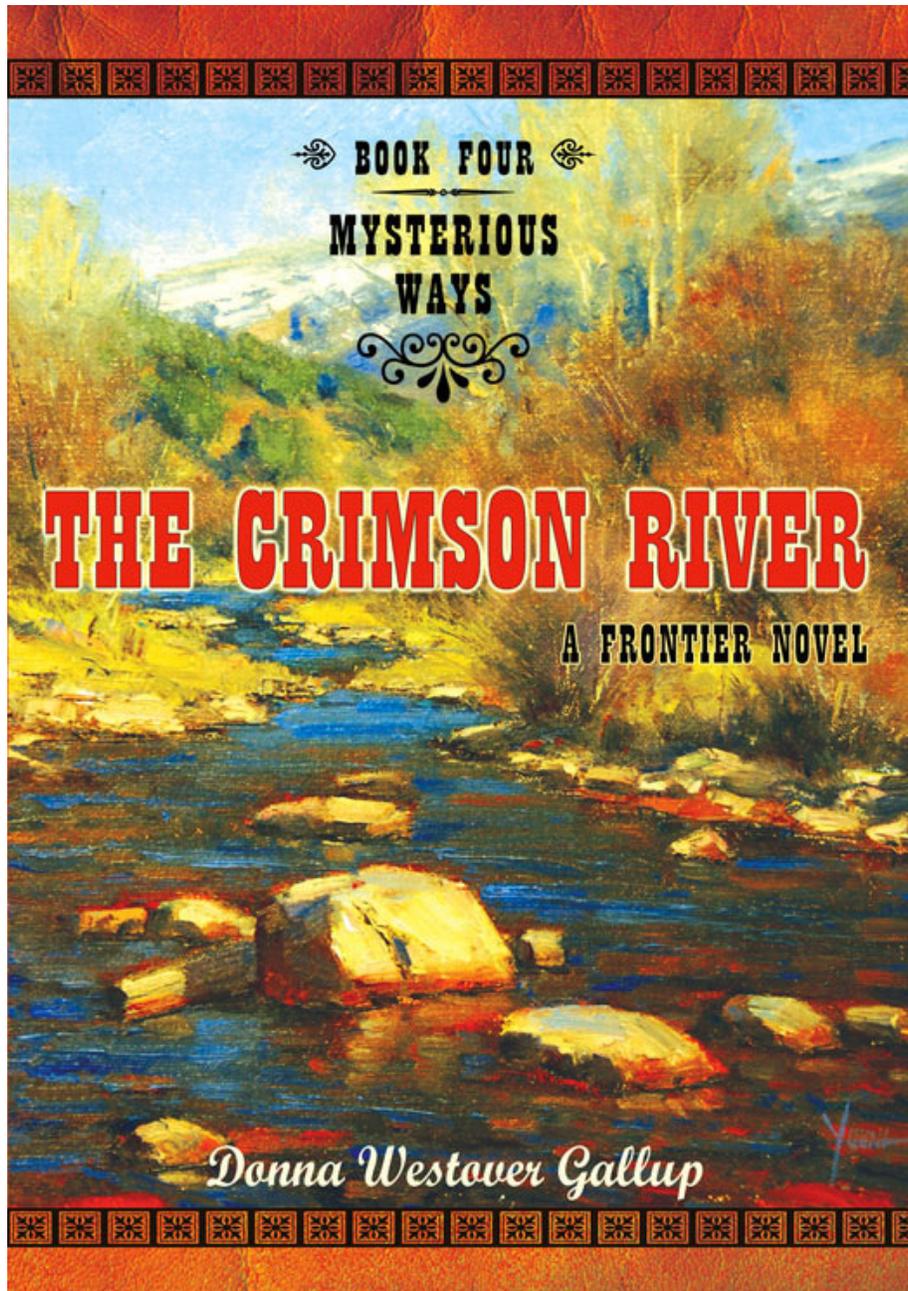


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Published by CLADACH Publishing

# Chapter 1

## COLORADO TERRITORY 1872

**T**HICK BLACK clouds loomed overhead, quietly dropping pellets of rain across the territory. But looking down the muddy streets of Denver, one could see that the rain had not dampened the festive mood that was befalling the city as quietly as the weather. Candlelight sparkled in the glass panes from house windows and closed storefronts. Tunes from pianos, guitars, fiddles, and mouth harps escaped from behind papered walls and spilled out into the cloudy mist that hung over the boardwalks, mixing their melodies into a strange yet cheerful song.

