

*Julia's Golden Eagle*  
*By Ciara Gold*

A note to readers: I hope you enjoy the sequel to Sarah's Brass Token. This story is very close to my heart because the first chapter (which is now chapter two) placed in the first RWA chapter sponsored contest I ever entered, thus encouraging me to continue writing. This is an unedited version, as my editor is still looking over the little details. I would love to know what you think.

*One*

*Brownwood, Texas 1874*

Julia Stanton flew down the stairway as if a raging stampede of longhorns pounded after her. She peered over her shoulder, her breath ragged. No one pursued her. Her pace slowed when she neared the bottom, but even so, the unfamiliar high heels she wore caused her to stumble. Regaining her footing, she peered around the corner of the enclosed stairway.

Not a soul lurked in the ally. She slumped against the wall and wiped a bead of perspiration from her forehead. Safe, but for how long? The rip in her borrowed dress caught her eye. Sly had attacked her. His audacity still caused a furious hammering in her heart. She fingered the tear, and her eyes snapped wide.

Traces of blood?

The resistance of flesh and muscle as the knife stabbed into his shoulder would be forever ingrained in her memory. His look of stunned surprise haunted her still.

Her hand flew to her neck and fumbled for her mother's locket. Whenever life became a trial, the memento gave her some measure of peace. But not tonight.

A gasp tore through her throat. It was gone! Her mother's locket was missing. A quick survey of the shadowed stairway gave her no answers. Retracing her steps to the

closed doorway above yielded nothing. The necklace had disappeared. She should have thought to remove it before venturing into this crazy scheme. The oversight might cost her dearly.

Staring at the closed door, Julia weighed her options. Going back meant facing possible consequences that she'd rather avoid. What if Sly had recovered enough to continue his pursuit of her? No, she'd stabbed him, not hard enough to kill, but he wouldn't be dancing anytime soon.

The dance hall dress she'd stolen brushed against her exposed calves. The rustling sound compounded her fears. The steak she'd eaten earlier sat in her stomach like a pound of dry flour.

*I should have never tried to sneak into that Cattleman's Association Meeting.*

Her heart beat an erratic tempo. If the necklace was in the room she'd just vacated, she was doomed. The memory of Sly Griffing fumbling with the front of her skimpy costume nauseated her. The man must have torn the chain from her neck. The locket had to be in his room. *Oh, please let his temper fade.* The possibility of facing his anger made her hesitate, but leaving the precious item behind could prove more disastrous.

She cracked open the door and peered down the long hallway of rooms just above the Faded Calico Saloon. Raucous sounds from the downstairs bar kept her company. Tonight, the building overflowed with local ranchers and their employees. Not only was it payday for most of the various outfits, but it also marked the date for the monthly Cattleman's Association Meeting. Unfortunately, the meeting had been called off at the last minute, making Julia's efforts pointless. With no meeting to attend, the cowboys spent the night socializing, drinking, gambling, and flirting with the barmaids. She spent the evening bemoaning her failed attempt to spy on the closed proceedings.

A lively, whistled tune floated closer.

She ducked back into the shadows. A lone cowboy staggered up the main stairway, coming straight toward her hiding place. She hugged the wall and held her breath.

The stranger stopped in front of a room and bent his tall frame to insert his key. Off balance, he fell against the door. He grabbed the doorknob and tried again, finding

the keyhole after three attempts. The door swung wide, and he staggered inside room four.

When the door closed, Julia filled her lungs with air. Before she lost her nerve, she crept from her hiding spot and headed for room eleven, Sly's room. Her high-heels clicked a loud beat as she headed down the hall. Stopping, she slipped out of her shoes, vaguely wondering why she hadn't done so in the first place. The door to Sly's room opened, and she skidded to a stop. Pivoting, she rushed back to the shadowed stairwell.

A man exited Sly's room with a bloody knife in his hand.

*Sly's knife The one she'd stabbed him with..*

Julia's eyes widened with fear and disbelief. "Oh, God!" She clamped a hand against her mouth and hoped the man hadn't heard.

He glanced her way and she gulped. A bandana concealed all but his eyes. In the dimly lit hallway, she had no clue to the man's identity, but something about him was familiar. He hesitated. After looking down the hall on either side of him, he hurried to room four.

