

Enjoy this **unedited** first chapter of my coming, February release; *Kaitlin's Silver Lining*. You will remember Bryce from *Julia's Golden Eagle*.

One

Denver, Colorado, 1875

“Don’t even think about climbing aboard my rig with that goo clingin’ to your skirts, Missy.”

Kaitlin Kanatzer had one foot lifted toward the trolley step when the conductor’s grumpy voice stopped her progress.

“J--j--just how d--do you pro--propose I get home?” Her teeth clattered in the brisk winter air. She didn’t dare put on her coat for fear of ruining it and held it aloft between two sticky fingers.

“I don’t rightly care. I just know you ain’t gonna climb in this rig with molasses covering you from head to toe. The city pays to keep these public wagons clean. ’Sides, it ain’t all that far to your house.”

“You’re a mean-hearted old coot, Martin Shires.”

“A walk in this weather might just make you come to your senses.” He shook his bald head. “It ain’t right you leading those women to picket and carry on against an honest man’s right to drink. No sirree, it just ain’t right.”

He clicked the reins, setting the horse into motion. The trolley lurched. Kaitlin stumbled back, teetered a moment, and landed on her backside on the icy ground. A chorus of laughter sealed her humiliation.

Ignoring the jeers and the pain, she pulled herself up and grimaced at the dirt clinging to her hands. No doubt, the back of her dress was littered with soil and debris. Her coat lay crumpled beside her. So much for trying to keep the garment clean. With as much dignity as she could muster, she lifted the heavy skirts, picked up her coat, and walked as fast as she could toward her home.

Thankfully, she didn't have to journey far, but the cold winter wind against her molasses drenched skin made the walk most unpleasant. By the time she made it home, her bones ached with fatigue, and her anger simmered to a bitter resentment. Next time she protested for women's rights, she'd be more prepared.

She yanked the door wide and stepped inside her cozy, two-story house. She took two more steps, closed the door and froze. What should she do now? "Maggie. Maggie!"

"What in tarnation got a hold of you?" Maggie McGuire rounded the corner, a handkerchief in one hand and a hot mug of cider in the other.

"You must be feeling better to be up and around." Kaitlin closed the front door behind her and stood in the entryway.

"Don't you be changing the subject." Maggie set down her cup and took Kaitlin's coat. "Now tell me how you got yourself covered in molasses."

"Call it a difference of opinion with patrons at the Tip Top Saloon."

"I can see. But were you successful?"

Kaitlin sighed, allowing the warmth of the house to comfort her frozen limbs. “We got their attention, or the men wouldn’t have felt obliged to react as they did. They took special delight in targeting me. The rest of our ladies got away clean.”

“Leave it to you to joke about such a humiliating experience.” Maggie chuckled. “Guess we’d best see about getting you bathed.”

“It’s good to see you smiling again.” Kaitlin studied Maggie’s face for signs of illness. While she still sported bags beneath her eyes, her cheeks blossomed with color. Even her voice sounded stronger. “You must be on the mend.”

“I won’t be doing any jigs, but I feel well enough to help you clean up. Lordy, what a mess.”

Kaitlin caught her image in the hall tree mirror and grimaced. Maggie hadn’t lied. She looked a fright. How should she go about cleaning the thick syrup from her body without contaminating every piece of furniture she owned?

“The kitchen.” They both replied in unison and then giggled.

“You stay right there while I get a bath ready. No sense you dragging that stuff all through the house. I figure once I get the water ready, you can strip here.”

“Try to hurry, Maggie, but don’t overtax yourself.”

Laughter echoed down the hall. Maggie definitely felt better. A dollop of molasses trailed down Kaitlin’s nose. Her eyes crossed to stare at the offending drop before taking an index finger and scooping it off. Not particularly fond of the taste, she found a clean spot on her skirt and wiped her finger. A draft from the closed door chilled her, and she wrapped sticky arms around her body.