Charlie paced the boardwalk outside the train station, nervously fingering the yellow piece of paper he had tucked into his slicker pocket earlier that day. Detective Peterson's telegram said he had information to give to Charlie, but upon his arrival, he didn't want to leave the station. He wanted to catch the same train out and get back to Chicago as soon as possible; so Charlie agreed to meet him out on the platform.

Charlie had suggested that Peterson save himself the wear and tear of traveling and just wire the information. But the detective insisted on making the trip; he said, as an experienced detective of the Pinkerton Agency, he knew the risks involved if he sent this type of information over the wires. Experience had taught Peterson that there were always too many ears, too many eyes, too many unknowns that could put people at risk should this information fall into the wrong hands. So it was on the train platform that Charlie waited.

A chill ran up Charlie's spine—not from the cold rain, but from the happiness he felt at the moment. It was Thanksgiving and he had so much for which to be thankful. In the distance, a train whistle cracked the night air. Soon, the locomotive's headlight could be seen coming into Union Station. Charlie watched it grow brighter and larger as the iron horse closed in on the small platform.

The train slowed, then came to a stop. Great puffs of steam burst from its sides as people poured from the cars and into the cold November drizzle. Many of them ran to waiting friends or family members while others walked away into the darkness alone. Charlie searched the crowd, but didn't see anyone who resembled the tall, lanky soldier he'd ridden with on a cattle drive a few summers before. Had Peterson made it?

Moments later most of the people were gone, with the exception of a few men waiting to board. Charlie almost turned to leave, then he noticed a lone man standing under a gas lamp farther down the boardwalk. The man had pulled the collar of his overcoat up around his neck until it met the rim of his fedora, hiding his face. He moved away from the gas lamp and came through the mist towards Charlie.

# Chapter 2

DENVER 2010

**J**AKE STARED, with a Bird's-Eye view, the picturesque landscape beneath him. Circles of farmland dotted the prairie in hues of green and gold. In the distance he could see a couple mountain peaks, still capped in snow even though it was June. He turned his attention back to the ground below and studied the routes of several dirt roads that seemed to run hither and yon through the growing crops but, even from the air, made no sense to him. They seemed to have no purpose or direction. He snickered as the analogy of his life hit him; in the midst of beauty ... chaos ... running here and there, but no purpose or direction.

The stranger sitting next to him shifted in his seat as the Boeing 737 banked to the left. It dipped so low, it looked as if its wing would scrape the ground. Somewhere behind him, a small child started to fuss. Jake had to swallow to clear his ears. He watched as the ground rose up towards him. Noticing the change in terrain, he looked back just in time to see a herd of startled pronghorn bound across the golden prairie, away from the giant, metallic bird. They scattered for a moment then regrouped the larger and stronger animals immediately surrounding the oldest and youngest members of the herd. "Natural instinct to protect," he muttered. "Makes it harder for their enemies to move in for the kill ..."

His eyes scanned the prairie floor. "They're out there somewhere," he whispered. "Coyotes, eagles, hawks, maybe even wolves." His mind wandered, imagining the weaker or older members of the herd that would eventually have to fight for their lives or die. *Happens everywhere*, he thought, *not only in the animal world, but in my world, too*. He ought to know. He was one of the wounded, the maimed, fighting for survival. His wolf wasn't flesh and bone with bared teeth and a thirst for blood. No, his wolf was worse. His wolf was a snarling, merciless economy that had ripped everything he owned from him; everything he held dear—everything he loved. There had been no one to protect him, no one to fight with him. No matter how hard he fought, he fought alone. And lost. Everything.