The door opened without resistance. After a few moments passed, the man came back out, but the knife was no longer in his possession.

"Come on, mister," she whispered to herself. "Show me your face."

He slid a furtive glance down both sides of the corridor. With his back to her, he removed the bandana and sauntered leisurely to the main stairway. She wanted to see his face, to confirm her suspicions, but he retreated without turning her way. It didn't matter. She'd know that walk anywhere.

Stunned, Julia thought to flee, but she couldn't risk letting her locket be found. Quickly and more quietly than before, Julia entered Sly's room. A gasp escaped her trembling lips. Sly lay on the floor, a pool of blood seeping from his wound. She rushed to his side and felt for a pulse.

Dead? No, she'd only pricked him. He couldn't be dead.

She clutched her mouth and swallowed back the bile. Sly Griffing was dead. By her hand? Or had another finished what she'd started? She studied him more closely and saw only the wound she'd inflicted.

She'd killed a man.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. Nothing had changed. Sly was still dead. She could do nothing for the man now. Hurriedly, she surveyed the floor. A look under the bed and behind the dresser produced nothing. Frantic, she turned this way and that. Just when her search seemed hopeless, a glint of light caught her eye. The necklace lay half concealed by Sly's body. A shudder of guilt and revulsion ran the length of her body.

On shaky limbs, she knelt beside Sly and tugged the necklace free.

## *Two*

"Sit still, girl," Cal Stanton demanded. "You're not concentratin'."

Her father looked very displeased with Julia. She'd been concentrating more than she should and not necessarily on the task at hand. "I'm doing the best I can."

Sly's dead body flashed in her mind, an image more telling than a tin-type. She gave the photographer a weak smile.

"Come on Julia. You're squirmin' worse than a piglet. All you gotta do is be still for ten minutes, so Mr. Newton can snap the tin-type."

Julia shot her brother, Bryce, a glaring look. He didn't have to wear a corset or contend with hat pins that grazed her scalp. *He hadn't been party to a murder.* She shuddered.

“Relax for a minute while I put in a new plate.” Mr. Newton sorted through his supplies.

She gave a grateful sigh.

William, her oldest brother, got up and paced. He’d been strangely quiet all morning, but then she suspected he had a right. He and Sly had been close friends.

“You all right, Will?”

“Still tryin’ to come to terms with Sly’s murder,” Will said.

Not murder, but self-defense, yet she felt no less guilty for ending the man’s life.

“Well, at least they caught the guy.”

Julia’s attention snapped to JD, Bryce’s twin. “Caught the guy?”

“The Sheriff arrested a fellow by the name Jake Nolan for the crime,” JD said.

Julia froze, and a bead of perspiration trickled between her breasts. *Arrested Jake Nolan?* She’d never heard of the man, but that didn’t matter. They’d arrested the wrong man.

“Take your places, folks.” The photographer poked his head out from under the black hood. “That’s it Miss Stanton. Hold that pose, and we’ll be done before you know it.”

The flash exploded and Julia jumped. *They arrested someone else for Sly’s death.* Numbness settled into her bones, and she stared into space.

“You look pale, sis. Feelin’ all right?” Bryce put a hand to her forehead, and she reeled back.

“I’m fine. I’m just not used to tight corsets and fancy dresses. Are we done yet?”

Mr. Newton pulled the film plate from his camera. “All done.”

“Then, I – I need some air. If y’all will excuse me, I’ll meet you back at the ranch later.”

They all nodded, all five of them.

Tate came up beside her. “I’ll escort you, if you’re of a mind to accept my company.”

“Thanks, but no.” She smiled at her youngest brother. “I want to be alone for a while. You go with the others. I’ll make it back to the ranch when I’m ready.”

“Don’t tarry too long,” Cal said. “We’ve plenty of work waiting for us today.”

Julia Stanton left the portrait sitting in a daze. Preoccupied with last night's fiasco and feeling the burden of guilt, she didn't notice the dust clinging to her dress. The new button-up shoes rubbed blisters on her heels, and the tight corset bit into her tender skin. The physical discomfort was minimal compared to the emotional pain. The horror of viewing Sly's vacant eyes as he lay in a pool of blood kept her from sleeping. It was self-defense, but dressed like a calico queen, they'd never believe her. The scandal alone would destroy her father. *She'd killed a man.* She wrung her hands, her mind awirl with the events. The sheriff should be told, but the ramifications of such a confession didn't bear thinking upon.

