one if we all work as one. Let’s concentrate on bringing all people and all cultures together to reach this lofty goal of unity.” He touched on a subject that was ignored by most. The mines attracted people from all over the world. The workers represented over thirty-one different cultures and nationalities but were very segregated. She was impressed by his inspirational speech.

The crowd cheered his encouraging words and she felt especially proud of him. After his speech, it was announced that the bar was open, and drinks were on the house. Magdalena knew it was time to get back to her own house and she started walking down the dirt street.

The night had chilled down as a March night could and she pulled her shawl closer around to shield from the chill. When she stepped onto the wooden wrap-around porch, Magdalena took one last glance at the party going on up the block.

The night was lively in the lobby. The piano player was playing the all-too-familiar tunes, patrons were drinking and flirting with the girls, and Elizabeth was watching the entire scene. She waved at Magdalena and encouraged her to come over and talk.

“How did it go?”

"I saw Daisy and her loving husband. She looks so happy. The speeches were interesting. Alexander talked too. Our little town is growing up and if we aren't careful, we'll be civilized before you know it."

"I bet you were happy to see him." Elizabeth saw the glow on her face.

"Yes, it's been a while since we've gotten together. I hate letting that jackwagon Jacky have that much power over our lives, but I would never do anything that might bring shame or danger to Alexander's life."

"Pardon my boldness, Ma'am, but you should think of your own life and happiness too. You deserve more than you're getting right now." She and Elizabeth had been together for over eight years, and it always surprised her that Elizabeth still called her 'Ma'am'.

She tried one more time, "Elizabeth, you should call me Magdalena."

"Yes, Ma'am." She replied with a grin and a twinkle in her eyes. "What are you going to do for the rest of the evening?"

Just as she was about to answer, the thunderous sound of an explosion rocked the entire town. The chandeliers were swinging, glasses were falling from the bar and screams were heard by all. "What in the world was that?" Magdalena cried.

"It had to be a blast from the mine."

"We've had them before but never that loud and that strong. Check upstairs and make sure everyone is okay." Magdalena ordered Elizabeth, who readily complied.

A man ran in through the front doors and screamed, "Fire in the Hole!" He waved his hat in a panic.

"You're a little late with the warning, aren't you?" Magdalena's words were scathing.

He just looked at her, shook his head, and ran right back out the swinging doors. Everyone started moving about cleaning and straightening the things that had fallen from their places and were broken. Raul appeared from the kitchen and came right over to her. "Madam, is everything all right out here?"

"Yes, any damage in the kitchen? Is Conchita safe?"

"We are fine, but there were several of the dishes broken. I am helping to clean that up. She sent me out here to make sure that no one was injured. That was a big blast for sure!"

"I hope it doesn't mean another fire in town." Magdalena expressed her fears aloud. "Wasn't that how one of the last two fires started?"

"I'm not sure, but I hope, like you do, that we don't have another fire to deal with."

"Go back and help your wife, we can fix things out here." She patted him kindly on the back.

Elizabeth returned and reported that all was safe and secure upstairs, no one had received any injuries. "You know the Connor hotel has telephones in the rooms. Maybe we should think about putting a few in here. It would help keep track of people easier."

"Isn't that a little bit too modern for a two-bit place like this?" Magdalena giggled at the suggestion.



"We'd be the first bordello to do that, wouldn't we?" Elizabeth smiled with her challenge.

"I have a great suggestion. Why don't they put a phone in the mines, and they could call us with 'fire in the hole'!" They both started laughing as if it were the funniest thing they'd heard in days.

"Let's see, there's over eighty miles of tunnels below us. How about they put a phone every mile or so?" Elizabeth added to their good-natured fun.

As they were laughing, a stranger walked in and over to the bar. He was dressed in a long black coat and when the bartender offered him a drink, his deep voice bellowed, "A drink of the devil's brew! How dare you offer me such vile sustenance."

After all these years, Magdalena's sense of danger pushed to the forefront of her mind. Going over to the man, she approached him carefully. "Sir, may I help you?"

"Stay away, Harlot! I came to see for myself what kind of sin you are promoting here. I intend to put you out of business!" He wagged a finger in her face.

"I think you need to leave now." Her words were firm and full of courage.

"Not until I have the chance to save some of these souls!" The man spoke loudly and several of the men waiting in the lobby scurried out the swinging doors.

"I will send for the constable if you don't leave immediately!" Magdalena signaled behind her back to Elizabeth, who left the room quietly.

"Send for him! I will prove to him that you need to be shut down as a public danger!" He ranted and

raved on and on until a thought suddenly entered Magdalena's head.

"You are no man of the cloth! Jacky sent you here to disrupt my business." She pulled the gun out of her pocket just when Raul and Conchita came from the kitchen. "I will tolerate your disgusting banter no longer. I know who sent you and I also know who is going to get you the hell out of my lobby!" She put the gun right in his face and looked him in the eye. "I'll give you to the count of ten and then I'm going to pull this trigger and you won't look so smug when I'm done!"

"Ma'am!" Elizabeth shouted as she came back into the room. "What are you doing?"

"This scallywag has been sent here by Jacky to interfere with our customers." She pushed the gun further into his chin. "Are you leaving, or shall I pull this trigger and see what it does to your looks?"

With a quick look at the other people in the room, the stranger made his way to the door. Before leaving, he turned back and yelled at her. "Jacky said you were crazy! I believe it now!" His back was all they saw as the swinging doors shut behind him.

Magdalena screamed after him, "Tell Jacky thanks again for the pistol!"

Elizabeth rushed over to her. "Ma'am, are you okay? What in the world possessed you to pull your gun?"

"I am sick to death of the interference in my life by that low-life son of a gun! It's time I do something about it." She put the gun back in her pocket.

Raul and Conchita knew enough to remove themselves from the situation. Everything seemed to be under control now, business was back to normal as well and they had faith in Elizabeth handling the Madam.

“I know what you’re going to say, Elizabeth. I just want you to know that I am not going to put up with his interference any longer. He has wreaked havoc with our lives for the last several years and I refuse to let him have any power over me and mine any longer.”

“What are you planning to do?” Elizabeth’s fears grew.

“I’m going to confront the little bastard and call him out. I am done with this!” Magdalena stood tall.

“Ma’am, I beg you. Let’s plan this out. If you want to do this, we have to be ready.” Elizabeth pleaded with Magdalena to regain some sanity. “Please, let’s take time to think this out.”

Magdalena stopped for a moment. “Perhaps, you’re right. We need to have a plan for getting even with him. Thank you, Elizabeth, for keeping me on track once again.”

“You want a cup of tea?” Elizabeth proposed.

“I’ll have a glass of wine, thank you. Join me.”

With a shy grin, Elizabeth agreed. “Just one. I’ve never indulged but in honor of our pact, I’ll have a sip.”

They took their glasses and sat at the little table in the corner by the fireplace. With a big sigh, Magdalena took a sip of her red wine. “This is nice. You are good to me, Elizabeth.”

“You have been the best to me, Ma’am.” They raised their glasses and clinked them together in salute. “We’ll get him, we must do it our way. Trust me, Ma’am.”

“I always do, my companion. I always do.”

## Chapter Ten

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**“S**o, Jerome became incorporated before Arizona was even a state?” Ellie was amazed.

“Yes, the territory didn’t become a state until February 14, 1912, Valentine’s Day. They felt that by incorporating, it would establish a town council and give them the authority to enforce safety and fire standards. They had so many fires that were so destructive.” John’s knowledge of statistics from the various cities in Yavapai County had been part of his job as Sheriff.

“But what about the devastating fire that happened just three months after setting up the council and fire regulations?” Shotgun asked. He sorted through several papers in front of him. “Here it is.” He held up an old newspaper article.

“It started between Hull Street and Main Street upstairs in the doctor’s office. The winds were blowing strongly from the south sending the flames north and east endangering all buildings in its path. It consumed businesses including the bowling alley, several small stores and all the Chinese restaurants on both sides of the street. It was basically stopped

*at the Connor Hotel." John related the information he researched.*

*"How did the people react to that?" Ellie asked.*

*"They were mad as hell. All the new fire regulations were supposed to stop the madness. The Chinese up and left. They saw the fire as a bad sign." John replied.*

*"You know all of that is bad but what about Magdalena? She's going through hell and still hasn't found true love. Jacky keeps harassing her and she hasn't heard from her son."*

### 1903 Jerome

"Ma'am, you have a letter from Benjamin!" Elizabeth ran up the stairs to knock loudly on Magdalena's door. She had to knock several times before the door was opened.

"What are you saying? Is it true? I finally have a letter from my son. It's been over four years since I last heard." Magdalena grabbed the envelope and eagerly ripped it open.

"What does he say? What's the news?" Elizabeth was excited too until she saw Magdalena drop down on the nearest chair. At the devastated look on her face, Elizabeth pushed for more information.

"Ma'am, what does he say?"

The tears were flowing down her still pretty face. "My son has married and now has his own child." She broke out in uncontrollable sobs.

Not knowing what to say, Elizabeth just stood there waiting for her to gain control. "I'm so sorry, Ma'am. I don't know what to say."

Through her gulps and sobs, Magdalena finally managed to speak. "He's now beyond my reach. I have sacrificed all these years and for what? I'll never see him again." The pain showed in her overwhelming moans. "What have I done?"

"Oh, Ma'am, you did everything you could under the circumstances. He's had a good life and now he is a father and husband."

"All without me! I have nothing but this whore house to show for thirteen years of my life!" There was no relief to be had for the devastating pain she was feeling.

Elizabeth bent down to talk to her eye to eye. "Ma'am, now is the time for you. Talk with Alexander and make your plans to leave this place."

The letter was now crumpled in Magdalena's lap. She gave it to Elizabeth to read.