He rubbed his face with his hands and sighed. Slowly, the pilot righted the aircraft and the earth disappeared from view, leaving only various shades of blue in the tiny panel of the airplane window.

He stared at his reflection. A five o'clock shadow was already stubbing his chin; his thick black hair, dusted lightly with specks of white, was slicked back, making his dark eyes round and prominent. He was a handsome man, but right then, he half expected his whole being to slowly disappear, right along with the ghostly reflection that had just stared back at him, only to fade into the clouds that powdered the blue sky. He took a deep breath and leaned back into his seat.

A thud from underneath the plane brought his thoughts back to the present. He listened as the plane's hydraulics system broke the monotony of its humming engines. Mechanical arms buzzed as they pushed the plane's landing gear out of the aircraft's belly and locked into place with a loud *clunk*.

He leaned forward to look out the window again. In the distance the Denver skyline was clearly visible. Behind it rose the majestic, snow-capped mountains. The setting sun was leaving a golden trail as the mountains tucked it deep within their jagged arms. He pressed the side of his head against the small window pane and tried to follow the mountain range as it flowed southward, but the rocky cathedrals blurred at the edge of the window then disappeared beyond the curve of the fuselage. Somewhere farther south lay the small town of Pueblo, the land of his ancestors, a place he'd never visited.

Not that he wanted to. This trip was more for business than pleasure. The attorney's letter sounded urgent and, besides, since the man had paid for this ticket, Jake thought the least he could do was to oblige his request and come to Denver to tie up whatever loose ends were dangling out there. Personally, Jake felt that he had endured enough with attorneys this past year to last him a lifetime, but since he had nothing else to do, or lose ... there was nothing to stop him from finding out what the counselor wanted from him. "Can't squeeze blood from a turnip," he muttered.

Jake closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He sighed heavily. He was forty-five years old and had worked hard to build his own investigation business; but now, after the economic downturns of the past year, he had nothing to show for it. He'd lost it all: his livelihood, his home, his savings. He had nothing left. He was just a beat-up gum shoe from Pennsylvania that didn't have two pennies to rub together. Slowly, he opened his eyes and, looking through the window, felt the encroaching darkness of a fading sun. Again, it reminded him of looking into a mirror of his life; he saw nothing. Just a great vast of nothingness; nothing in the present; nothing on the horizon; and nothing for the future, except the pain from the past. And when it came to pain, he couldn't help but think of her. Despite everything else, nothing had caused him more pain than losing her.

If everything else had been taken, but he still had her, he'd be fine. But his heart lay on top of the pile of his losses. Funny, but he knew that if he ever got back on his feet financially, he'd still feel like he had nothing. How could he? He wouldn't have *her*. When she left, she took everything with her. No, not his business, his home, or his money. She had nothing to do with those losses ... but when she left, she took all that was "him": his heart, his emotions, his determination, his happiness, his ability to love again, and his trust. He was sure he could never trust another woman for as long as he lived, let alone allow himself to love again. No, she'd not just broken his heart; she'd crushed it. Ripped it from his chest and destroyed it when she softly kissed his cheek and whispered, "Good-bye."

The searing shards of pain were gone now, or at least they didn't present themselves as often. Now he just felt numb, void of feeling anything, but with an overwhelming sense of aloneness. Sometimes the loneliness was crushing, like a boulder sitting on his chest, slowly suffocating him; yet despite the constant heaviness, he had learned to breathe around it.

A crackling noise overhead tore his thoughts from the colorless window. He instinctively looked up.

"Good evening." A friendly female voice sounded over the jet's PA system.

Jake blinked, both surprised and irritated to find that his eyelashes were wet.

"This is Captain Anderson and I'd like to welcome you to Colorado." She sounded cheery, too cheery for Jake's present state of mind. "The temperature in Denver is currently a mild seventy-two degrees and the skies are clear, a beautiful June evening in the Mile High City. The local time is approximately 8:45 p.m. Due to expected turbulence as we arrive into Denver, we will be having our flight attendants clean up the cabin and prepare the cabin early. We're about ten minutes out from touching down, so please, sit back and enjoy the remainder of your flight." There was a slight pause. The PA crackled again, but this time a male voice broke through the static.