She stood still, not wishing her drenched clothing to come in contact with the walls or furniture. Sounds of Maggie preparing her bath came from the kitchen. She peered around the

corner to watch. Maggie made several trips to the pump to fill buckets and dump them into the tub. The water would take a while to heat before Kaitlin could enjoy her bath.

Meanwhile, her cheek twitched. Molasses itched.

“Well, at least James Latham got a helping of just deserts.” A bitter laugh followed as Kaitlin reflected upon the incident. The look of surprise on that man’s face justified the wearing of his boss’s latest shipment. She’d had the quickness of mind to twirl her heavy skirts, flinging molasses all about the saloon. James just happened to be standing in the way.

A year ago she’d left James at the altar. He still held a grudge, a grudge so bitter he’d incited the men to lift that heavy barrel and douse her. Didn’t he know she hurt also? She, too, wept for lost dreams and hopes. He was the one at fault. Not her.

Men! She’d exhausted all hope of ever coexisting among the stubborn gender with mutual trust and admiration. With this in mind, she’d joined the suffragists’ movement with a keen desire to succeed. She’d had her share of setbacks, but she was determined, and the devil take any man who stood in her way.

A resounding knock interrupted her contemplations. She stared at the door, willing the intruder to leave. Under the circumstances, she wanted no company.

“If you’ve come to gloat, you can go away.” She had no intention of opening the door to more ridicule.

Bang! Bang! The casement rattled from the force of the summons. She wrinkled her nose and drew her eyebrows into a fierce frown. Before she could dismiss the caller again, fists pounded on the wooden door once more. Whoever stood outside seemed very determined.

Kaitlin’s hand stuck to the handle once she pulled it open. A sucking noise accompanied her efforts to free herself. Standing back, she looked to see who dared interrupt her afternoon. She could do nothing but stare. Had he spoken?

The molasses on her neck stretched as she tilted her head. The man stood at least six feet tall and not an inch less. A lock of wavy blonde hair fell across his forehead when he inclined his head. She followed the lock of hair to a crooked nose, the looks of which indicated it had been broken once upon a time. A handlebar mustache framed a set of lips slightly chapped. Rough, calloused hands played with the rim of a well-worn Stetson. Lanky and lean, the man exuded a confident air. His mustache twitched. The smile he gave her caused her insides to tighten. In all her life, she'd never encountered such a fine-looking man.

Her skin warmed. She'd just been cursing the male population, and here she mooned over a complete stranger.

“Miss Kanatzer?”

Ah, Beethoven. His voice had the same rich essence as Beethoven's Fifth. The deep cadences struck a chord within her, numbing her senses and rendering her momentarily speechless.

“Kaitlin Kanatzer?”

Mooning over a man? Kaitlin did not moon over men. She straightened her shoulders and glared at the unwanted guest.

“Yes. Who wants to know?”

His mustache twitched again, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened. The man hid a laugh behind a discreet cough. Beside him, a young adolescent giggled outright. Her gaze swung down to the young girl whose features could have mirrored her own at that age. Kaitlin's eyes rounded with suspicion.

“Uncle Bryce, look. She's a brown bear with polka dots.”

Kaitlin folded her arms across her chest. While ogling the newcomer, she'd all but forgotten her predicament. The comment snapped her from her momentary stupor. She shifted her gaze from the child to the man. “What brings you to my door?”

A bemused expression exploded upon his face. Her eyes narrowed. She'd had enough amusement at her expense today. Thank heavens, Maggie chose that moment to walk up behind her.

The man must have sensed her unease. He glanced down at the child. "Perhaps you should say you're sorry for that remark, Charley."

"Why? I told the truth, and you told me more than once you don't like liars."

A rosy hue spread across his cheeks. The man ducked his head. "I'm truly sorry for her choice of words. Sometimes her vocabulary is more colorful than a sunset over the plains of west Texas. Do you think we could come in and jaw for a spell?"

Her face muscles tightened. His assumption she'd welcome him hit a nerve. "I don't know you, sir, and I'm not presentable for receiving guests."