*Dear Mother,*

*I wanted you to know that I am married and have my own little girl. Anna and I are very happy. I work as an accountant, and we have a little place in town. I am sorry for not answering all your letters. I would have preferred to speak with you in person. I'm sure we will when we get to Jerome. Anna and I are taking a trip to Arizona. We will be there soon. I am anxious to hold you and tell you how much I love you in person.*

*Your Son, Benjamin*

“Oh, my God!” Magdalena cried. “Can things get any worse? He’s coming to Jerome! What am I going to do? He cannot know about my life and...and this place!” She jumped up and started pacing about the room. “Elizabeth, you must help me!”

“Send for Alexander. He’ll come and help us with a solution. Please, Ma’am, get dressed and come to the kitchen. I promise we’ll find a way out of this trouble.”

Reluctantly and with little energy, Magdalena got up and dressed. She tried to put her hair up in a tight bun but failed because her hands were shaking too much. She finally just let it fall down her back. Stepping into the kitchen, the inviting smell of breakfast cooking did little to lift her spirits. She sat at the head of the table where Conchita placed a cup of hot tea in front of her.

Elizabeth came in and approached her. “Have you thought of a solution?”

“No, not yet. I’m just trying to think through this mess. Maybe I could meet Benjamin down in Cottonwood. That way he wouldn’t have to see me here.” She spoke softly, her misery laced her words. “I would love to see what a handsome man my son has grown up to be.”

“Do you want me to go for Alexander?” Elizabeth offered.

“Yes, please, he should be down in the warehouse. I appreciate it, thank you.”

“I’ll go right away. Please try to relax. All of us together can think a way out of this situation.”



“Just tell Alexander to meet me in our special place. He’ll know what I mean.”

She watched as Elizabeth pulled on a shawl and headed out the back door. As she took a sip of her tea, Magdalena thought about her current situation. She wanted to see her son in the worst way, but at the same time didn’t want him to know what she’d been doing all this time.

After finishing her tea, Magdalena decided that she’d wait for Alexander in their room. She took the stairs to the attic and into their special place. She wandered about the room, restless and nervous. What if he didn’t want her anymore? What if he didn’t want her to go with him to his family home in Canada? Her thoughts were running rampant.

She sat on the lounge and picked up the book she’d saved from the fire in ’97. It was one they’d read together but she still enjoyed re-reading the familiar pages. It was not a romantic novel, but the creativity of the author kept a reader’s interest.

She was immersed in the book when she heard some footsteps on the path coming from the tunnel. Eager to see her love, Magdalena got up and waited just inside the door. As she saw the secret wall slide open, Magdalena was shocked to see Jacky standing just on the other side.

She started to run away when he grabbed her. “Oh, no, you don’t! I’ve waited for this and today, Harlot, you’re going to get your comeuppance!”

“How the hell did you find this place?”

"I've watched you and your lover for months. You think you're so smart! Today is the day I get even with you!" The evil grin on his face startled Magdalena.

"You've got to get out of here. I'm done with the likes of you." She tried to sound as positive and determined as she could.

"You may be done with me, but I am far from done with you. No one fires me and gets away with it! No one treats me like I'm the scum of the earth!" His face was a livid red.

"That was a long time ago! You deserved everything you got." She stayed firm.

"Just the same, I have wanted revenge and now, Harlot, you will get what you asked for!"

"What are you planning?" She was disturbed by his veracity. She was almost free of this entire destructive environment and now with his interference, things had changed.

He closed the secret panel behind him as he stepped into the room. "So, this is the place for your illicit meetings."

"I don't know what you're talking about." She pretended ignorance to put him off.

Her answer incensed him to the point of violence. He rushed over and pushed her on the bed. Jacky punched her in the face, and she tasted her own blood as it ran from her nose. "Don't underestimate me! You think you're so far above me. You have been a thorn in my side for years, but I will now be victorious over such a slut as you!"

Trying to do it without him noticing, Magdalena moved her right hand in the pocket of her skirt. She

had just felt the gun when Jacky realized what she was trying to do.

He jumped on her and ripped at her dress. The fabric tore and she was stopped in her efforts to retrieve her weapon. "I'm going to teach you a lesson, whore! You will be mine!" Jacky again grabbed the fabric of her dress and pulled viciously until she was down to her camisole. Ripping the dress off, he threw it to the floor. She heard the gun in her pocket make a thud as it hit the ground.

"You will pay for this! Alexander will kill you! He will shoot you dead in your tracks." She threatened.

"Not before I kill him!" Jacky was enraged. He tore at her underclothes, but she fought with everything she had. She reached up and scratched with all her might, dragging her nails down his face.

"Ahhh!" He screamed with pain and let go of his hold on her.

Magdalena took this moment to leap from the bed and dash toward the opening to the tunnel. Frantically she searched for the lever, finally getting the door opened. Her life was on the line, and she wasted no time in getting down the staircase. Oblivious of the fact that she was wearing only her underclothes, Magdalena's only thoughts were of saving her own life from a madman.

She heard his footsteps behind her, and this drove Magdalena further down the tunnel leading to outside and freedom. The rough boards caused her to trip, but she quickly regained her footing and kept moving towards the exit. The darkness was a barrier, making a swift exit that much harder. Her heart was beating

faster and her desire for freedom was paramount. This bastard is not going to keep me from finally getting the happiness I deserve! Her thoughts gave her the courage, despite her injuries, to keep moving.

Magdalena could hear his footsteps close behind, driving her faster and faster. I hope Elizabeth got to Alexander and he was on his way, she thought. He would use the tunnel entrance. Her breath was labored, her steps were forced, but her desire to live was the momentum to keep her moving forward.

The tunnel was in total darkness, she had no lantern, but having already been down there, she knew it better than that ratbag Jacky. Hopefully, he would falter, giving her time enough to get outside to freedom. She could hear him screaming obscenities behind her. Magdalena tripped once again and felt herself falling. She scraped her face against the wall of the tunnel and for a fleeting moment, thought she would faint.

"You won't get away! I'm right behind you, slut!" He was completely out of control, and she had no doubt he was going to kill her. When he tripped over the change from wood planks to the dirt floor, she felt a new sense of hope. Magdalena knew the entrance was just a few feet away as she saw a small ray of light shining through the bushes that hid the opening.

The key, she thought desperately, I've got to get that key and open the lock. A sudden thought occurred, he must have taken the key. Maybe he didn't lock the gate back when he came through. God, please be there for me, she prayed, please let the gate be open.

Just as she reached it, Magdalena realized that her prayers had been answered. She pushed with all her might and the rusty, wrought iron gate opened enough for her to slip through. With a quick second thought, she reached back and shoved the gate closed. The lock was still hanging there and with trembling hands, Magdalena pushed the bolt back in place, locking the entrance behind her.

Jacky had just reached the gate as she turned to run away. "You are going to regret that!" He held up the key, laughing like a wild man. She didn't stay to see how quickly he could open it and come after her. Magdalena pushed the scratchy bushes aside and saw the street was active with people going about their business. She looked down at her torn, dirty camisole and tried to wipe the now dried blood from her face but realized that staying alive was more important than her appearance.

The afternoon light was subdued by clouds covering the sky. Early spring weather was often unpredictable, and a light shower could be heading their way. Spinning around, Magdalena was looking for a place to hide. Jerome had been called 'the wickedest town in America' and to see a woman standing in the street with nothing on but her underclothes didn't necessarily raise anyone's eyebrows.

Just as she decided on a course of action, Jacky burst through the bushes, waving her gun in the air. "I got you! I'm going to kill you with your own gun!"

The scream from her throat could be heard up and down the street. A few people came out of the saloons and bordellos to see what the fuss in the middle of the

day was all about. "Help me! He's going to kill me!" She pleaded but not one person moved to help her.

Jacky's evil laughter put chills down her spine as he repeated his threat, "I'm going to kill you with your own gun! How do you like that?"

Magdalena started to run up the street toward the warehouse Alexander owned. Elizabeth had gone to get him but maybe he was still there and then Jacky would be stopped, dead in his tracks.

His shot was close as she ducked to avoid being hit. More people were gathering to watch the action, some cheered when she fell in the dirty street. He was coming closer; his shots were too. Magdalena felt the end was near. Her tears fell freely as her shouts fell on deaf ears.

Suddenly, just ahead she saw Alexander and Elizabeth. As soon as he saw what was happening, Alexander ran towards her. "Stay right there or she gets it!" Jacky's shout accomplished what he intended. Alexander stopped just short of reaching her.

"Lena, stay where you are." As he turned to look directly at Jacky, he shouted, "You are a dead man!"

"No, I'm looking at a dead man." He raised the gun and aimed it directly at Alexander's chest.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion, as Jacky pulled back the trigger, Magdalena dashed in front of Alexander. With the blast of the gun, dark red blood started to stain the lower part of her bodice. She fell to the road at his feet, moaning in pain, her hands grasped the bloody bodice as she tried to stem the flow.

Despite feeling intense pain in his side and a growing spot of blood on his shirt, Alexander ran to Jacky and grabbed him by the throat, squeezing the life out of him. As Jacky collapsed in death at his feet, Alexander turned to see his love bleeding profusely.

Elizabeth was down on the ground, next to Magdalena. "Ma'am, oh my God, hold on. We'll get Dr. Carrier. Magdalena!" She cried.

Alexander came and as gently as he could, picked her up in his arms. Her eyes fluttered open, and she tried to reach her hand to his face. As he carried her tightly in his arms, her long hair flowed over his arm. She was so pale, so very, very pale.

"Don't move." He stepped faster as Elizabeth ran to get the doctor. "Lena, I love you. Please, please stay with me." He finally got to his warehouse and going inside, placed her on one of the crates. "Oh, my God!" He looked at the bloody stain covering most of her camisole. Grabbing some rags, he pressed them to her midriff to stop the blood from flowing out of this beautiful woman. His own tears blurred his vision as he tried to stem the life from pouring out of her body.

"Alexander," her voice was so soft he had to bend down to hear her words. "I love you; I always have."

He held her hand and stroked her face. "I know, my love. Stay quiet, Dr. Carrier is on his way."

She groaned and shifted to a fetal position. "It hurts, oh my God, it's so painful."