"Flight attendants, please prepare the cabin for landing."

With the co-Captain's final order, a soft *ping* announced the lighted seatbelt sign above the passenger's heads and the cabin came to life. Flight attendants walked the aisles scanning for unbuckled seatbelts, lowered tray tables, or articles that needed to be stowed. Another female voice, this one not as pleasant as the first and more robotic, sounded overhead.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the co-captain has requested we prepare the cabin for landing. Please note that the seatbelt sign has been illuminated. We request that all passengers remain buckled in your seats until we stop at the designated gate. Once stopped, please open the overhead bins carefully, as the contents may have shifted during the flight. If you need assistance with a connecting flight,

please see the departure boards upon leaving the boarding area. Flight attendants are coming through the cabin to gather any remaining trash, newspapers, or unwanted articles....”

Jake ignored the rest of her spiel and turned his attention back to his window.

“Sir.” Jake heard the voice, but was too lost in thought to care, wondering, instead, what was the name of the mountain that stood so large behind the city lights. He made a mental note to find out.

“Sir!” said the female voice more loudly. He finally realized the voice was addressing him. He jerked his head away from the window and turned, looking around slightly bewildered. A flight attendant was leaning across the back of the aisle seat glaring at him. Her face, stern and framed by raven black hair, was stony white. Her eyes were dark and demanding. “We’re getting ready to land, sir. Would you please bring your seat to its full upright position?”

“Sure,” he whispered, “if it’ll make your life easier.” He found the button on the armrest and gave it a firm push. Instantly, the back of the seat popped forward, stopping just as it grazed the back of his head. The flight attendant smirked at him, but before she could say anything else, she seemed to have eyed another death-defying passenger and took off down the aisle. Jake grumbled something under his breath about accepting her smirk as a lame excuse for a thank-you and turned back to the window.

To the relief of the passengers, the flight attendants finally buckled themselves in their seats. The cabin grew quiet, except for the droning engines.

Jake had been told that landing in Denver could be a turbulent experience and it seemed he wasn’t going to be disappointed. The plane began to bounce mercilessly in its descent. He imagined it hopping across the sky. The tail dipped suddenly then violently juttled back up. Children squealed with delight. Babies wailed. Mothers whispered to quiet their children. The word *rollercoaster* came to Jake’s mind. His stomach flip-flopped with every pitch, dip, and shudder of the plane. His white knuckled fingers gripped the armrest tightly and he closed his eyes.

“What is this ... Junior Pilot day?” he mumbled.

The man next to him sniggered nervously. “More like bring your kid to work day.”

Jake smiled weakly. It was strange, but just knowing that he wasn’t the only one feeling anxious comforted him—just a little.

The plane continued to rock, but sensing they were close, he opened his eyes just as the runway rose up and grabbed the wheels of the plane. Concrete and rubber met with a violent jolt. Simultaneously, everyone was pulled forward in their seats as the plane wailed from the grip of the brakes. Finally, it settled down to taxiing speed and Jake unwrapped his fingers from the armrests.

He stared at the strange new airport with its tent-like roof and sprawling concourse. He hadn’t been to Denver since he was ten years old, when he’d come out with his parents to visit some relatives that he hadn’t seen since and only thought of as old. He just wished he was coming back under different circumstances, not just because the attorney—whatever his name was—had beckoned him. He wanted to be back in small-town Pennsylvania, hiding under a rock. He didn’t want to encounter more legal battles. He didn’t want to be told more bad news. He just wanted to be left alone. He fingered the attorney’s letter that he had tucked in his shirt pocket. It was brief, vague of detail, but it felt heavy against his chest. Or was that the empty hole where his heart had been? Either way ... being called to Denver couldn’t be a good thing.

