

~1882, Portland, Oregon

Amelia Martin clapped her gloved hands together before glancing at her father and noticing his scowl. She shoved them behind her back. Still, she couldn't help but rock forward on the pointed toes of her kidskin boots. As they stood in front of the Oregon Express office in Portland, the shiny red stagecoach pulled in front of them. And Josh Benson was driving. She'd know him anywhere from his description in the letters Mrs. Kincaid—wait, she was Mrs. Adams now— had sent them. That dark curly hair. She couldn't see his dimples, as he wasn't smiling. But she'd bet a cutting of her mother's prized blush damask rose that they were there.

He would be marrying the town's schoolteacher, Miss Emily Stanton. So romantic! She hoped she and Father would be invited to the wedding. She just loved weddings. And since schoolteachers couldn't be married, Amelia planned to take the position Miss Stanton currently held. The town had offered it to her. Father hadn't given his blessing yet, but he would.

She slid her arm through Father's. "Aren't you excited for this adventure?"

He patted her hand, a slight smile flitting across his face, barely visible under his neatly trimmed mustache and beard, but not reaching his eyes. It never did anymore. "I'll be happy when we're settled in our new place. There's much that needs to be done before then."

True. And it had been a lengthy journey from upstate New York to Chicago by train, and then another train through some of the most diverse and spectacular scenery of prairies, deserts, and mountains. In Sacramento, California, they switched to the Oregon and California train for the final leg of their journey to Portland. And somehow her cuttings had survived the entire journey. As tired as she was, excitement coursed through her. The end was so near. And she would get to ride a stagecoach! Just like in her favorite dime novels.

An older man and a younger one loaded their valises and trunks into the boot. And most importantly, her cuttings, wrapped in burlap and nestled in damp sawdust that she refreshed each night. They were her mother's legacy, and they meant more to her than anything else she owned.

Their household goods would be coming by freighter at some point. And because of the dime novels she read, she knew all the correct terms for life in the West and what they meant. Her latest novel was safely tucked in the emerald-green velvet reticule that swung from her wrist. Oh, she was living out a proper adventure, just like in one of her books! The only thing that would make this perfect would be if Mother were with them. She swallowed down the thought. No tears, or even the hint of them, would mar this adventure. She brushed her hands over her deep-green wool coat that matched her traveling suit, picking at a speck of dust.

Josh Benson nodded in their direction as footsteps came up behind them. Amelia tore her gaze away from the stagecoach. A man had joined them. He was sharply dressed in a dark suit and crisp white shirt. Taller than her father and possibly a little older than herself, he was lean with shoulders that filled out his suit coat. He smiled and tipped his hat at her, his golden-brown eyes—such an unusual color—twinkling. "Miss." He turned to include her father. "Are you folks traveling all the way to Reedsville?"

Father nodded. "We are. How about you, Mr.—?"

“Hank Paulson.” He stuck out his hand and shook Father’s. “I’ve been living there for a while now. It’s a friendly town, good people. You’ll like it there, I believe.”

“Dr. Luke Martin and my daughter, Amelia. I’ve taken the position of town physician. We’re relocating from New York.”

“The town is surely in need of a doctor.”

This man would be on the stage with them. All the questions she could ask him about the town raced through her brain. “Mrs. Adams has been writing to us about Reedsville and the people. We’ll be staying in her boardinghouse until our house is built. I can’t wait to get there.”

He smiled. “You won’t have to wait long. Josh is ready for us. Shall we?” He swept his hand toward the open stagecoach door.

Amelia stepped on the small box, and with Mr. Benson’s assistance, entered the stagecoach.

He flashed her a smile, and those dimples appeared.

She grinned in triumph as she took her seat. Father sat next to her and Mr. Paulson across from them. The rest of the stagecoach filled with passengers, making for a tight fit. She kept her skirts firmly tucked under to keep them from brushing against Mr. Paulson.