"Stay still, my sweet."

"Is...is he dead?" She whimpered again. "Is that bastard dead?"

"I killed him with my bare hands. He'll never harass you again." He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "Stay still, Lena. Save your strength."

Just then Elizabeth and Dr. Carrier burst through the door. They rushed over to where she was laying. Myron quickly removed the rags and as he saw the wound, he made eye-to-eye contact with Alexander. He shook his head but went to work. He cut the bodice open and started cleaning the wound. The bullet ripped through her stomach but missed the spine. She most likely wouldn't survive.

"Myron, give it to me straight." Alexander spoke quietly but emphatically. He held his hand over the wound at his side, ignoring his own pain.

They stepped away as Elizabeth soothed Magdalena. "Ma'am, Dr. Carrier is here. You'll be fine. Just relax, please."

"Elizabeth, please tell my son I love him." Her voice broke, tears ran down her face and her breathing became more labored. Pain ripped through her body, and she moaned loudly.

"Don't move, Ma'am. The doctor and Alexander are discussing your treatment."

"Elizabeth, you and I have never lied to each other, don't start now. I know I'm not going to make it." She broke down, sobbing in anguish. "We both know it."

"Please Ma'am, you are the strongest woman I've ever known. You can pull through this." Elizabeth begged and wiped her own tears away.

"Alexander, let me look at that wound. The bullet must have gone completely through her into you."



"I can wait. Let's take care of her." His stubborn reply upset the doctor, but he knew fighting him to change his mind would waste valuable time for both of them.

The doctor and Alexander came back to her side. She took Myron's hand. "I know I'm not going to live. Don't be upset with yourself. It's in God's hands, not yours." She had to breathe between words and labored to get her message to one of the few friends she'd had known in this hellhole.

Alexander stepped forward and kissed her tenderly. "Lena, the preacher is coming. I want you to marry me." He held his hand to shield the blood stain from her sight.

With a frown on her face, Magdalena responded, "Why, why would you want that?" She tried to smile, "You mean you want to make an honest woman of me?" She coughed and grabbed her stomach. "Ohhh, it hurts!"

"I've loved you since the first time I met you on the train from Phoenix and I won't rest until we are husband and wife." His voice was firm and determined. "Say yes, my love."

With a voice that barely could be heard, she said, "Yes."

"Magdalena, I'm going to give you a shot to help with the pain." Dr. Carrier informed her. The morphine would help her relax for a bit.

She simply shook her head lightly in agreement. "Oh, it burns so much."

They all turned their heads when the door opened and the preacher from the Baptist church walked in

and straight up to Alexander. "Alexander, Daisy told me that you wanted to see me. What...?" He stopped mid-sentence as he saw Magdalena laying there with blood everywhere. "What has happened here? You're injured too?"

"She's the most important thing right now. I'll survive. Take care of her, please." Alexander insisted.

Reluctantly, the preacher went over and took Magdalena's hand. He wanted to take care of both of them but saw that she was indeed the worst of the two. "May I say a prayer for you?"

She couldn't answer, but once again agreed with a slow nod.

They all bowed their heads as he spoke words of comfort and salvation. Each one had their own prayers as the great lady lay dying on a crate in a dirty warehouse wearing nothing but her stained camisole. When the preacher finished, Alexander spoke his mind. "I want you to marry us." When he saw the hesitation on the minister's face, he added, "She's agreed, and the doctor will speak for us. Elizabeth has been her companion for over ten years now and can confirm our love."

Before agreeing, the preacher leaned over and whispered to Magdalena, "Do you want this? Do you love this man and want to be his wife?"

With strength she didn't know she possessed, Magdalena answered firmly, "Yes, I love him more than life itself. I've loved him since the first time I saw him."

The preacher held his bible and as Alexander took her hand in his, he said the words they'd wanted to

hear for years. When he asked her if she took Alexander as her husband, they all waited for her answer. She took a deep breath as the pain was now consuming her entire body but managed to speak. "Definitely, yes."

"Do you, Alexander Douglas, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." He placed a small, light kiss on her forehead.

As the preacher declared them married, the tears from the participants were not only for the couple's happiness but for the tragedy that was inevitable. Alexander held her hand throughout the entire ceremony but let go of it now to wipe the sweat from her brow.

"Dr. Carrier, what can I do?" He asked helplessly.

"Make her comfortable. Daisy should be here soon, and I'll do what I can to make her calm."

"Alexander, maybe you can find a blanket for her?" Elizabeth suggested. She knew he needed to feel that he was doing something to relieve her pain and discomfort.

Everyone in the room knew that it was hopeless. Jacky had succeeded in his goal. The beautiful Magdalena was not going to live to see her son again. When Daisy came in, the doctor indicated she should look at the wound on Alexander's side.

Dr. Carrier tried to clean up the damage to Magdalena's stomach, more in an attempt to distract her from finding out about Alexander's injury than anything. "Magdalena, I'm so sorry. I wish there was more I can do."

The morphine was helping with the pain, but she was just lying there with her eyes closed and softly moaning. "Myron, I know you are trying, but we both know there's nothing you can do." She started crying again, "I had just figured out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted to be his wife and live in a house and finally be happy. Oh, my God! Why did this have to happen? What have I done in my life to deserve all this pain?"

Daisy came over and reached to touch her on the arm. "Madam...sorry, I'm just used to calling you that. Mrs. Douglas, what can I do for you?"

Magdalena laughed at the referral to her now married name. The laughter caused her to cough and clutch at her stomach. "Oh, God, it's so much pain." Her breathing was getting shallower as she struggled to speak. "Alexander." She cried.

He immediately came to her and bent down to hold her as best he could. "I love you." His voice cracked and he bent his head to keep her from seeing the tears falling freely from his eyes.

"Remember you promised to take care of Benjamin." She could barely get the words out before a great spasm of uncontrollable pain shook her entire body.

The people in the dimly lit warehouse watched the exchange with undisguised empathy. These two people had struggled for years to get to this point and now it was going to be over before it began.

"Don't talk, just relax." He begged for more time, but it was not to be.

She tried to raise her hand to his face, but with one last shudder, Magdalena fell silent.

## Chapter Eleven

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“Oh, my God! I knew she had to die, but I didn’t think it would be like this!” Ellie wiped tears from her eyes. “What about Alexander? He got shot too. Did he survive? Oh, wait a minute! How are we going to find out? Now that Magdalena is dead, she can’t journal anymore.”*

*“Don’t panic, Girl. Here are some pages but they are written in what appears to be a different handwriting.” Shotgun held up a small stack of papers.*

*John added, “Here are some more. These look like yet another person penned these. Let’s see if we can organize these in some sort of order.”*

*They worked for a bit until all three were satisfied that they had the rest of the story. “This page picks up just a few days after Magdalena died.” Ellie spoke with a few sniffles of sadness. “I really do like her. I said it before and I’ll say it again, I knew she was a good person all along.”*

*“There’s more to it than we know right now. I mean, why is Magdalena still hanging around here at The Desperation Depot? Don’t they say a spirit or ghost stays because they have unfinished business? What is her purpose here? What does she have to*

*do?" John's years of detective experience are shown in his questions.*

*"Well, read on and let's find out, Girl." Shotgun ordered.*

1903 Jerome, Five Days After Magdalena's Death

"Sir, you must allow me to change your bandage. If we don't keep this wound clean, you'll get an infection. Please, I promised Dr. Carrier that I'd take care of you." Elizabeth pleaded with Alexander.

"I don't care if I get an infection. I just want to die." He rolled over away from her.

"Sir, please, I vowed to Magdalena. She wanted me to take care of you."

This statement did get his attention and he rolled back over to look at Elizabeth. His eyes were gaunt, his hair was mussed, and he looked more dead than alive. His home was an elegant place near the top of Cleopatra Hill. Elizabeth had been invited to help him recuperate since Magdalena had died and she eagerly accepted.

"Elizabeth, I know you mean well, but how can I possibly survive without her?" He cried unashamedly. "I loved her for years and when she finally agreed to become my wife..." His voice broke, but he tried to continue, "I will never love anyone as I loved her."

"Sir, her son is going to be here soon. You promised to take care of him. I need you to get better so you can keep that promise."

"Damn! You're right. I did make that promise to her. Okay, change this bandage. I won't fight you anymore." Alexander reluctantly agreed.

Elizabeth quickly got to work on changing out the bandage according to Dr. Carrier's instructions. She was glad that he finally agreed and tried to make the process as quick and painless as she could.

"Do you want to get up? A walk might do you good." She challenged.

"If you insist, I'll get up." He reluctantly agreed.

"Shall I send in your dresser?" Elizabeth offered.

"Yes. Please get me some food and a cup of tea, too." Alexander answered. "I think it's time for me to get ready for Benjamin's visit."

Elizabeth left him to find his manservant. Alexander needed him to help bathe and dress the injured man. Once she gave him the message, she walked through the hallways of the magnificent house and marveled at the beauty. A tear fell as she thought of what Magdalena could have had. Her lady had deserved all this and more, but fate had stood in their way.

As she walked past the parlor, she saw her lady's body laid out as tradition demanded. Daisy, Margaret, and she had prepared Magdalena and dressed her in the gown Alexander had made just for her. It was a dark navy-blue gown with lace sleeves and delicate lace around the neckline emphasizing her shape and beauty. Visitors had been paying their respects for the last few days, including the constable and many local business owners, even Madam Brown paid her regards.

Slowly she walked into the room and sat down in the chair next to Magdalena. Elizabeth had spent the required three days in this very same chair after her

lady's death. Someone had to sit for three days and make sure the person was dead and she had eagerly volunteered to honor her friend.

"Ma'am, I miss you." She wiped at a tear sliding down her cheek. "Sir Alexander is in a bad way, but I'm sure he'll realize that he needs to live and honor his promise to you regarding your son. Benjamin and his wife should be here soon." Her voice choked with her next words. "I know you wanted to see him, Ma'am, but I'll let you know how handsome he is now."