"Howdy, Miss Stanton." Simon Bessler's greeting tore her from her troubled thoughts. With broom in hand, he swept the front porch of his hardware store. "You look right nice in that getup. You should wear a dress more often."

"Thank you, Mr. Bessler." Ordinarily, she would chitchat with the man, but not today.

*I have to get that man out of jail, but I can't confess. I can't. Daddy would never forgive me for bringing shame to his name.*

The unfamiliar sound of her footfalls against the boarded sidewalk grated on her nerves. She was used to the jangle of spurs. As if the sound of her spurs could offer comfort. She snorted.

A sick feeling of shame and remorse settled deep in her stomach. How could she prevent the hanging of an innocent man without causing pain to her family?

"Miss Stanton!"

She turned. Faraday Metzger hailed her from down the street. Her heartbeat increased its tempo at his excited approach. Although, not the most attractive man around, something about him always kicked her heart into a fast canter. Even today, his greeting soothed her troubled mind.

"Miss Stanton." He gave her an appreciative look. "You look really pretty today. I don't believe I've ever seen you in anything other than pants."

She blinked. Faraday had just paid her a compliment. She'd longed for this moment for as long as she could remember.

When she said nothing, he continued, "I'm glad I caught up with you. I wondered if you'd give me a few moments of your time."

*Only a few?* Julia stared, struck mute by his sudden attention. His interest suspended her preoccupation with Jake Nolan's arrest and her subsequent guilt. She focused on Faraday, feeling relief at the brief respite. God, he had the most beautiful cow-brown eyes. He'd never noticed her before today, but she'd noticed him. She glanced at the tips of her dress shoes. Could it be the dress?

"Miss Stanton?"

She smiled, flustered by her bumbling manner. On the ranch, she exuded confidence and skill. Why did she find it so difficult to address Faraday in a similar fashion? *Because you should be thinking of Jake Nolan and not romantic inclinations of the heart.*

"Forgive me. You were saying?" she asked.

"The uh – the party at the Downey's for – for your brother and his fiancée. I want to ask a certain young lady, but I feel rather awkward. I thought maybe you could help." Could he mean her? She gazed straight into his eyes, relishing the moment. No man had ever shown any polite interest in her. Too tall for most, she'd about given up on the idea of a husband. How would her best friend, Mary Sue, respond? Pushing her worries aside, Julia attempted a more flirtatious demeanor.

She inclined her head. "I'd be honored to help you in any way I can, Mr. Metzger."

Faraday relaxed. His eager smile touched her heart. "Well, like I said, I want to ask a certain young lady if I can escort her to your brother's engagement party, but I don't know if she returns the same affection I have for her."

"You'll never know unless you ask, and the worst that can happen is she'll say no. But I reckon that won't happen. After all, you're a very charming man. Any woman would be honored to accept an invitation from you."

"Do you think so?" Those luscious brown eyes searched hers, filling her with pleasure.

"I know so." She nodded and her curls bounced. The ringlets tickled her cheek like a band of crawling ants. She brushed them aside.

“Thank you, thank you.” He grabbed both her hands and shook them, exaggerating his enthusiasm. Her curls trotted across her skin, making her wish she’d plaited her hair as was her custom. “I knew you’d be the one to help me with my dilemma. After all, Mary Sue is your best friend.”

“Mary Sue? Mary Sue Johnson?” Her heart reeled from the impact. How foolish she’d been.

“Well, I want to ask Mary Sue, but I didn’t know how she felt, and since you’re her dearest friend, I thought you might be able to tell me her feelings on the matter. I can’t thank you enough, Miss Stanton. You’ve given me the courage to speak my heart. You’ll have to save me a dance.” He gave her hands a brief squeeze before sprinting down the street. Julia stared at his retreating back.