Pulling his carry-on from the overhead bin, he knew that he’d soon be done with this mysterious deposition. He smiled. When whatever unexplained business had summoned him here, when whoever had cast this shadowy enigma over his already tumultuous life had been revealed, he would settle whatever needed to be settled and then go back home. Jake stopped in the middle of the boarding area and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings.

“Home,” he whispered. “Wherever that might be.”

## Chapter 3

A HAGGARD MAN climbed out of the taxi dragging a carry-on bag behind him. He was immediately greeted by a friendly doorman whose black velvet cape and top hat made him look like an old English guard of sorts. The doorman happily waved him to come up the steps and enter the brightly lit hotel, but Jake paused. Instead, he stood on the sidewalk and stared up at the triangular shaped building that rose high above him. A light summer breeze ruffled his dark hair and tugged at his jacket. The odd-shaped structure and its old-fashioned doorman were a curious sight. It was like a scene out of a Dickens novel, but instead of being surrounded by the soot-stained smokestacks of 19th-century factories, he was in the heart of Denver's 21st-century downtown. History, he marveled, a lot of history.

He slowly climbed the wide steps until he reached the large, double glass doors. Just beyond them lay a welcoming lobby, its golden light spilling onto the stoop. His tired eyes met those of the doorman who threw him a warm smile. Jake noticed that the wrinkles at the corner of the man's mouth danced up his cheekbones and rested at the corners of his eyes, making it appear as if his eyes were smiling too. Despite being a stranger, Jake believed the welcoming gesture was genuine. With a white-gloved hand, the doorman pulled on a large brass handle and opened one of the glass doors for Jake.

"Good evening, sir," he said cheerfully. Bowing slightly, he continued, "Welcome to The Palace Hotel."

Jake didn't respond with a smile. He didn't feel like smiling. He merely nodded as he stepped into the hotel. He'd read a review in a travel magazine once that reported this hotel as one of Denver's finest. Taking a quick visual inventory of the marble floors, mahogany walls, leather chairs, and tasteful pictures of an historical Denver confirmed what he'd read. The clippity-clap noise echoed through the ornate lobby as he wheeled his small bag across the marble tiles and up to the check-in desk.

The room grew eerily quiet. He felt like every eye in the place was on him. He glanced around. No one seemed to have heard his noisy entrance. No one was paying any attention to him at all. Except for the periodic tick from the oversized, antique-looking clock that hung on the wall behind the desk and the soft whispers of the old lady in front of him, no other sound could be heard. He rested his elbow on the counter and waited his turn to check in. He was lost in his thoughts, zoned out when delicious smells wafted from the house restaurant and tickled his nose. His mouth filled with saliva so fast he almost choked. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. He slid his hand across his face and let his fingers linger a few seconds on the five o'clock shadow that covered his chin.

All he wanted to do was take a hot shower, eat a good meal, and follow it all up with a good night's sleep. The trip from JFK International to Denver had been long. With a two-hour layover in Chicago, it had taken seven hours to get to Denver International Airport. Then after the time it took to finally get out of the terminal, board the train and hail a cab, the ride to downtown added another hour and a half. Traffic had been horrible. He glared at the old woman who seemed to continuously have one more question regardless of what the clerk told her. He ran his fingers through his hair with a sigh. "Good grief," he moaned.

The clerk shot him a quick glance, but continued to patiently answer the silver-haired lady who seemed not to have heard Jake's comment. Jake shot a quick smirk back at the young man, taking a mental note of the name tag that hung from the clerk's jacket pocket: Marc Singleton. *Well, Marc with a 'c,' what in the world does this little old lady have so much to inquire about? After all, this isn't New York City. It's just a cow town.*

"I know, dear," the old woman was saying to the clerk, "but what if I take 16th down to Market Street? Can I catch the light rail there or would I have to walk all the way back up to 16th Street, board one of those dreadful buses for a few blocks, and then get off

just to catch the light rail somewhere else?” The clerk maintained a calm demeanor and politely gave the same answer he’d given her a half-dozen times before but this time threw in the suggestion that maybe she should consider taking a taxi.