He twirled the Stetson. "It's my turn to apologize for my lack of manners. I'm Bryce Stanton, and this is your niece, Charley, short for Charlene. She's Bethany's daughter."

Bethany's daughter? Shock rendered her speechless. She stared at the child. Charley could have been Bethany, they looked that much alike. The resemblance thrust Kaitlin into a reservoir of shadowed memories.

Mr. Stanton extended his hand. She gave him a pointed look. She wouldn't be able to greet him properly without getting his hand dirty. She tried to uncross her arms and to her mortification, they snapped apart, the molasses acting like glue.

"Perhaps you should come in, Mr. Stanton. I'm Maggie McGuire. Miss Kanatzer and I share the house. I think it would be best if you took a seat in the parlor and waited until Miss Kanatzer can clean up a bit."

Bryce stepped past both women with Charley in tow, his lips curved into a generous smile. He turned back toward Kaitlin once he stood inside. "If you don't mind me asking, ma'am, what did you get into, anyway?"

“None of your business.” She shut the door behind them more firmly than necessary. He’d caught her off guard, and she didn’t care much for surprises.

Charley jumped at the noise and sidled closer to Bryce. Bryce ignored the girl. He stepped closer and took a whiff. He reached out a finger and wiped a spot off of her cheek.

She reeled from the unexpected gesture. He brought the finger to his lips and smiled. In a motion that stirred her blood more than she’d care to admit, he licked his finger, a slow sampling of the thick, sugary substance.

“Someone mistook you for a pancake?”

His comical expression made her want to laugh. She resisted the urge and sighed. “Very funny. If you must know, the owners tarred and feathered me for preaching against the opening of their new saloon.”

“You’re wearing molasses and oats, not tar and feathers.”

“You’re too astute, Mr. Stanton.” The sarcasm flowed naturally from her lips, a habit she embraced when faced with a frustrating moment. At his look of censure, she relaxed her stance. “Although the men at the Tip Top Saloon don’t agree with my views, they aren’t really cruel. They wanted to make their point without hurting me. Old man Delaney just happened to have a new keg of molasses handy.” And James Latham had been there to spur them all into action. In fact, her ex-fiancé had enjoyed every sticky moment.

“Ah.”

“I doubt you came here to discuss my political inclinations, Mr. Stanton.” Her gaze lit on Charley. Where was Bethany? Why did this man have custody of Bethany’s daughter? “Suppose you enlighten us as to the reason for your visit.”

His smile faltered. “You weren’t expecting us?”

“Why no.”

“I sent a letter. And then, just before setting out from Texas, I sent a telegram.”

Maggie shook her head. “She probably got it. In fact, she probably got both of your missives, but they’re likely sitting in a pile in the parlor. Kaitlin has an aversion to opening mail of any kind, so she lets it stack up until she can’t stand it any longer, and then she spends a day sorting through all of her correspondence.”

Bryce lifted one eyebrow. “You mean to tell me you got my letter, but never opened it?”

Kaitlin had the good sense to look sheepish. She studied the tips of his weathered boots. “I would’ve gotten around to it - eventually.”

“That’s absurd.” His voice rose giving evidence to his sudden anger. “I don’t know anybody who doesn’t like mail. What if something important came to you?”

Kaitlin looked at Charley. “Obviously something already did.” Her jaw ached from the tight way she’d pressed her teeth together.

For a few minutes, silence claimed their company. Bryce played with the felt hat, his long fingers stroking the rim. Finally, the man’s features softened.

“Is it possible we could go and sit somewhere? I have something I’d like to tell you.”

She was about to answer when Charley caught her eye.

“Don’t touch that.”

Charley’s snatched her hand from the fragile china pitcher that sat on a small curio shelf. “I just wanted to look at it.”

“Children should not touch things that don’t belong to them.” She hadn’t meant to sound so harsh, but she’d never been very good with children. She tried to soften her features, but the damage had already been done.