She swallowed her deep disappointment. It wasn’t fair. The presence of four intimidating brothers didn’t do much for encouraging would-be suitors. Her height didn’t help matters, either. At twenty-three, she was fast becoming what most would consider an “old maid.” She squeezed her eyes shut. What would it matter if she wound up in jail or worse?

She often wondered if her father wanted her to remain unmarried. Her unwedded status didn’t seem to bother Cal Stanton in the least. On the Double S Ranch, Julia was treated like one of the men. The employees both respected her and deferred to her whenever the Stanton men weren’t available, but very few ever thought to cross the line. A healthy fear of Cal Stanton’s temper kept most of the men from making any untoward advances. And of course, her own method for dealing with unwanted attempts upon her person, left the unlucky perpetrator lying in the dirt. *Or lying on the floor dead.*

Her eyes flew open. She was not guilty of murder. It *was* self-defense, but not revealing the truth kept an innocent man from going free.

A gun exploded somewhere close by, and she jerked her head toward the sound. She failed to locate the source, but her gaze connected with the front of the jail. She’d procrastinated too long. Released from her dismal thoughts of Faraday, Julia faced a new sense of dread. A man’s life rested in her hands. She worried over her unmarried status when she should be thinking about the prisoner. Guilt replaced self-pity. She still had to

figure out how she was going to save the poor man without implicating herself, her father, or one of her brothers.

She glanced down the street and saw William speaking to Mosquito Johnson and his son, Ryan. They had planned another Cattleman's Association Meeting tonight at the Faded Calico Saloon. Even though she knew every aspect of ranching, she had never been allowed admittance.

Thinking of the meeting tonight, she wondered if she dared try to attend again. Perhaps if she went this time, she could find answers to help clear Mr. Nolan's name without involving anyone else. Someone had been in Sly's room after her. Someone had removed her bloody knife and placed it in another's room. But who? One of her brothers? She suspected as much, but why? The guilt of that night weighed heavy on her mind and her heart. A man was dead and another in jail, and she had only herself to blame.

With trepidation, Julia stared at the door to the sheriff's office. Sheriff Tiny Carter might not like the idea of her visit, but she saw no other way. She needed to talk with the prisoner.

Bracing herself for Tiny's reaction, Julia entered and walked quietly to Tiny's desk. Tiny scrambled to a standing position. His deference to her presence seemed almost comical, and she might have laughed if not for the seriousness of her visit. Even Depute Dayton stood as she entered.

"Miss Stanton, don't you look a sight. You should dress like that more often. So, what can I help you with?"

"You arrested a man last night."

"Shore did." Tiny puffed out his chest and gave her a full account of the arrest.

"Thank you for the information, Tiny." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I've come to visit with the prisoner."

"Say that again." He removed his hat and scratched his balding head.

"I want to talk to the prisoner."

Dayton stepped closer and puffed out his chest. "The only prisoner we've got is locked away for murder. Don't think you need to be talkin' to the likes of him."

The chair made a loud, scraping noise as Tiny pushed it aside to come around his desk. He stood in front of her with a stern expression on his face, but he was much shorter than she, so his gesture lost most of its power to intimidate.

She glanced at both men. "Please. It's important."

Tiny gazed at her with an incredulous expression. Minutes ticked by. Finally, he nodded. "Dayton, watch the front while I escort Miss Stanton to the back." They exchanged a few more words before he opened the door that led to the cells. She peered down the corridor, but hung back, letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior. Behind her, she could feel Dayton's gaze bore into her. She'd never cared for the deputy, but she had no excuse for feeling this way, just a gut feeling that caused an uneasiness whenever she was in his presence.

The jail had two cells. One was unoccupied. The far cell housed the prisoner known as Jake Nolan. Julia took a step closer and peered into the dark confines. The man lay on the cot, staring into space. Stale odors from previous inhabitants assaulted her senses. She lifted a handkerchief to her nostrils. She recognized him as the tall man from the Faded Calico, the one who'd stumbled to his room. Last night had left her with the image of a man accustomed to overindulging in drink. Her second impression of the man was even less flattering than her first until he spoke.

"Shut the door, sheriff. The door blocks the sounds from the street." He didn't bother to look their way, so didn't realize the sheriff wasn't alone.