She took her hanky out and dabbed at the tears that still flowed. She was going to miss her, but Elizabeth knew a new destiny was soon to reveal itself. As soon as that thought entered her head, there was a knock at the door. Elizabeth didn't move, knowing that the butler would respond.

Shortly, he appeared at the door of the parlor and announced, "There is a young gentleman at the door asking for you." He left before she could answer him. Elizabeth got up and went to the entry.

Seeing Benjamin standing there, her breath caught in her throat. She went to him and placed a kiss on his surprised face. "You are the spitting image of your mother, Benjamin. You are a handsome young man."

He stammered, not sure of what to say or do. Finally, he pulled his young wife to his side, "This is Anna, my wife. We were told that my mother was here. We went to The Desperation Depot, but it was closed. I'm confused."

"I am Elizabeth, your mother's companion." She suddenly realized that he had no knowledge of the



events that had just happened. "Oh, my God! I am so sorry to have to be the bearer of horrible news, but your mother is dead."

Anna put her hand on her husband's arm, "Benjamin, I think we need to sit down."

"Yes, yes, of course." Elizabeth agreed and led the young couple to the living area just off the entryway. They each took seats and finally Benjamin spoke, "I think you had better explain." His voice shook with emotion.

Just then, Alexander appeared much to Elizabeth's relief. "I'm Alexander Douglas, Magdalena's husband."

He took a chair right next to the settee that held Benjamin and his young wife. "I'm devastated to have to report your mother was the victim of a horrific crime. She was killed five days ago."

Benjamin broke down and wept while Anna tried to comfort him. They all waited until he could gain control of his emotions.

"What happened? Where is she now?" His voice broke as he tried to find out the details.

"Come with me." Alexander tried to stand but failed on his own. Elizabeth came to his aid. She helped him up and they all walked to the parlor. Benjamin stood at the door transfixed at the sight of his mother lying in repose in the center of the room.

Slowly but reverently, Benjamin walked in alone to view his mother. Anna kept back, respecting his privacy. He didn't reach out, but as his heart was breaking, Benjamin finally touched her hand and stroked it gently. "Momma." His only word was heard by all.

Anna finally came to stand by her husband. He reached over and hugged her to his side. "Isn't she beautiful? I told you she was."

Alexander walked over to the other side of the casket and looked at the young couple. "I am so sorry that you had to come all this way to find her in this state. I am devastated, I know that she longed to see you, hold you again, and meet your wife and child." He too reached out and brushed his hand down her ivory face.

Elizabeth stepped closer, "Benjamin, we have rooms prepared for you and Anna. Perhaps you would like to have some time alone?"

"Our daughter is in the carriage with a nanny. We need to take care of her. That would be great." Benjamin spoke softly. "I wanted Momma to see our little angel, our Sallie Ann." His voice broke, "She would have loved her."

As the young couple went outside, Elizabeth went to Alexander's side. "Sir, what can I do for you?"

He seemed transfixed. "Do you see how much he looks like his mother?" He broke down, "I'm so incredibly sad that she didn't get to see her son. I failed her."

Elizabeth helped him as they made their way upstairs to his room. She made sure he was settled in a lounge chair before she left to get his manservant.

As she hurried back downstairs, Elizabeth saw that Anna and Benjamin were coming back in with a little bundle in his arms. A stern-looking woman followed, her demeanor was not one of happiness nor concern,

but rather impatience and indignation. She moved closer to look at the little girl in Benjamin's arms.

"She's adorable. You said her name is Sallie Ann?"

"Yes, we named her after Anne's side of the family." He spoke proudly.

"May I hold her?" Elizabeth asked.

"She's got to have her nap." The nanny spoke firmly as she took the baby from her father's arms. "I believe in keeping a schedule."

Benjamin appeared embarrassed by the nanny's behavior, but he reassured Elizabeth, "I'll make sure you get her as soon as she wakes."

Once they were safely tucked in their rooms, Elizabeth went back to check on Alexander. She saw that he was still seated in the lounge with his eyes closed. As she started to leave, he opened his eyes and spoke, "Are they comfortable?"

"They are doing fine under the circumstances. The baby is delightful, and I hope to hold her after they nap."

"Elizabeth, have you thought about what you're going to do now?" He asked the very question that had been on her mind since Magdalena had died.

"I think I'll be able to help Benjamin and Anna find a new nanny. The one they have is a sour puss if ever I've seen one." She spoke bluntly.

For the first time in days, Alexander showed a small smile. "I know that you've been in charge of your destiny since meeting Magdalena, and I have no doubt that they will have a new nanny shortly."

“I think Alice would be a great addition to that family. What about you sir? Can I be of service to you?”

“I will strive to heal with my family and friends. I would love to have you in my life, but I feel that your obligation will be to take charge of Magdalena’s legacy.” His answer reflected how tired he had become.

“You need to rest. Tomorrow is going to be a big day with the funeral.” She stood, but he stopped her.

“Elizabeth, I am very grateful for your help. Please take some time for yourself. Get some rest, too. Tomorrow will be a very hard day for both of us.” He held out his hand to touch hers.

They had a moment and for Elizabeth, she finally realized what made Magdalena love him. He was a good man, no, he was a great man. “Can I send your manservant in to help you?”

“No, I’ll be fine right here. I just want to relax and take some time for myself.”

For the next several hours, the house was silent with everyone in their own spaces relaxing. Elizabeth was in her own room when she heard a knock at the door. Surprised that someone was requesting entry, Elizabeth pulled her robe about herself and hesitantly answered the door.

“Elizabeth, I am so sorry to interrupt your private time, but I must speak with you.” Benjamin stood there.

“Please come in.”

“I have questions that only you can answer.”

She was now facing what she feared most about Magdalena’s death. Elizabeth indicated a chair at the

small table in the corner of her room. "May I get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. I am so sorry to pressure you, but I need to know so much more about my mother."

"I don't know what I can tell you, Benjamin, other than the fact that she loved you above all else."

"I realize that now more than anything else I believed before, but why did she send me away?"

"Oh, my that goes a long way back, doesn't it?" Elizabeth knew the time for truth was upon her. "Your father had signed the rights to the ranch to his aunt and in order for your mother to get some money for the both of you, she had to agree to come to Jerome."

"Did she know she was coming to a house of ill repute?"

"Absolutely not! She was as shocked as she could be but when Rose died on the first night we were here, your mother acted with all the honor she knew and did what she had to do." Elizabeth returned with a question, "How long have you known that she was the Madam of a bordello?"

The look on her son's face was one of distress. "I was oblivious until just a few years ago. When I asked Mother Williams about the money she was receiving, she gave me enough information that I could put two and two together and get four."

"That's when you stopped writing, isn't it?" She asked the obvious.

"I'm so ashamed. I was so angry and felt so abandoned. I wanted to punish her with my silence." He hung his head in humiliation. "I just wanted to be

with her and felt so rejected. I missed my mother so terribly much.”

Elizabeth went over and put her arms around his fallen shoulders. “Benjamin, there wasn’t a day that she didn’t think of you. Every decision she made with love and the thought of protection for you.”

“Did she love my father?”

That question was unexpected, but Elizabeth answered as best she could. “Magdalena was forced into different situations throughout her young life, she rarely had a choice in the matter, but with all the dignity and courage she could muster, your mother went forward in the path that others created for her. She accepted and treated Edward as her husband with respect and humility.”

“But there was no love, was there?”

“I don’t think there was love like you know with your Anna nor love like Alexander and your mother had, but she was determined to honor her commitment.”

“I think I understand. We had such fun when I was young. She was so tender and gentle but always pressured me into learning and developing my talents and skills.” He finally smiled a bit.

“What actually happened? Who killed her?” He asked, determined to know the truth. As he noticed the look on her face, Benjamin apologized, “I know this must be painful for you. You were so important in my mother’s life. She wrote about you in every letter.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment and then finally gathered her courage to answer this question. “In the

very beginning, when we arrived in Prescott, we were supposed to be picked up by Jacky, he worked for the aunt. He was so crude and obnoxious, that Magdalena decided to accept Alexander's offer for a ride from Prescott to Jerome."

"That brings up another question, but I'll wait for your answer first."

"Jacky was kind of a handyman about the place. He didn't respect your mother but with the kind heart she possessed, she kept him employed after the aunt died."

"What exactly did he do for The Desperation Depot?" Benjamin was digging for all the information he could get.

"He did the odd jobs thing. He was also in charge of security for the place. Although, he didn't always do a great job of that." Elizabeth added.

"What do you mean?"

"I can remember one time that one of the customers beat up one of our girls. Jacky was nowhere to be found and your mother took it upon herself to take care of the scoundrel." She grinned at the memory. "She went to Jacky's room to see where he was and found his gun. Magdalena showed no fear when she confronted the man." She giggled and added, "She fainted right after he left the building."

"I cannot imagine her doing that. I would have loved to know her." Benjamin stated. "Jacky was the one that killed her then. How did it happen?"

"She finally fired him several years ago for stealing from her and the girls. He was furious and spent all this time trying to get even with her. At first, his at-

tempts were harmless pranks but as time went by, he got more creative. She tried to get the constable to handle the situation, but there was nothing done to him." It took a few minutes for Elizabeth to gain her composure before continuing.

"There are many layers to the building of The Desperation Depot, hidden rooms, and such. She was waiting for Alexander in her favorite space when the secret panel opened revealing Jacky instead of her love." Her voice broke, "She'd sent me to get Alexander. I wasn't here to help her. I was so excited she had finally decided to marry him and give herself a chance at happiness that I ignored my own instincts about impending danger."

"I'm sure there was nothing you could have done. It sounds like he was determined to get his revenge and you could have been hurt too." Her son tried to console Elizabeth.

"He beat her, he tried to force himself on her, but she eventually got away and ran down the hidden tunnel to the street below the Depot. Alexander and I were coming down the street when we saw her running from him. My heart stopped when I saw the state she was in with nothing on but her camisole and blood coming from her nose and fear vividly on her beautiful face. As long as I live, I'll never forget that moment." She cried openly now.