Soon they were off. The jostling made it necessary for her to grip the seat, but the scenery that passed the window was breathtaking. So many variations of green! Back in New York, everything was still under layers of snow, the trees only bare sticks. Here it looked like it was nearly spring, even though it was only the end of January. Even the cool air had a hint of warmth to it.

Between the scenery, the jostling, and the noise, Amelia didn’t ask any questions of Mr. Paulson. She’d discover it all as she experienced it.

A sharp report split the air. The coach jerked, and shouts came from outside. She caught Mr. Paulson’s gaze. His brow furrowed, and he leaned to peer out. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out an envelope. He nodded at Father. “Any valuables, best try to hide them. We’re being held up.”

Robbed? Oh this was just like one of her books. Except she wouldn’t swoon like the heroines often did. That was silly, frankly. She whispered a quick prayer for safety.

Mr. Paulson shoved the envelope in the seat cushion behind him then pointed to her reticule. “Anything in there you want me to try to hide?”

“Oh no. Merely a handkerchief and a book.” But her hand went to her neck. Her mother’s cameo, one of the few things she was allowed to keep for their journey West. It had a gold setting and chain, so it was worth some money, but of far greater value was its sentimental one. She tucked it into her dress, her high collar hiding the chain.

Father’s arm came around her shoulders, pulling her close.

The stagecoach slowed to a stop, and horsemen replaced the woods as the scenery out the window.

Mr. Paulson cut his voice low. “Just do as they say. They likely want the strongbox and any valuables. But generally no one

gets hurt, and they'll let us on our way once they get what they want."

A man on horseback with a bandana over his face bent to scout out the inside of the stagecoach. "No funny stuff, ya hear? Get on out here, and bring your valuables with you."

The stagecoach door flew open, another masked man holding it. "Don't none of you men try to be brave, or you'll get shot for your trouble."

Amelia trembled. While this was like something out of one of her dime novels, it might be a bit more adventure than she'd like.

What had they gotten into?

Hank followed Amelia Martin out of the stagecoach. He couldn't help but notice her comely form, the green coat that highlighted her eyes, or the sun glinting off her reddish-brown hair. He'd been hoping this stagecoach ride would be enjoyable. It was not to be.

He kept to the side and in front of her, her father flanking the other side. What a way to be introduced to their new town. He scanned the robbers for any sign that might help Sheriff Riley identify them or their horses. One horse, a paint, resembled Tim Donnally's that had been stolen last week. So horse thieves too. The men were dirty and scruffy enough that he wasn't sure he could even identify his own brother if he were one of them. Not that Philip would ever be dirty or scruffy.

The final passengers exited the coach. He studied the men. He didn't know any of them, and he hoped no one would try to be a hero. They were evenly matched numbers-wise with the robbers, but the robbers all had their hands firmly on their firearms. Josh had been forced to surrender his shotgun.

The man who had opened the stagecoach door went around to each passenger collecting their valuables, patting the men's pockets to make sure no one was hiding anything. Another two were rummaging in the boot.

And the ringleader had his shotgun pointed at Josh. "Go ahead and toss down that strongbox I know you have up in that so-called secret driver's compartment."

Josh moved slowly, deliberately, but he complied.

The robber stealing from the passengers reached Hank and the Martins. "Easy now. Give me your wallet." His gun shifted to Miss Martin. Hank stiffened and shifted his weight closer to her. "And you, missy, hand over any jewelry and that fancy bag of yours."

Miss Martin paled. A faint sprinkling of freckles stood out across her nose and cheeks. He'd be enchanted in any other circumstance.

"I'm wearing no jewelry. And there's nothing of value in my reticule. See?" She opened the drawstring pouch and held it toward him.

The man raked his gaze up and down her form. Hank wanted to punch him. Based on the slight movement Dr. Martin made and Miss Martin's restraining squeeze on his arm, Hank suspected he wasn't alone in that sentiment.