Jake glanced impatiently at his watch. It was almost midnight. The antique clock behind the mahogany desk showed the time to be two hours earlier at almost ten o’clock. The night was still young according to east coasters, but that didn’t help his headache.

Finally, the elderly woman seemed satisfied and shuffled away from the desk. The man turned to Jake with a smile.

“Good evening, sir. How may I help you?”

Jake glanced at the name tag pinned to the young man’s shirt. “Good evening, Marc with a ‘c,’” he said as he pulled his wallet from his back pocket. “Reservation for Jacob LeFaye.”

The man’s eyes seemed to darken for a split second before recovering with a smile. The young clerk tapped a few keys on the keyboard and studied the computer monitor. “Yes, sir. Here you are. It shows here that you’ll be staying for a week. Is that correct?”

“Yep, for a week.”

“And your preference of bank card is still American Express?”

Nodding, Jake closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Never leave home without it,” he quipped.

With the click of another computer key, the clerk scanned a plastic card key and handed it to his waiting customer.

“Welcome to The Palace, Mr. LeFaye,” he said cheerfully. “You’ll be staying in Room 1872.” Pointing down the hall, he continued, “The elevators are down the hall on the right. Go up to the eighteenth floor and your room will be a few doors down on the left.”

Jake murmured something under his breath, took the key and slid it into his wallet. Pulling the noisy suitcase behind him, he headed toward the elevators. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt like this was going to be a long week.

The gray-haired lady was waiting at the elevator doors, too, but she paid no attention to Jake as he approached. He took note of her, though. Dressed in a light gingham dress, she was small, no taller than a child. And her frailty was apparent. She held her purse tightly to her chest with thin translucent fingers. The contrast between the black leather and her alabaster skin was remarkable. Her fluid blue eyes seemed to shine as brightly as the numbers above the polished brass doors. He gave her face a quick study. Yes, there was light behind those eyes and a brain in that head. At first glance, she may have looked like a helpless old woman, but Jake knew her type: quiet, polite, and sharp as a tack.

When the doors opened, she shuffled to Jake’s side so folks could exit the car before she entered, but she still didn’t look up at him. She seemed to be preoccupied by watching people, as if she were looking for a familiar face. In the brief moment she was near him, he caught a faint scent of lilac. Not the nauseating odor of some medicinal cream, but the sweet, delightful aroma of a light perfume. When the car had emptied, the elderly woman stepped in carefully, paying special attention to the spot where the marble floor of the hallway met the wooden floor of the elevator. With her purse still clutched to her chest, she shuffled to a back corner and stood quietly.

Jake followed her in, but turned to face the doors, letting her stand alone in the back of the tiny compartment. He hit the button marked “18” and looked over his shoulder. “What floor, ma’am?” he asked.

“Twelve,” she whispered. “Twelve, please.”

He hit the button marked “12” just before the car lurched upward. No one spoke. When it came to rest on the twelfth floor, the doors parted smoothly, almost silently. The old woman scuffled forward, but stopped just before stepping off into the hallway. The heavy doors started to close, but Jake quickly hit the button marked “Door Open” and stopped them from crushing her. He rolled his eyes then glared down at her in frustration.

“Ma’am?”

She looked as if she had no idea of the pain he had just saved her from. Her face only projected the innocence that shone in her eyes. She nervously fingered her purse strap.

“Sir,” she said feebly. “I know we’re strangers, but you do have a kind face, somewhat familiar in fact.” She continued to twist the strap. Glancing at the floor, then back up at him, she continued, “This is awfully hard for me to ask, but I fear my memory isn’t what it used to be.”

Jake sighed impatiently, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Again, she didn’t seem to notice. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to remember where I’m going once I get out onto those busy streets. It’s been so long since I’ve been to the city.”

He’d been holding down the “Door Open” button for so long his finger was starting to hurt. If he didn’t release it soon, he’d set off the alarm. Quickly, he grabbed the handle of his suitcase with one hand and her elbow with the other and led her away from the elevator into the hallway. Standing at least a foot and a half taller than she, he looked down into her round face. His immediate thought was that at one time, she must have been strikingly beautiful. Her faded eyes still showed hints of blue. Her cheekbones, covered with tight, almost clear skin, were high and round. Even now, in her elderly years, she was stunning.