After a few moments, Elizabeth continued, "After the incident with that drunk and his gun, Jacky gave her a smaller derringer that she carried in her dress pocket all the time. It was that very same gun he pointed at Alexander as he tried to save her."



“But my mother saved Alexander instead, didn’t she?” Tears were now sliding down his face, too.

“Yes, she moved in front of him and took the bullet that was meant for Alexander. He got hurt too, but his wound wasn’t life threatening.”

Benjamin stood up and stretched his tired muscles. “My mother has been protecting people all her life, hasn’t she?”

“Yes.” Her answer was a simple confirmation of the life Magdalena had led.

“I have one more question if you aren’t too tired.” He sat back down.

“Only one more question? I would think there would be things that you are curious about. I am more than happy to clear up the past years for you.”

“When did they get married?”

“It was Alexander’s last request. Once she made sure Alexander would take care of you and your family, she agreed to become his wife. While it wasn’t the ceremony we all thought would happen, the Baptist minister performed their nuptials.” New tears fell as she continued, “Her heart could finally realize happiness. They’ve been in love since that first meeting on the train.”

“I felt that way about Anna.”

“I remember your mother reading that letter to me. You were only thirteen, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but I knew the minute I met her that she was the one I wanted to spend my entire life with. I’m glad my mother finally found that too.” He thought and then asked, “I do have more questions, but for now, I’ll just ask one more. What happens to The Depot?”

“Alexander and I have had a few talks about it but nothing has been decided. We closed it for now. Why do you ask?”

“I would like to go there and see where my mother lived.”

This surprised Elizabeth. “It’s nothing fancy, in fact, it’s just a building with a bad reputation. If she were here, I don’t think Magdalena would want you to see it.”

“You might be right, but I need to see where my mother lived and worked. I need to feel her presence and The Desperation Depot is where I will experience that. I hope you can understand and will honor my request.”

After some thought, Elizabeth agreed. “After the services tomorrow morning, I’ll take you there, if that’s what you want.”

“Thank you. Now, I’ll let you get some rest.” Benjamin went to the door.

“Dinner will be served later, but I don’t know if Alexander will join us. I’ll have the butler let you know when.”

After he left her room, Elizabeth thought long and hard about allowing Benjamin to see The Depot. On the one hand, she felt he had the right to see where his mother had spent the last ten years of her life but on the other hand, she hadn’t wanted him to know what she had been while in Jerome. It was a battle of contradiction, and no simple answer was in sight.

Another set of thoughts entered her mind, what would Alexander want to do with The Desperation Depot? As Magdalena’s husband, he was now the le-

gal owner of the brothel, and what problems did that put on his shoulders? These were all questions with no answers now.

She must have fallen asleep in her chair as the next thing she heard was a slight knock at her door and the butler announcing that dinner was being served in the dining room. "I'll be right there." Elizabeth got up, spruced up her appearance and made her way to join the others.

As she entered the dining room, she was shocked to see Alexander sitting at the head of the table. He was talking with Benjamin but as soon as she appeared, he slowly stood to greet her.

"Elizabeth, please sit here. Will you have something to drink?" He was the perfect host.

"I'll have a small glass of red wine, if you don't mind."

Alexander signaled the butler and soon a glass was set by her plate. "Thank you."

"I was just talking with Benjamin and Anna about the arrangements for tomorrow." His voice cracked a little, but he continued, "This is going to be the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I loved her beyond words and saying goodbye will tear me apart."

As the silence settled over the room, Anna spoke up, "We're so honored that you've opened your home to us during this time. I wish I could have met her."

"She would have welcomed you with open arms. Magdalena had a heart of gold and only wanted her son to be happy in life."

The servants came in and brought the first course of salad and soup. It helped break the mood as they

each ate their meal. "This is delicious." Anna spoke while enjoying her food.

There was small talk as each dealt with attempting to enjoy the meal, trying to ignore the elephant in the room. Magdalena's death was a heavy cloud that each one had to reason with in their own way.

At the end of the meal, a brandy was offered, but only the men agreed to partake. As he held up his snifter, Alexander proposed a toast. "I know this is not what any of us planned. Benjamin, she would have been so proud of you. She would have welcomed you, Anna, and hugged that little bundle of joy to her breast." He hesitated, but finally continued once he got his emotions under control, "The only task ahead of us all is to say a proper farewell tomorrow and resume our lives by honoring what she stood for as we move forward."

The meal ended and Alexander excused himself as did each of the others. The need for solitude was heavy on his mind as he mentally prepared for the services tomorrow. They decided that they would hold the funeral in his house and the preacher agreed to conduct the service.

Upon awakening, Elizabeth realized that the early spring they'd been enjoying was gone and the last breath of winter weather had reappeared. It was dark and overcast with a slight drizzle of rain covering the earth. How appropriate, she thought to herself. It should be a dark, depressing day considering the task ahead. She dressed in her mourning clothes and allowed a slight grin on her face. For years, she'd tried

to get Magdalena out of her dark, black crepe dresses, but to no avail.

In the dining room, the staff had put out breakfast meal foods on the sideboard, allowing each person to help themselves if they desired. She only poured a cup of tea and sat at the long table alone.

Benjamin came into the room dressed and ready for the day's events. She marveled again at how much he looked like his mother. "Help yourself to whatever you want to eat."

"I think I'll have just a cup of tea. I can't seem to find an appetite today." He sat opposite her and held the warm cup in between his hands. "I didn't want to bother Alexander, but I wanted to know where my mother would be buried. Can you tell me?"

More complications to share with this young man, Elizabeth thought, but answered him anyway. "Although she was loved by many of the town's people, your mother was still regarded as the Madam of The Desperation Depot and there was a group of certain women in Jerome raising a fuss, that finally a decision was made that she couldn't be buried in the town's cemetery."

His handsome face showed the anger he must be feeling. "I can't even begin to express how disgusted I am over that. Where will she be laid to rest?"

Alexander's voice came from the doorway. "I'm going to put her in the family plot out by the cabin just at the edge of town. We'll go there together after the services."

Benjamin stood and went to Alexander. "I can't thank you enough."

“I love her.” A simple answer from a heart-broken man. He was also dressed and ready to get on with the difficult task of saying goodbye to his darling.

“Elizabeth, are we ready? People should be getting here shortly. I don’t know how I’m going to get through this with my dignity intact.”

“We’ll all be there to support you.” Benjamin tried to reassure him.

They walked together to the parlor where chairs had been set up and Magdalena now rested in her coffin. Alexander went to her and placed a single kiss on her cold lips, a tear falling on her cheek. As he wiped it gently from her near perfect face, he tried to push the memories of the time they shared from his mind.

The front door was opened allowing people to make their way into the parlor. Dr. Carrier and Daisy were among the first to pay their respects. As introductions were made, Benjamin was amazed at the wonderful words people had to say about his mother.

As the preacher stood to start the service, Benjamin looked around to see that the room was full and there was an overflow of people standing in the open doors. It was a sea of faces all showing their sorrow at the death of Magdalena far too early in her young life. He spoke of her kindness, her willingness to help others, her generosity in the small community, but mostly he talked of her unwavering love for her son, Elizabeth and Alexander.

The preacher concluded his remarks and asked for others to speak about their memories. Dr. Carrier stood and with soft gulps said, “She was not only a good person, but she was also a woman with the big-

gest heart. Magdalena truly encouraged and wanted the best for her girls.” He looked down at his lovely wife, “If it hadn’t been for her, I would never have met this wonderful woman that I’m proud to call my wife.”

Others spoke words and with each story, Benjamin saw how much of a great person his mother had been. Anna put her hand in his and squeezed it to help him cope. Finally, he stood up and faced the crowd. “I’m Benjamin, her son.” His voice cracked but he took a deep breath and started again. “I didn’t get to know my mother over the last ten or so years, but through all of you I can see she was the most honorable and courageous person I would ever want to know. I can only hope to live up to the standards she has set.” He sat back down and cried openly.

When Alexander stood up, there was a small collective sigh heard in the room. “The depth of the love I have for Magdalena will never be erased even as death has taken her from me.”





## Chapter Twelve

### *Modern Day Jerome*

*“There was silence in the room between Ellie, her uncle and John. Words seemed so inadequate as the depth of emotions flowed over them. Finally, Ellie spoke ever so softly.*

*“Every woman wants to be loved like that.” She sniffled as she grabbed the box of tissues. Dabbing at her nose, Ellie added, “Even as good a person as she was, there were still those rotten people that labeled her and caused her so much grief.”*

*“I don’t think they were completely rotten.” Shotgun voiced his thoughts. “Even today, people make all kinds of rash judgements without thinking about the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, I think it’s part of being human, but not the good side by any means.”*

*John got up and came over to sit next to Ellie. He put his arm around her and pulled her close to his side. “I love you like that. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”*

*She looked up and took the kiss he was offering. “It took us a few battles to get to this point, but I love you too. I’m happy beyond words that you and I are finally together.”*

*“So, we’ve gone through all those journals and papers written by Elizabeth, well, at least we think she was the author. Where do we go now?” Shotgun leaned over and started searching through the last stack of documents spread on the coffee table in front of them.*

*After getting those journal pages in order, Ellie noticed that there was a huge gap of time. “The first page is dated 1940. That’s going to be a lot of information that we’ll miss.”*

*“Maybe not. If the writer is Benjamin, maybe he’ll go back and fill in the blanks. As a guy, I wouldn’t necessarily write in a journal daily, but I might put in a final chapter to the previous journals. I can’t wait to get more answers to what our curious minds want to know.” John encouraged Ellie.*

## 1940 Prescott

“Grandfather, you must get rid of that morbid old building! I’m going to be marrying into a very respectable family and they can’t know we own a shady lady hotel!”

“Catherine, I’ll not have you make demands of me.” Benjamin sat behind his majestic old desk in the den of their grand home on Mt. Vernon Street in Prescott, Arizona. “Young lady, there is more to that morbid old building than you know.”