The robber grabbed the bag and dumped it into his hand. A scrap of lacy linen and a dime novel fell out. She hadn't been lying about her lack of valuables, thank goodness.

The man scowled. "A book? I ain't got no use for reading." He tossed the bag and its contents to the ground then chuckled. "But I might come back for a different kind of payment."

Over my dead body.

A scuffle at the boot caught Hank's attention. Items flew out the back, including some burlap sacks that broke open and scattered sawdust and plant material over the ground. What on earth was that?

Miss Martin whimpered.

He turned to see her gaze on the sacks, her gloved hand at her lips. They must be her items. But what they were, he had no idea. Her face crumpled, and she blinked rapidly. The encounter with the robber must have upset her more than she let on.

One of the passengers lunged for the robber. Looked like Bill Benchly, a saloon owner. Two others joined in.

Hank snatched Miss Martin about the waist and rolled her under the stagecoach.

The other robbers leaped in and a melee ensued. In the midst of the wrestling match, a gun went off. The shouts and several other gunshots faded from his awareness as the blackness pressed in. *Lord, please. Not now.* Reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm in his head, he deliberately steadied his breath and opened his eyes, which he hadn't realized he'd closed. He could see daylight. The space wasn't that tight. Slowly the blackness receded.

He became aware of Miss Martin's form pressed beneath him. Small and soft. He forced his mind away from those thoughts. She would likely be upset that he had dirtied her dress.

She struggled under him, trying to push him off. The scent of lilacs filled his nose.

"Shh, it's not safe."

She whispered something he couldn't hear over the commotion.

Horses whinnied. Men shouted. Hoofbeats started then receded.

He peeked out from under the stagecoach. Dr. Martin bent over a man. A woman knelt next to him, sobbing.

An elbow to Hank's ribs elicited a grunt, and he rolled over.

Miss Martin shimmied out from the stagecoach and ran—not to her father—but to the burlap sacks.

Hank slid out from under the stagecoach, fast on her heels.

She reached the first sack, scraping the sawdust and plants back into the bag.

Plants?

She glanced back at him. "Help me." Then she began coughing.

Dr. Martin jerked his head in her direction, frowned, and returned attending to his patient.

“What are these?” Hank studied what appeared to be a stick in his hand. Some others had a bit of greenery on them. Odd.

“My cuttings. The only thing I have left from my mother. They can’t dry out. Pack the damp sawdust back around their roots and put them back in the burlap.”

He did as she asked, taking in the scene around him as he worked. One man had been shot, the one Doc was working on. The rest seemed no worse for wear, picking up their hats, dusting themselves off, and repacking bags the robbers had strewn over the ground.

Josh gave directions and tended to the horses.

Hank packed the last burlap bag and handed it into the boot.

Miss Martin continued coughing.

“Are you all right?” Perhaps Josh had a canteen if she needed a drink.

“I’m coughing because you pushed my face into the dust and wouldn’t let me breathe.”

Oh. He’d tried to be a hero and had, once again, failed miserably. At least she’d only inhaled a bit of dust.

She rummaged through her father’s doctor bag and came up with a small vial, which she opened and placed under her nose.

They loaded the injured man onto the stagecoach. It was Benchly. Some of the men rode up top to make room for him to lie down inside. Miss Martin followed her father onto the coach, carrying his medical bag.

But she didn’t glance his way once.

Her reticule lay in the dirt where the robber had tossed it. Hank picked it up and dusted it off. She’d likely want it back. He snatched up her handkerchief and her book as well. *Her Love or Her Life*. The cover promised adventure and romance. Maybe today’s adventure was a bit more than Miss Martin had encountered in the pages of this book. Maybe she’d learned that a hero only existed there and not in real life. Thank God He had kept them safe.

He tucked it all into his coat pocket and scrambled up next to Josh once all the other passengers were settled. He told himself Josh could use another set of eyes for the remainder of the trip home.

But the truth was, he didn’t want to be near Miss Martin. He’d never felt less like a hero.