“How can I help you, ma’am?” he asked as the elevator doors closed behind them.

The words were out of his mouth before he could take them back. It was too late. He saw the direct impact they had on her the second the words passed over his lips. Her light blue eyes twinkled merrily. Her pink cheeks gathered high on her cheekbones and she broke into a radiant smile. Years had vanished from her face.

“I knew you were a godsend. Please, sir. I’ll pay you handsomely if you will escort me about my business over the next couple of days. Just to make sure I get to all of my appointments on time.”

“But . . . I . . . I,” he stammered. “I have appointments of my own to get to, ma’am. I’m here on business and once I’m done with it, I’ve got to get back home.”

Her dancing eyes lingered on his face before the years seemed to overcome her all at once and he watched helplessly as her eyes dimmed and the youthful smile faded.

“I see,” she said quietly. “I understand. Thank you anyway.”

She slowly turned away from him and hobbled down the hallway. Jake watched her until she reached the door to her room. She made no further gesture to him—didn’t even look his way—but as quickly as she could, she disappeared behind the walnut door.

He felt like a heel. But what else was he supposed to do? *I don’t even know this woman. For all I know, she could be Al Capone’s mother.* The thought made him uneasy. “Stop worrying about it, Jacob,” he whispered. “She’s not your concern. You probably won’t even see her again the whole time you’re here. . . . And besides, that’s what the concierge is for.”

But he couldn’t shake that feeling that he might see her again and, if he did, what would he say? What could he say? “Let it go,” he told himself.

## Chapter 4

**J**AKE'S HEAD came up with a jerk. His eyelids felt as if they weighed a ton, but he forced them open and looked around the dark room. A smidgen of drool teetered from his bottom lip, but he caught it with his tongue and pulled it back into his mouth. Seconds passed before he remembered where he was. Sitting up in the bed, he listened.

Floors below him, a sleepy Denver was just beginning to stir. A truck rattled down a dark street. In the distance, the definite hiss of airbrakes cut through the morning air. But those weren't the noises that had awakened him. He wasn't sure, because he wasn't quite awake when he heard it, but it sounded smaller, closer, more like a soft tapping. He strained his ears a little longer, but hearing nothing, he let his head fall back down onto the feather pillow. "Must be someone delivering the newspaper," he murmured. He rolled over onto his stomach, pulled the covers up to his shoulders, and closed his eyes. The soft, constant hum of the ceiling fan started to lull him back to sleep.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

He opened his eyes and lifted his head again. "There is someone here," he groaned. Rolling over onto his back, he kicked the covers off of his legs. When his feet hit the floor it took him a moment to get his balance.

"Just a second," he shouted. "I'm coming."

Dressed only in his pajama bottoms, he grabbed the robe that was hanging limply across the back of the desk chair and impatiently shoved his arms through the sleeves. He tied the belt around his waist, quickly ran his fingers through his hair, and yanked the door open.

The bright lights from the hallway hit him in the face and blinded him. Throwing a hand up to shield his eyes, he could only make out the figure of a short, stout man.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. LeFaye," the stranger said in a mousy voice, "but she insisted I come and wake you."

Jake, blinking his eyes against the light, let go of the door knob and rubbed his face with both hands. "Who?" he muttered angrily. "Who insisted you come and wake me?"

"Miss Wakefield," answered the steward nervously.

Jake squinted hard and looked at the man in mock relief. "Oh, Miss Wakefield," he said sarcastically. "Well then. I guess that makes it okay, since it was Miss Wakefield who wanted me awake at ...?" He glanced at his bare wrist. "What time is it anyway?"

"Five o'clock, sir."

Jake's glare drilled into the short man standing in front of him. "Five o'clock? In the morning?"

"Yes, sir," squeaked the steward.

"For Pete's sake!" Jake bellowed. "Who does she think she is—?"