“What could possibly be so important about it?” She pouted her lip out but grinned slightly.

“Those feminine tricks won’t work with me.” He shook his finger at her. “Have a seat and I’ll tell you a story.”

“Grandfather, I’m too old for your stories now.” She took the wingback chair in front of him and leaned back, ready to indulge her favorite person in the whole world.

He took a long look at his only grandchild. Catherine was the spitting image of his mother with her long almost-black hair and violet eyes. He counted having her in his life as a second chance to make up for the years lost when Magdalena sent him away.

“I remember you telling me about your mother, my great grandmother, Magdalena when I was younger. I wish you had a picture so I could see her.”

“Photography was rather new back then, and when we separated, she wouldn’t agree to pose for a picture. I seem to remember a faded, grainy picture of her with my father, but I don’t know what happened to it.” His voice was laden with sadness. “You’ll just have to look in the mirror and you can see how beautiful she was through your own reflection.”

“Grandfather, why did she become the owner of such a place?” Her question was an honest one, not meant to hurt anyone.

He tried to deliver as truthful of an answer as possible, “My mother spent most of her life living with the decisions that someone else made for her.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I understand all of that.”

“My mother was just sixteen when she was basically traded from her father and mother to be the wife of my father Edward. She married him and moved to his ranch in Buckeye.” When he saw the look of horror on her face, he added more information. “Back in those

days, arranged marriages were common. It was like the families figured out who could benefit from the marriage and then the parents did the deal.”

“You mean the woman had no say at all!” She was shocked.

“How would you like that? I could say that your young man wasn’t the best ‘deal’ for our family and make you marry someone I felt would be better.” Benjamin teased her a bit.

“Did she love your father?”

“I think she respected him and honored her role in his life, but my mother didn’t know what love was until she met Alexander.” He finally felt comfortable saying what he knew was the truth in his heart.

“So, what happened that she ended up in Jerome?”

“My father was a great rancher but a poor businessman. When he got in trouble financially, he borrowed money from his aunt in Jerome. She saved the ranch but became the owner in the process. Magdalena never knew until his accidental death and then the ugly truth came out. She had been promised to help the aunt in Jerome. She thought she was going to help with young ladies in a boarding school.” He had gone over this information in his mind many times before, but now relaying it to her great-granddaughter, Benjamin felt a certain peace come over his being. “She had no idea it was a brothel until she got there.”

“Grandfather, you just said it and you must realize that we need to sell that place. Is there any real reason to keep it?”

He drummed his fingers on his desk in hesitation and deep thought, but finally asked, "What are you doing right now, young lady? Do you have time to take a little trip with me?"

"I believe I can do that. Where are we going?" She stood and started toward the door.

"You need to see and know everything before you make demands of your old grandfather."

"You're not old, just a bit set in your ways." She teased but took the hand he offered.

They got into his Cadillac Limo and with Benjamin driving the beautiful luxury car, headed swiftly out of Prescott. She loved her grandfather and knew time with him would be precious. He spoke to his granddaughter, "I want you to approach this trip with an open mind. I had to do that very thing back in 1903 when I first came to Arizona to see my mother."

"Grandfather, I trust you and want to learn from you. I will keep my mind open."

He smiled and pushed the car forward faster. They headed out of Prescott for a few miles, but then he turned on Highway 79. "I heard that this road is rather twisty, and it winds through the mountains. I had wanted to bring your little sports car, but I'm glad we brought the big one."

"I am too. I will take it slow, so you don't get car sick." His voice teased her. "This is one of the most beautiful, scenic routes in the nation. It is rather curvy, and some people don't like it, but I thought with the adventurous spirit you have, you would like it."

They traveled up the rough road on Mingus Mountain. It was slow going, but Catherine marveled at the scenery. It was the middle of summer but unlike Phoenix, the weather up here was awesome and mild. The sun was shining through the grand branches of the many trees in the Prescott National Forest. The air was warm, but slightly cool as it came through their open windows. "You were right, this is absolutely beautiful with all the pine and oak trees and greenery."

"I knew you'd love it. It will take us a bit longer, but I want you to see Jerome as I know it."

They took the last turn on the road and suddenly the small town of Jerome popped up in front of her. "Wow! I didn't expect that. These houses are practically built on the side of the mountain. What keeps them from sliding down the hillside?"

"It's funny you should ask that. The jail started sliding down the hill in 1938 due to an underground blast in the mines. It's been slowly working its way down the hill. Who knows where it will end up."

"They don't use it anymore, do they?"

"No, the town is very subdued compared to what it was about thirty years ago. They do have a new jail in a safer location. At the height of the mining boom, there were about 15,000 people living here, but now there's only a little over 2,000 permanent residents."

He drove slowly down the main street and eventually stopped in front of a rather dilapidated-looking building. With a big sigh, Benjamin turned to her before opening the car door, "Catherine, this place is the only thing I have left to remind me of my mother. It's

been empty for over thirty years, so we'll have to be careful of any critters and dust we might find."

"Ooh, I don't think I like the sound of that."

"We'll be fine." He finally opened the car door and encouraged her to follow him up the wooden steps to the front of The Depot. The door had a bar with a padlock that he removed with his key. He then pushed the doors open and they stepped through the swinging doors into the lobby of The Desperation Depot. Leaving the door open, allowed some light to penetrate the dark interior.

"Well, what do you think?" Her grandfather asked.

"My first impressions are the dank smell and the cobwebs, but it must have been a lovely building in its time." Catherine looked at the ornate wooden bar covered with dust. As her eyes took in the entire lobby, she noticed the steel ceiling tiles and the beautifully elaborate crown molding. "Where's the rest of the furniture?"

"When Elizabeth died, I had everything sold and this place closed up."

"Elizabeth? Who was she?" This was the first-time hearing of the woman.

"You're old enough to hear the entire story now. That will help you understand why it's hard for me to let it go. Elizabeth was responsible for your wonderful nanny Alice. She made sure you were loved and received the best care a granddaughter of Magdalena could have." Benjamin took her to the bar, and they took the only two stools left in the place.

As they sat down, he started to explain, "Elizabeth became my mother's companion when she boarded

the train from Phoenix to Prescott. To this day, I'll never forget how sad Magdalena looked when she put me on a different train bound for back East."

"This was all after your father died?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, I saw Elizabeth talking with my mother from the train window and somehow I knew she was going to be good for her."

"Your world must have been very different from how I live today."

"That's an understatement. My mother found herself in a horrible situation but possessing powerful strength and courage she made herself a force to be reckoned with in a world of wickedness and greed."

"So, this Elizabeth stayed with Magdalena the rest of her life? What a friend she must have been."

"She was that and more. How much have you been told about my mother's death?"

She giggled but answered anyway, "You know mother, she's very hush, hush about certain things in the family tree. I can guess, but honestly, I really don't know."

"Mother was a good person despite being labeled as a Madam of a bawdy house. But with that said, she made an enemy of a man that had worked for the aunt. She fired him for stealing and for years after he did things to aggravate her. Most of his attempts were almost harmless pranks and she just ignored them, but finally he became determined to make her pay for firing him. He was said to be a bit unstable and always bad-mouthed her for humiliating him in the town."



“Why didn’t the law do anything? If he was pestering her, she could have pressed charges or something, couldn’t she?”

“You forget that she was not considered an ‘honorable’ citizen of the town and therefore, the law just didn’t help.” He took a deep breath before continuing his sad tale, “The day she finally decided to give up this place and marry Alexander, was the day Jacky decided to make good his threat.”

“Wait, wait. You forgot to tell me about Alexander.” She stopped him.

“I’ll get to him. Jacky showed up when she was not expecting him. He beat her, tried to rape her, and chased her out on the street wearing nothing but her camisole, that’s underwear in case you didn’t know. No one would help her, she cried out, but no one would lift a hand to stop him.”

“Oh, my God! That’s horrible.” She got up and went to her grandfather and put a big hug around him. “I’m so sorry that you had to live with this.”

“Alexander and Elizabeth were just coming down the street when they saw all of that happening. She’d sent Elizabeth to tell Alexander the good news, she finally had agreed to get married. When he tried to rescue her, Jacky aimed his gun to shoot Alexander and my mother stepped in front, taking the bullet instead.”

Catherine felt tears forming in her eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Anna and I got here five days after she died.” His voice cracked and for a moment they just held on to

each other. "I got here in time to be a part of her funeral."

"Grandfather, I am so sorry. I think I can understand why you want to keep this place."

"Alexander was the man she was in love with for years, but she sacrificed that love to keep his honor intact. He was a respectable member of the society here in Jerome at the time. They married just before she died, and she's buried in his family plot in a little place not too far from here."

"What happened to Alexander?"

"His family was from Canada, and he went back home to live until he died years later. He kept in touch with me but said he could no longer live here knowing he would never see her again."

"That is the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Elizabeth stayed on and ran this house until her death about ten years after Magdalena had died. I told you before that I closed it up and I have never been back until today."

"Grandfather, I love you for sharing this with me. I'm sorry I acted like a spoiled brat. I was just concerned about my fiancé's family and what they would think. I had no idea about the entire story."

He stood up and reached into his pocket. "I brought a flashlight if you would like to look around."

"I would love to. Where do we start?" She had her grandfather's sense of adventure and he smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I think up the stairs to the lounge. I'll show you something my mother created that made her place so popular with the miners." He took her hand and slow-

ly using the beam of light they took the steps up to the area just above the lobby.

As they surfaced upstairs, he flashed the light to the wall of the lock boxes. "See those boxes?"

"What in the world are those for? They look like the type of safety deposit boxes they have in the bank."

"My mother had these installed so the miners could put their valuables in there and when they were..." He hesitated as he heard her giggle.

"Grandfather, I know more than you think I do."

"Catherine Louise, I'm shocked!" He teased back and continued, "when the miners were with their chosen lady, his money and valuables weren't subject to being stolen. Magdalena thought their payment for services was quite enough money to pay."