The intelligence she heard in the few words the prisoner spoke startled her. His words were softly said, but the tone of each syllable had a cultured rhythm unlike the general populace of Brownwood. His appearance didn't support the deep, rich, bass timbre of his voice. Shaggy blonde hair fell loosely over his eyebrows, making it difficult to discern the color of his eyes. A long, thick beard concealed his chin and a wiry mustache hid his mouth. He reminded her of a dangerous grizzly. She grimaced.

Julia tilted her head to one side and swallowed the bittersweet taste of fear and apprehension. She wanted to appear calm in front of the sheriff and the prisoner, but her knees shook, and her palms grew sweaty. Already, her impulsive decision caused some regret. The repercussions this visit would ignite might prove more upsetting than the

confession she needed to make. The great Cal Stanton would not be pleased. She'd be lucky if he didn't disown her.

"Sheriff, can you leave us alone for a few minutes?"

"I can't do that. Your daddy would have my hide."

"Not if he doesn't know."

~\*~

Jacob Nolan awoke to the fetid smells of a dank jail cell. Slowly, he lifted his head. Dizziness made his stomach churn, and he lay back down. He draped an arm over his eyes and groaned. A hazy fog caused him to forget what day it was. In fact, he had trouble remembering the past twenty-four hours. For a man known for his memory skills, that idea disconcerted him.

Jake tried to concentrate on the vague images flashing before him. Failing, he lifted his head again in an attempt to gauge his current dilemma. Knife-sharp pain jabbed at his head, and bile rose in his throat. Perhaps he'd better just lay back down and rest. He wasn't going anywhere soon.

Gradually, he acclimated himself to the surroundings. Familiar smells and sounds played on memories better left buried. Panic rode on the edge of his sanity.

A deep breath did much to calm his worries. Whatever deed had seen him imprisoned in this town would not keep him here long. Realizing the hangover for what it was, the reason for his arrest must be for disorderly conduct. Once he dried out and paid damages to whatever establishment he had ruined, he'd be free to go his merry way. With that one thought, he rubbed his swollen eyes and relaxed. He touched the amulet that hung around his neck, seeking comfort from the familiar charm. The war was over, and this prison wasn't anything like Alton. The Eagle would fly free soon.

Soft footsteps padded down the corridor and stopped in front of Jake's cell. He heard the rustle of petticoats and smelled the sweet aroma of honeysuckle. A woman? Curiosity brought him out of his stupor and he removed his hand from his eyes.

He caught sight of the edge of a laced skirt. A woman. He grimaced. He was not exactly groomed to receive guests. Three days of trail dust clung to his body. Hopefully, the woman brought a perfumed hanky.

He shifted on the cot. "Come to ogle the prisoner, ma'am?"

“Not at all.”

He couldn't help the sarcastic bite that colored his words. Being behind bars was embarrassing enough without the local, welcoming committee staring at him. It came as somewhat of a surprise when the woman asked to be left alone with him. The sheriff had been skeptical in his decision to indulge her and rightly so.

“Please Tiny. I need to speak to the prisoner alone.” The softest, musical voice made the request once again.

The sheriff hesitated. “Now, Miss Stanton, I don't think that would be such a good idea. This riffraff has committed a heinous crime, after all.”

“What can he do, Sheriff? He's locked up tight. I'll be fine.” Her shadow fell across the floor. The phrase 'heinous crime' stuck in his brain. What was so heinous about getting drunk?

A tall, statuesque figure swept toward his cell. A perplexed look rested upon Tiny Carter's face, but the Sheriff made no further attempts to dissuade the woman from her purpose.

“All right, Miss Stanton. You be careful, and don't get too close to that jail cell. Just call if you need me. I'm right outside.” Tiny gave Jake a parting glare meant to put him in his place.

Silence.

Had the woman changed her mind? He made a greater attempt to lift his head, groaning with the effort. The sight of an extremely attractive woman rewarded his efforts. If he were a guessing man, he'd imagine her age to be about twenty. She was tall for a woman, but strikingly so. No expense had been spared in covering her from head to toe in the latest feminine fashion. The lavender blue crepe trimmed with a minimum of lace extenuated a shapely figure. An elaborate hat in matching fabric and lace perched atop her head. The color set off the shimmering ringlets of gold that framed her lovely face. His pulse raced. Why such a creature would bestow him the time of day was beyond his comprehension. He must be hallucinating. That was the only possible answer to the vision before him. He laid his head back down, staring at the ceiling and wishing this particular dream would talk again. The sound of her voice had been music to his ears.