"Shhh," said the small man, nervously looking up and down the hall. "You'll awaken our other guests."

"Well, who *does* she think she is?" Jake whispered loudly.

"She's Miss Wakefield. She's one of Denver's finest attorneys, sir. And she requests that you meet her for breakfast in half an hour, downstairs in the hotel restaurant. Said she has some important business to discuss with you."

Jake was livid. He started to pace in the doorway. "Oh, is that right? Well, I happen to have an attorney here in Denver myself and, if Miss Wakefield isn't careful, I'll sue her for—"

“And who might that be?” interrupted the little man.

Jake whipped around, slapped the light switch on, and marched over to the wooden valet where he had hung his jacket and shirt the night before. From the shirt pocket he retrieved a folded piece of paper. Looking at the steward rather smugly, he unfolded it and was about to read the name aloud when he stopped short. His mouth fell open.

Peering into the room and watching Jake recoil, the little man squeaked, “Well?”

Jake closed his mouth and slowly refolded the paper. “Tell her I’ll be down in thirty minutes,” he mumbled.

“Yes, sir,” the steward stated smartly with a smile. “I’ll tell her.”

Jake turned to close the door, but Mr. Mouse hadn’t yet departed. He stood still just beyond the threshold, looking at him with his big brown eyes. A palm lay open and extended.

“What?” asked Jake tartly.

“It is customary that one receives a tip when one provides a service,” answered the little man.

Jake shook his head in disbelief. “You mean to tell me that you expect me to pay you for coming up here and waking me out of a dead sleep so I can meet a complete stranger in the wee-est hour of the morning, to eat food that I’m not yet hungry for, and that I’ll probably end up paying for although I really can’t afford it?”

The little man, unmoved, just nodded.

Knowing he had been defeated, Jake made his way back to the desk and retrieved his wallet. “And what,” he said, flipping through the bills, “is the customary tip for this kind of service?”

The steward shrugged his shoulders. “Ten, I guess.”

Jake froze. “Ten?” he asked. “Ten what? Ten cents?”

The little man snorted. “Sir, the longer we stand here and bicker about this, the less time you have to get ready to meet Miss Wakefield. And that may mean the longer she’ll be sitting downstairs with an empty chair in front of her. Believe me, sir, when I say that paying me a measly ten dollars now isn’t going to hurt as bad as what you’ll have to pay her if you make her wait. She’s not only one of Denver’s finest, sir; she’s one of Denver’s most expensive.”

Jake slapped a ten-dollar bill into the man’s extended palm and pushed the door closed with his foot. He glanced at the alarm clock on the bedside table. 5:08 a.m. The note in his jacket pocket said to meet L.K. Wakefield in the hotel restaurant at 5:30 sharp. He had assumed that L.K. Wakefield was a he and that 5:30 meant 5:30ish, like it does in Pennsylvania. He hadn’t met an attorney yet that made it on time to anything except court; but then again, he hadn’t bothered to read the rest of the message his friend had scribbled down, which of course, explained the consequences should he be late.

“Okay, shame on me for assuming and not doing my research,” he muttered as he threw the robe onto the bed and went into the bathroom. Starting the shower, he wished he’d paid more attention to the details yesterday; but now he was just going to have to beat the clock.

With two minutes to go, Jake flicked his wrist and looked at his watch. He had to get down eighteen floors, get to the restaurant, figure out who Miss Wakefield was among all the patrons, and make introductions. “I can do this,” he muttered. He’d never showered, shaved, and dressed so fast in his life, but he felt quite proud of the fact that she’d get no late fee out of him.

He waited impatiently for the elevator to arrive, glancing at his watch a dozen times before he heard the anticipated *ding* and the doors parted. Ready to spring aboard, Jake looked into the compartment and froze. The brightly lit car sat waiting for him, soft elevator music beckoned to him, the ticking of his watch pounded in his ears, and his brain was screaming, *Wait! Wait for the next elevator!* But he couldn’t wait. He had to move, so he clenched his jaw and made his feet move forward.