“I’m not a child.” Charley tugged at Mr. Stanton’s jacket. “I told you. Didn’t I tell you? She’d be mean and hateful. Just like momma told me she’d be. I don’t wanna stay here, Uncle Bryce. I won’t.”

Kaitlin's mouth gaped, and her composure slipped another notch. "Stay here? What does she mean?"

"Please, Miss Kanatzer, can we go somewhere other than the middle of your entryway?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. If I move, I'll dirty everything in sight." Why couldn't he just tell her? Had something happened to Bethany?

"Mr. Stanton, you've caught Kaitlin when she's obviously not at her best. Why don't you let me help her get washed up? You can wait in the parlor until she's done. Then you can tell her whatever it is you need to tell her."

Maggie could always be counted on to be reasonable in the face of adversity. Mr. Stanton appeared unsure. Kaitlin glanced at Charley's mutinous face. They'd gotten off on a bad foot. Maybe it was best she heard what Mr. Stanton had to say right now.

"I apologize for snapping at you, Charley. I'm not used to being around children. And -- you caught me at the worst possible moment."

Though Charley remained stiff, Bryce smiled. The expression lit his face. When he spoke, the timbre of his voice flowed over her, soothing and seductive. "I think you have every excuse for feeling out of sorts. That coating can't be comfortable. You must itch something fierce."

She smiled back, feeling more at ease. "I'd be grateful if you go ahead and divulge the reason for your visit. I confess to a healthy dose of curiosity."

His gaze dropped to the floor. When he lifted his eyes to meet her own, a grim façade had replaced his pleasant demeanor. "It's with great sorrow I tell you of Bethany's passin', ma'am. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

"Bethany's dead?" Mild surprise accompanied her question. She should have suspected as much. Why else would he bring Bethany's child here? She tried to conjure up remorse, but any feelings she'd had toward Bethany had died long ago.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see.” But in truth, she didn’t. Bethany had been such a free spirit, a dreamer, a roamer. She’d broken their mother’s heart and caused the difficulties Kaitlin now faced with her father.

“I figured to give you the opportunity to meet Charley. Actually, I was hoping . . .”

“Hoping?”

“Hoping you’d agree to keep Charley for a while.”

Keep Charley? Her eyes swung to Bethany’s girl. Charley’s face caused her heart to constrict. Try as she might, she couldn’t stem the onslaught of memories. With the memories came feelings long suppressed until now. Her past collided with the present, and a once confident and secure Kaitlin whimpered with the injustice of it all. Why now? Why had Bethany’s ghost come to haunt her now?

“I . . .” Looking at Charley, she knew the girl’s pain mirrored her own. The adolescent’s belligerent manner hid a deep hurt. Her heart melted. In that moment, she forgot the bitter history between herself and Bethany. Her feelings toward Bethany had nothing to do with Charley.

“Here now.” Before she could answer, Maggie stepped forward. “We have plenty of time to discuss these things after you’ve had a chance to make yourself presentable. Kaitlin, you head for the kitchen. Mr. Stanton, you follow me. I’ll get you and Charley situated in the parlor. You’re welcome to hang your coats here on the hall tree.”

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“Thank you, ma’am.” Bryce helped Charley out of her coat. He hung hers first then his.

“Follow me, Mr. Stanton.” Maggie led them into a cozy parlor situated a few steps down the hall.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Kaitlin navigate the hall toward the kitchen. He grinned. He didn’t envy her job of cleaning.

“I’m sorry for the mess,” Maggie said. “Kaitlin finds it more comfortable to sew in here than in her own room.” Maggie rushed in ahead of them to pick up pieces of fabric scraps that littered the floor. When she’d cleared a path, she insisted they make themselves comfortable before scurrying off to help Kaitlin.

Charley made a beeline for the fireplace, while he took a moment to look around. He wanted to know more about the woman whom he planned to entrust with Charley’s care.