“Are you hurt?” she asked. “Do you need anything?”

His head lifted again, and his eyes went wide with wonder. He ran a hand over his face as if to clear the fog that surrounded him.

“Water,” he said.

The woman left for a few minutes to return with a tin full of water. She knelt in front of the cell and slid the tin through the bars onto the floor. Before she could retract her hand, Jake reached for the cup. For the briefest second, their fingers touched. Jake jerked back, his eyes wide. An electric current passed between them, one that startled Jake into a more lucid frame of mind. He stared at her hand, the one that had caused his own body to respond in a curious manner. Frowning, he noticed the torn cuticles and chaffed skin. These were not the hands of a gently raised woman. These were the hands of a woman who knew the labors of hard work. His interest grew.

If their brief contact had any affect on the woman, she didn't show it. She gazed down at him with a bland expression. She pushed the water further into the cell, a blatant invitation to accept the drink. The act gave him a very good view of her cleavage. A dime-sized birthmark on her left breast caught his attention. It titillated his imagination and begged for a closer peek. He clambered to his feet in slow, exaggerated movements.

She clutched her gaping bodice and stood, a deep frown plastered on her pretty features. Jake tore his gaze away and stared at the water without making an attempt to retrieve it. Woozy, he swayed. He stumbled forward and leaned against the bars. She took a step back. His head pounded, and his stomach churned. Alcohol was the devil's own brew, an evil he usually avoided. But last night he'd caved under the pressure of his own demons. He'd craved the numbness that only a stiff drink could bring.

He pushed dismal thoughts away and peered at the woman. What brought her to his cell? The sheriff hinted at a serious crime. No, surely not. He was a mild-mannered man. Though quick to anger on occasion, he controlled his temper. Like most men, he had his weaknesses, but even so, he considered himself reserved when it came to the more sinful vices.

He rubbed his throbbing temple. When he reached Heaven, if he reached Heaven, he would have a lot to answer for.

“Don't you want the water?” The woman tapped a toe in front of his cell.

He reached for the tin again and took a sip. The water glided down his parched throat and reduced the stale aftertaste of whiskey.

“Sir? Do you know why you’re in jail?” She leaned forward.

His voice felt rusty. “I don’t seem to remember much of anything, ma’am.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed. “You’re in here for murder.”

The tin cup fell to the ground, water splattered on the floor. “That’s ridiculous!”

She jumped back from the raining water. He sought to calm his temper. “I’ve never killed anyone in cold blood, and I doubt I ever could unless it was self-defense or a matter of war.”

“Nevertheless, you’ve been arrested for the murder of Sly Griffing.”

“Who?” He just couldn’t wrap his befuddled mind around her words. “You can just get that sheriff back in here, cuz I didn’t kill anyone. I don’t even know this Sly Griffing.”

“Calm yourself, and I’ll try and explain.”

“You do that, lady. I’d like to know what no-count accused me of such a thing.”

“No one had to accuse you. The sheriff said they found the murder weapon in your room. The blade was still wet with Sly’s blood.”

“That’s sick.”

“That’s the truth.”

He took a deep, steadying breath. Getting worked up wasn’t going to help the situation.

“All right. I’m calm now. Explain.”

“You were gambling and drinking. The way I heard it, you started losing heavily, almost as heavily as you tossed down the whiskey. Mosquito cheated, and you called him on it. Everyone knows he cheats, but most are smart enough not to make an issue of it. Sly got up to defend Mosquito, and supposedly, you threatened his life. Next thing anyone knew, Sly was dead. Tiny found you passed out in your room, the bloody knife on the dresser, and he had his boys bring you here.”

“So why are you here?”

There was a long pause. Her fingers twisted the folds of her fancy dress.

“You didn’t kill Sly.”

Jake blinked. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“I don’t know how to get you out of here, but I know you didn’t kill Sly.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. Trust me on this one. I know you didn’t kill the man.”