"What unique thinking. I think she might have been ahead of her time. Women weren't supposed to be good at business, were they?" Catherine voiced her thoughts aloud, not really expecting an answer.

"I found six more of these boxes in a basement room below the kitchen. I think she might have used those for herself."

"What do you think she would put in those boxes?"

He didn't answer her question right away, but added "Can you imagine what the miners called these boxes?"

Her laughter echoed through the near empty building. "Grandfather, I have no idea, but I'm sure you're about to enlighten me."

"They called them squirrel holes, you know, like where a squirrel would hide their special treats. I

think she might have done the same with those boxes in the basement. I've never looked in them." He laughed as he saw her confused expression. "Let's take a secret trip, shall we?"

"A secret trip? Where to?" She was pleased but a bit confused at her grandfather's behavior. He always seemed so serious and in control. This side of him intrigued her. She watched as he pushed on a panel just to the side of one of the lock boxes and to her amazement, the wall swooshed open revealing a dark space just inside.

"Oh, my! A hidden passage! Where does it lead, Grandfather?" She ventured closer to see better but stopped short of going into the mysterious space.

"Are you willing? How daring are you?" Benjamin challenged her.

"Let's do this. I'm right behind you." She stepped back from the opening and waved her hand to indicate he should go first.

The light from their torch showed a small platform with steps going up on the left and going down on the right. "Which way are we going?" Her voice was timid in the small space.

"We're going up. I want you to see more of the mysterious life my mother lived in this big old building." He took her hand and with Catherine close behind, they mounted the narrow stairs one step at a time. Finally, he took a last step that brought them to another flat spot but with no visible opening. As he rubbed his hand over the wall he found the lever, Benjamin stood back and allowed her to peak into the room beyond.

Catherine slowly moved into the room. A small hexagonal window allowed light from the bright summer day to cast a shadowy luminescence around the space. She saw a lounge chair, the bed, a dresser, and some other small pieces of furniture, but the object that caught her attention was a beautiful full-size painting of Magdalena.

He, too, was transfixed by the magnificent portrait.

“Grandfather, I thought you said that she wouldn’t pose for a painting.” The enormous painting was leaning up against the wall, its golden frame seemed to pale in comparison to her beauty.

“I swear, this wasn’t here before. I searched every part of this hotel before I shut it up. Like I told you, I sold most of the furniture except for this room and the few belongings you saw downstairs.” Benjamin walked up to the painting and tentatively put his hand on the frame as if to make sure it was real. “I have no idea how this got here.”

Catherine walked closer to her grandfather and looked around the room before speaking, “Do you think this place is haunted? Do you think she could be here?”

He opened his mouth to give an answer, but shut it before trying again, “I swear this wasn’t here, but I don’t think a ghost put it in here. Catherine, I don’t have a logical explanation for any of this.”

“I think I want to go. I’m suddenly feeling frightened.”

“I understand that you might be scared, I’m a bit perplexed myself.” He stared at the painting. “That

was the dress that Alexander had made for her. After my father's death, she wouldn't wear anything but a black mourning dress. She was buried in this gown." He stroked his chin as he thought of the mystery in front of them.

"What are you going to do with this painting?" Catherine came nearer and looked closely at her great-grandmother. Magdalena was standing with her back to them, but she could see her face as the grand woman looked over her shoulder. The intricate blue lace of her gown showed a bit of her milky white skin and her long black hair fell down the back of the dress. She was looking down as if in deep contemplation, but her perfect profile showed the eternal beauty she had possessed. "We need to take this with us. You can't leave it here."

"Sweetheart, I can't imagine trying to get this large frame in the backseat of my car. It just won't fit."

She turned to face him with her arms crossed in front of her slim body. The look of determination caused him to realize that she was not going to leave without the painting. "Let's take it downstairs and at least try. You have a big car, Grandfather. We can solve the mystery of its appearance later, in the safety of your home."

"Okay, you go ahead and shine the light for me to follow you down those steep steps. It shouldn't be that heavy." He went to lift the painting and realized he was right. The frame was bulky but not too terribly hard to lift. They struggled but finally Benjamin and Catherine had the painting at the curb beside his car.

Surprisingly, the painting fit between the second and third seats with the seat backs lowered. After getting it in and secured, Benjamin turned to her and said, "I'll go back in and lock everything up. Wait here, I'll be right back."

She stood by her side of the car and waited. The secret room revealed much more than she could've ever imagined, but Catherine felt safer waiting for her grandfather out here in the open spaces of the small town. She looked up at the building, trying to envision what it must have looked like in its heyday. The building would be open and bustling with patrons coming and going.

Turning around and glancing up and down the street, Catherine saw other businesses. The sign over one of the buildings showed that it was a grocery store, while another was a variety-type store, but in the distance further up on the hill was a beautiful five-story structure. She noticed smoke from several of the stacks which she assumed was coming from the mines. Turning back and wondering what was taking her grandfather so long, Catherine noticed the balcony above the wooden sidewalk in front of The Depot.

Just as she was ready to step back inside, a flash of movement from that balcony caught her eye. When she turned to see what was up there, her breath caught in her throat. Standing just ready to go back inside an open door was the fuzzy image of a woman. Without any doubt, Catherine knew she'd just experienced a visit from Magdalena.

Before she could say anything, Benjamin came out and turned to bolt the bar across the exterior door. "Grandfather, quick! Come here!"

Sensing the excitement in her voice, he moved to where she was standing and pointing. "I saw her! Your mother was just up there! I swear it!"

He raised his hand to cover his eyes from the sun and stared at the balcony. "Catherine, are you sure? I don't see anything."

She turned and saw the door was closed and there was now nothing. "That door was open and after looking at me, she went inside. I am telling you she was here."

"You know, I don't doubt you. I sensed something in there today with that picture showing up. Let's get back to Prescott. They'll be missing us soon." As he started the powerful engine, Benjamin took one last look at the balcony but saw nothing.

The trip back to the house went faster than before and soon they were pulling up the front drive to his stately home. A houseman was there to open the doors for them and as they stepped out, Benjamin instructed him to carry the painting into the house.

"You didn't have much to say on the trip home, Grandfather. Are you alright?" They walked to his office and sat down.

"Catherine, I've always considered myself a logical man. I work with numbers and calculations that make sense. I didn't doubt what you said you saw today, because I had a similar experience when I went in to lock up."



“Oh, my goodness. What happened?” She leaned forward in her chair, anxious to hear his story.

“I went up the secret stairs to make sure we closed everything up and I found this laying on the bed.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a locket. The emotions overcame him, and Benjamin had to wipe at a tear before he could continue. “After father died, my mother’s favorite piece of jewelry was this locket. She wore it always, but it couldn’t be found after she was killed. Elizabeth looked for it because she wanted me to have it.”

“Grandfather, what do you think all of this means?” She reached for the locket and opened the small golden frame to see the greatly faded portrait. “We didn’t see this. We looked over that room. How can this be?”

Just then the houseman knocked at the open door. “Sir, as I was propping up the portrait, this fell off the back.” He held up an envelope.

Benjamin signaled for him to hand it over. The houseman did just that and left the room. Benjamin turned the yellowed envelope over and looked to see that it was addressed to him. He showed it to his granddaughter.

“Open it, see what’s inside.” Catherine encouraged him.

With shaking hands, he carefully opened the aged paper envelope and gently lifted out a single piece of paper.

*My Dear Benjamin,*

*It's been a little more than ten years now since my beautiful wife and your mother passed. I left shortly after, as I could no longer face living there without her. I had this painting commissioned and the expert artist completed it from my memories and, forgive me if you feel it was an intrusion, but I had a still photo taken as she lay in repose.*

*I kept it at the Douglas cabin. My health is failing fast, so I wanted you to have it before someone else takes over that place and destroys it or gets rid of it. Even after all these years, there are still people out to destroy her reputation and mine. I had my loyal manservant arrange to have her moved to a secret resting place and I will join her soon. I cannot believe how vicious and evil people in the town can be by spreading lies about her life. Don't you believe anything you might hear. My family has disowned me because I married my one true love. Shame on them!*

*I used the secret entrance from the street and placed it in our special meeting place. I know it must be a huge shock to see this, but I know you are the rightful heir to have it.*

*It's time to keep this and let her go.*

*Forever linked to Magdalena,*

*Alexander*

“Oh, my God, Grandfather.” She was crying. “What are you going to do?”

He came around the desk and pulled his granddaughter to her feet. They both cried and held on to each other. Finally, he let her go and as she sat back down, Catherine saw a smile starting to form on his face. "I'm going to sell it. The message is loud and clear for me now."

The look on her face showed that she was still confused. "You don't have to get rid of it. I understand now, and I'll make his family understand the beauty and history of that place. Please, grandfather, I'm so sorry I even brought it up."

"It's the right thing to do. She's ready to find some peace and I suddenly realized that she's not there, she's here, here in my heart." He patted his chest. "She loved and sacrificed for everyone in her life. Someone else needs to take that old building and turn it into a fun place where good times can be had. That's not for us."

Catherine stood up and faced him. "I can only hope that I have a love like she had for her family. I only hope that in two weeks when I marry, that I'll do her justice."

"You will, Princess, you will. When you become Mrs. William Parker, you will honor her memory. I know in my heart that you have the same courage and fortitude as she did."



## Epilogue

### *Modern Day Jerome*

**S**hotgun, what's wrong?" Ellie saw the look of shock on her uncle's face as they finished reading.

"Ellie, all of this contradicts everything we thought we knew. You said you researched our family. I thought you already confirmed we were related to Magdalena. How could the information you dug up be so wrong?"

"I'm not sure how it happened, but this new information has to be the truth!"

"You know how those lawyers for the stock certificates are fighting us? They wanted proof, absolute proof that Magdalena was my long lost relative. These journals and letters will prove it all."

"Just to confirm some facts," John stated, "Magdalena came from Buckeye not Mexico and she sent Benjamin back east before coming to Jerome."