A less-than-tidy room met his eyes. A thin layer of dust coated the fixtures. Scraps of material littered the floor beside what looked to be a fairly new sewing machine. He wouldn’t call the room dirty. Messy was a better term. All-in-all, the room had a comfortable, lived-in feel to it. Decorated in cheery colors of rose and yellow, the room radiated love and warmth.

He fingered an unfinished peach dress draped over a chair in front of the sewing machine. Its design indicated Kaitlin’s creativity with needle and thread. She did good work. Hopefully, she’d want to teach these skills to Charley.

“She don’t keep house very well, does she?”

“Peers to me she’s very creative and right handy with a needle and thread. All things a young woman should know.”

“Not me.”

“Charley, don’t start.”

“I don’t want to stay with her. I want to stay with you.” Charley’s plea hid such vulnerability, making it difficult for Bryce to follow through with his plan. With great determination, he pulled away from the fear and hurt in Charley’s luminous eyes. He’d come this far. He had to see this through for Charley’s sake, as well as his own.

“But Charley, she’s your family, and she might want to get to know you. ’Sides, if she’ll agree to let you stay on for a spell, I can start courtin’ Elizabeth. If you and Kaitlin don’t get

along, you'll still have a home with me. Hopefully, I'll be taking a wife back with us, so there'll be a woman around who can teach you things."

"If it's about those pranks, I'll quit. I promise. In fact, you won't even know I'm around." Huge, luminous brown eyes appealed to his heart. "I'll be so quiet."

"A working ranch full of men isn't a place for a young lady."

"Please, Bryce. I don't want to stay here. I want to stay with you." Her bottom lips jutted forward in a pout. "Besides, I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"Look, honey. I'd keep you with me in a heartbeat if I thought it'd be the best thing, but it ain't. I've got no wife, no female in my life who can teach you the things you need to know. It's important you let me have some time, so I can remedy the situation. I can't go courtin' with a child underfoot."

She stomped her foot. "I'm not a child."

"Then stop acting like one."

At eleven, she hadn't yet blossomed into a woman. He wanted to think of her as the cute button who used to follow him around, and not the mischievous brat she'd grown into. A kid her age should be able take on a certain amount of responsibility, but not Charley. No, she'd instigated one too many pranks for him to trust her to stay home alone.

Charley settled down on the settee and glowered at him. He shook his head. Why on Earth had Bethany named him the girl's guardian? But he knew the answer. He had loved Charley as if she were his own.

Trying to take his mind off Charley, he meandered about the room. As he studied the decor, he ran across the pile of mail. Absently, he thumbed through the stack in search of his own letter. Finding one with his return address, he set it aside.

Meanwhile, Charley began to relax and her eyes looked heavy. Traveling must have worn her out. He yawned. He could do with a nap himself, but he had more errands to attend to before dark, and he had no idea how long it would take Kaitlin and Maggie to return from the kitchen.

As expected, Charley curled up on the settee and fell asleep. Bryce pulled his trench coat off the hall tree and draped it over the sleeping child. Since Charley could no longer be counted on for company, he prowled the room in search of a diversion from his boredom. Spying a newspaper on one of Kaitlin's fancy end tables, he settled down in an armchair and proceeded to read about the local politics.

He read one article and started another. His eyes grew heavy. He blinked, trying to concentrate. The ticking of the mantle clock beat a monotonous tune. Its rhythmic cadence lulled him. His head fell to his chest, and the newspaper floated to the floor.

A loud crash jarred him awake.

His heart thudded in his chest. Disoriented, he gazed about unfamiliar surroundings. What had disturbed his sleep? Blinking, he tried to remember where he was. He drew for his gun, but his hand met empty space. Not there. Irritated, he recalled hanging his gun belt on the hall tree under his hat.

A dead quiet descended. He jumped up. Rounding the corner of the parlor, he found the entryway floor littered with shards of glass. A fist-sized rock sat in the center of the debris. He picked up the rock. Around its girth was a note tied with twine.