Jake stood, exhibiting his full height. “Well, that makes two of us. I know I didn’t kill him either. So tell the sheriff, and have me released. I could use a more comfortable bed than this creaky, old cot.”

She turned away, not wanting to meet his eye. “I can’t.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?” His hands curled around the bars.

“I – I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be, and I could hurt a lot of people if I told my story. If I only had me to worry over, I’d come forward. But . . . You’re just going to have to trust me to think of some other way.” She turned now, and their eyes met.

Jake found himself intrigued in spite of his anger. He hated the idea of being locked up. The looming threat of a noose at the end of his stay made his accommodations even less appealing, but still, he was intrigued.

“How long before the circuit judge gets here?” he asked.

“Judge comes around twice a month. He was just here last Tuesday, so you probably have about two weeks until the trial. Sometimes he shows up early, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

Jake stumbled back to the cot, sat down, and ran a hand through his hair. God, he wanted a bath. Glancing around the cell, the first fingers of claustrophobia took hold. If he weren’t careful, memories of another prison would play havoc with his mental state. Cautioning himself to take a deep breath, he tried to relax.

“I can’t stay here. Do something quick, or I’ll tell the sheriff you’re somehow involved in this.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to threaten me, and I doubt the sheriff will believe anything you say.” She called his bluff.

He looked back up at the woman and smiled ruefully. His hangover probably didn’t do much to enhance his natural charm. By her dress and mannerisms, this woman

was used to well-mannered gentlemen. If she held the key to his freedom, he would need to try harder to gain her trust.

“By the way, I don’t recall being introduced. My name’s Jacob Nolan, but friends just call me Eagle.” He paused, expecting the woman to answer in kind. He wanted to put her at ease. The last thing he needed was her fear. If she were his only hope out of this mess, then he would need to handle her gently and with great respect.

“I already know your name, Mr. Nolan. I’ll come by in a day or two.” She turned on her heel and was gone before he could question her further.

He blinked. Murder? Jail? A roach scurried across the floor.

The hold he had on his temper fled.

“Lady, come back here,” he yelled. “I’m not finished with you. Do you hear me? You gotta get me out of here. Maybe you better be more afraid of me, lady, cuz if you don’t do something soon, I’ll make you regret keeping me here. Do you hear me?” He pressed his face against the bars.

“Shut up in there, Nolan.” Tiny’s voice sounded from the other room. “The whole town can hear you. Miss Stanton’s gone, so it won’t do any good to keep yelling at her.”

Realizing the futility of his tantrum, Jake plopped back down on the cot. He had spent years trying to master his temper. How could one female make him lose control like that?

The cell closed in on him. A cold sweat drenched his body. He tried to recall a passage from the Bible that might offer him comfort, but the verses lay deep within his mental library. Past demons slipped through the bars. Memories of another time and place crowded in, making him aware of how fragile the human mind could be. He scratched his bearded chin. A weaker man could lose his sanity to such memories. Jake took a deep breath and rubbed the gold coin that hung on a chain around his neck.

Fumbling in his shirt pocket, he retrieved a worn and tattered photograph. Gazing down at the image of a young woman, he took solace from a more pleasant memory. Louise Anne Mayfield.

Before the war, he had entertained thoughts of marriage to Louise. She had been the love of his life back then. Her letters had given him the courage and will to live when all around him, men lay dying. Knowing she waited for him made life at Alton bearable.

Prisoners of war didn't fair well at the Union prison. His family and friends assumed him dead, and so had Louise Anne Mayfield. She'd married another man seven months after his capture.

He still dreamed of her. It wasn't really her fault they weren't together now. Fate and circumstances had conspired against him. He shook his head and pocketed the photograph. Fate and circumstances conspired against him once again.

According to Miss Stanton, his stay in the local jail was only temporary. But had Miss Stanton deliberately dangled the key to freedom with no intention of unlocking the door? If that were the case, he had even more reason to hold the lovely lady in contempt.

He closed his eyes, the picture of Louise tucked against his heart. Word had arrived letting him know Louise was now widowed. He tried to dream of the life he planned to make with Louise. Instead, his mind swam with images of a mysterious woman, a statuesque vision with golden curls, blue eyes, pouting lips and a secret.