"Right! You know, when I started digging up all this stuff, I found out that the 1890 census in Phoenix was destroyed by fire. Back then, everything was done on paper and as it was sitting on the back docks of some warehouse in downtown Phoenix, it

*burned up.” Ellie apologized to both men, “I don’t know how I could’ve gotten things so mixed up.”*

*“Don’t worry about it now. I’m pretty sure we have the real facts in front of us.” John hugged Ellie to reassure her.*

*“What about the story that she bought three lots and purposely built a bawdy house?”*

*“Remember in the journal, Magdalena wrote that Madam Bertha bought three lots next to The Depot. It was Bertha not Magdalena. I’ll bet that tons of correct information got burned up in all those fires they had in Jerome over the years.” John said.*

*“What about the fact that Benjamin was supposed to have married a local girl?” Ellie asked.*

*“We can get the marriage records from Philadelphia to confirm his marriage to Anna. That should be easy enough to prove that.” John suggested.*

*Ellie was already on her laptop and soon enough had the information on the screen. “There it is! Alexander said in his note to not believe the lies! I’m going to find the birth record of Sallie Ann.” Her fingers flew over the keyboard and while the men waited, she found what she needed. “Okay, here it is. She married Grant and they had Catherine, your mother, Shotgun.”*

*Seeing the look of distress on his face, Ellie asked, “What’s wrong, Uncle?”*

*“I’m afraid it’s time for a little confession. When your father was born just minutes after me, it was too much for her and she died giving birth to us. Our father couldn’t even look at us, so he sent us to a*

cousin in Nevada to live. We weren't adopted, just abandoned."

"Oh, Uncle, don't think of it that way. You took me in when mom and dad died. I loved that you could do for me what your cousin did for you." She went over and hugged him as they both shared a few tears.

"So, Magdalena was a good person." John stated. "She saved her son, Alexander, and Elizabeth."

"Yes, and then she saved us from the bomb in the sub-basement. Her tradition of saving family continues but John, we don't need saving now. We're fine."

"Maybe, it's time for family to help her. We need to release her from here and us." Shotgun offered his suggestion.

"How?" Ellie asked.

"Remember when you and I went to see that psychic?" John held up his hand to stop her protest. "I know, I know. I didn't believe it, but she might be the right person to help us with this sort of a problem, don't you think? Look, Ellie, we're out of our element here. As sheriff I dealt with a lot of bizarre situations but having a resident spirit and finding out you're her relative is way above my expertise."

"We're supposed to leave on our honeymoon in five days and officially open this place in three. I just don't know what we should do. Uncle, what do you think?"

"I'm hungry." They laughed at his statement.

"We have been here all day. Why don't we have some dinner and then we can decide what to do." John said.

*"Sounds like a plan. What's for dinner?" Shotgun was always ready to eat.*

*"I've got some of that stew from yesterday. Let's heat that up. It's something easy and ready quickly." Ellie got up and went across the hall to the apartment her and John shared. The guys followed and sat at the table. They enjoyed their simple meal and John offered to clean up.*

*"You know what I want to do?" Ellie sat at the kitchen bar.*

*"What's that, Sweetie?"*

*"I'm drained. I'd like to sleep on our decision. I think it's extremely important and I don't want to make it without some deep thinking." Ellie let them know her feelings.*

*"I'm tired too. See you guys in the morning." Shotgun went to his own space across the hall.*

*John came around the kitchen bar and kissed Ellie. "I know this has been trying to say the least, but Sweetie, I love you and we need to get on with our life together."*

*"Does that mean that we need to go to the bedroom?" Ellie teased her new husband. After making love, they both settled down in their bed.*

*Ellie fell asleep right away, but a few hours later she was suddenly awakened by a small noise in the kitchen. Looking over at John and seeing that he was sound asleep, she decided to check the noise out on her own.*

*As she slowly walked to the kitchen area, Ellie had a feeling that she was being summoned. Seeing that everything was as they had left it, she grabbed a*



*flashlight from the drawer and ventured out to the lobby of The Depot. After living in this building for a year, she realized that a first timer would be a little bit afraid, but she knew that whatever was going on wouldn't harm her. In her nightgown and with bare feet, Ellie moved on to the stairs leading to the lounge.*

*She was confident and slightly amazed that fear wasn't a part of her emotions as she finally reached the top step. Knowing that Magdalena was now part of her family, Ellie felt a peace in her movements.*

*Not knowing what to expect, she looked at the lock boxes and seeing nothing, Ellie moved closer to move the lever that activated the hidden passage. Once the panel whooshed open, she stepped in the darkened area. Turning on the light, Ellie knew the steps and moved slowly up to the hidden room above.*

*The final step was pushing the lever to reveal the hidden room. Once Ellie did that, she expected a darkened space, but much to her surprise, she found a lamp burning on the nightstand next to the bed. Cautiously she stepped further into the room.*

*"Magdalena?" Her question was spoken softly. Sensing movement behind her, Ellie turned to look at the glowing figure of the very woman she'd wanted to see. She was standing by the lounge chair and seemed to be a bit nervous. Magdalena wore the gown she'd been buried in and was as beautiful as Ellie had imagined. There was a sparkly glow about her as though her dress was covered in diamonds. She smiled.*

*“I know you and I are related. I want you to know that I’m honored and proud.” Ellie’s voice broke with the emotion she was feeling. “I wish I could give you a hug. I wish we could have a conversation. I wish I could say the words that would release you from this place. You deserve to be with Alexander and finally have your own happiness.”*

*Magdalena waved her hand to indicate that Ellie should sit on the lounge and as she did sparklets fell to the floor. Eager to find a way to communicate, Ellie moved across the floor and sat down at the end. There wasn’t any movement of the cushion, but she knew the moment Magdalena sat next to her. A feeling of warmth and love surrounded them both.*

*Ellie put her open hand out and she watched as Magdalena put her hand on top. A sensation of static electricity tickled her palm. She looked up and smiled. She realized that they were in tune with each other, and Ellie took this moment to speak. “Please, we are all fine and I need you to go and be happy. Now is the time for you.”*

*Magdalena stood up and facing Ellie, she gave her a little smile. Ellie noticed what looked like a single tear sliding down her cheek. As Magdalena crossed the floor, there were small sparkles falling from her dress all the way to the hidden entrance to the attic. Just as she started to leave, John and Shotgun entered the room from the hidden passage. Ellie could see her uncle standing in the doorway, mesmerized by the sight.*

*Magdalena stopped her movements and waited for them to join Ellie at the lounge. “El, are you al-*

right?" John never took his gaze off the image of Magdalena as he spoke to his wife. He put his hand on her shoulder in a loving protective way and indicated that her uncle should join them. Shotgun crossed the worn floor slowly, pain from taking the stairs etched on his face, but he never took his eyes from Magdalena.

"I'm so fine. Isn't she beautiful?" Ellie finally looked to her husband and uncle and asked, "Why are you two here? I thought you were asleep."

"When I woke up and you weren't there, I went looking and found your uncle in the hallway. He was trying to get to this room on his own. We came to find you. We both knew you wanted to say goodbye. Did you convince her that we were so much in love, and she should go and find Alexander?"

Magdalena nodded her head in answer to his question at the same time Ellie replied. "Yes, she knows we love her but are all in agreement that it's her time for happiness."

Against everything he'd lived by all his life, John spoke to the image in the corner of the room. "You've sacrificed enough. Shotgun is happy, we're doing fine, and we'll be okay without you here. I mean you could visit every now and again if you wanted." His life as sheriff was one based on finding facts and if he had to explain this situation, he couldn't do it logically.

Ellie finally stood up and John hugged her to his side. They watched as the last of the sparklets dropped to the floor and finally Magdalena stood before them just as the image in the painting that Ben-

*jamin had described. They all knew this was the moment she was saying goodbye.*

*Magdalena put her hand out to blow a kiss to Shotgun. Right before their eyes, she disappeared through the attic opening and darkness settled in the room. The only bit of light was from Ellie's flashlight.*

*John pulled Ellie into his warm embrace and hugged her tightly to his muscular body. For a few moments, neither of them spoke. Finally, he said, "Are you fine? Are you okay with all of this?"*

*"Oh, yes! I think we finally gave her some happiness."*

*"I'm going back downstairs." Shotgun's voice carried the emotions he was feeling. "I'll see you two later." He soon disappeared through the opening, but John looking to Ellie told her he'd help him down the stairs.*

*When he returned, Ellie spoke, "John, let's sleep here. This room saw a lot of love between her and Alexander and I think we can add to that."*

*"Sounds great." He kissed her passionately. They pulled the covers back on the bed and proceeded to make love. In the aftermath, Ellie lay snuggled in his arms. She felt his heart beating hard and matching the rhythm of hers.*

*"John, what happened to the picture of Magdalena?"*

The End

“I always love to hear from my readers. Please add your name to my mailing list and I will update you monthly with a bulletin. I will also include notices of upcoming books and free giveaways.”

[www.bbmontgomery.com/](http://www.bbmontgomery.com/)



## About the Author

A professor on the path to her Master's degree posed this question – “If you were arrested today for something you are passionate about, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” B. B. Montgomery's passion for writing spans back to her childhood. As a human resources trainer for over 25 years as well as an instructor at the local community college, she has written numerous facilitator's guides, participant guides, and collateral pertinent to the subject being taught in her classes. She finally found the time to pursue her passion, dust the manuscripts sitting on her bookshelves, and finish what she started years ago. Yes, there is enough evidence! She lives in Surprise, AZ with the love of her life!

[www.bbmontgomery.com/](http://www.bbmontgomery.com/)

Other books by B.B. Montgomery

*Day Trip Destiny*

*A Fast Affair*

Ante Up Series by B.B. Montgomery

Book #1: *Love is a Dam Mystery*

Book #2: *Chasing Chips, Finding Love*

Book #3: *Spirits and Love:*

*Rebuilding the Desperation Depot*

Salt of the Earth Series by B.B. Montgomery

Book #1: *They Call Me Raven*

Book #2: *Saving Me and the Salton Sea*