His gaze shot to the broken window. A figure retreated by foot down the street toward town. Rushing back into the parlor, he snatched the coat from Charley's prone figure and grabbed his hat and gun belt. He shoved the rock into his pocket. Running out the front door, his boot met a patch of packed snow. He slipped and landed hard on his backside.

Ignoring the pain, he scrambled to his feet just in time to see the fleeing figure turn a corner at the end of the street. He debated chasing the man on foot, but decided he might have a better chance at catching him if he took Burlap.

In record time, he galloped down the street and turned the same corner. He caught a glimpse of green and paused. His quarry stood at the end of the street. The man turned for a split second.

Bryce drew his gun. "Stop."

The vermin tipped his hat, a challenge if Bryce ever saw one. Fleet of foot, the man darted down an alleyway. Taking careful aim at the ground, Bryce shot out a warning. Burlap pranced about, skittish from the unexpected noise.

The man jumped a fence, turned the corner, and disappeared. Bryce yanked on the reins, unable to go any farther on horseback. By the time he dismounted, the villain had disappeared. With a groan of frustration, Bryce holstered his gun and remounted. For a long time he stared at the spot where he'd last seen the fleeing man.

Man? The varmint appeared younger than he'd first thought. Small, he could have passed for a boy or even a young woman. Bryce frowned. He could well imagine a boy throwing a rock through a window as a prank.

He fished around in his pocket and pulled out the stone with the note still attached. Finding his pocketknife, he sliced through the twine. The rock fell from his grasp, and he held the letter at an angle he could read.

You've ignored previous warnings. Maybe this one will carry more weight. Leave Denver or Else.

He mulled over the harsh words. *Previous warnings?* His eyes widened. The handwriting seemed familiar. Some of the addresses on Kaitlin's mail had been written in a similar hand. He recalled her aversion to mail. Had she received other such messages?

He looked down the alley. At least he'd gotten a look at the culprit. Finding the nameless skunk might prove difficult in a town the size of Denver, but Bryce could be patient. He enjoyed solving mysteries, and for the moment, he had nothing but time on his hands. His brother, William, wasn't expecting him home for another two months.

Compelled by his need to help, he made a conscientious decision then and there to find the man behind these threats.

But another thought stopped him in his tracks. Charley.

Dagnapit, what am I going to do about Charley?

He couldn't leave her like he planned. Not now. Not if it meant she'd be in danger. And with Charley underfoot, how in tarnations could he court Elizabeth?

He let out a long sigh and watched his breath steam in the cold air. With a heavy heart, he turned around and headed back to Kaitlin's house.

"What am I gonna do, Burlap?"

The horse snorted. Bryce sighed. The gentle motion of the horse's gait soothed his thoughts. Kaitlin's almond eyes flashed in his memory. He hated the idea of any woman being exposed to danger. But Kaitlin appeared to be the self-reliant type. She'd impressed him with her dauntless conduct in the face of her rather humbling incident. None of the women he knew would have reacted with such calm.

As independent as she appeared, she'd probably rebuff any help he offered. He pulled his coat tighter against his neck. Call it a quirk of his, but a deep protectiveness stole over him. He wanted to catch the man or men responsible for her difficulties.

How could he follow through with his original intentions? How could he leave Charley with Kaitlin? He shook his head, a self-derisive gesture aimed at the hopelessness of the situation. Hopeless unless ...unless he offered Kaitlin his protection.

His lip curled into a smile. He could just imagine Miss Kanatzer's reaction to his proposition. A spinster who fought for women's rights wouldn't care for a man's interference. The more he thought about it, the more determined he became. He loved Charley with all his heart, and he meant to do right by her. She needed the loving attentions of a woman and Kaitlin was family.

He spurred Burlap into a faster gait. He knew exactly what he had to do. And Kaitlin would have little say in the matter.

Bryce whistled a jaunty tune, more than a little ready to confront Kaitlin Kanatzer with his plan. "Miss Kanatzer, make room. You're about to have more than one guest for a spell."