

# COLORADO DAWN

## Prologue

*Lister House, outside London*

*September 1868*

Maddie turned the key in the lock at her parent's small stone cottage, paused for a moment to gather her courage, then opened the door and stepped inside.

Silence greeted her. That oppressive kind of silence that came when a house has been left empty too long and the life and energy once trapped within its walls was slowly draining away. A fanciful notion. But funerals always made her melancholy.

Still wearing her coat and clutching her reticule in cold, numb fingers, she walked slowly through the rooms.

Everything looked the same, like a tintype frozen in time—her mother's bonnet draped over the arm of the settee, the same array of photographs lining the walls, a book left open on the table beside her father's chair. Even the air smelled familiar—a subtle blend of old smoke with a hint of her father's pipe tobacco and her mother's sachet. But beneath it, barely detectable, hung the damp mustiness of an empty house and the beginnings of decay.

And they had only been dead a week.

In the kitchen, she dropped her reticule on the table and stripped off her coat

and gloves. Moving by rote, she set a fire in the cook stove and lit the lamp sitting on the table, then went through the rituals of preparing tea. Once she had the kettle heating and the tea caddy and sugar bowl on the table, she set out her mother's favorite cup, a napkin, and a spoon.

Then she sat down in her father's chair, dropped her head onto her folded arms, and wept.

An hour later, she was still sitting there, her tears long spent, nursing her third cup of tea and trying to decide what to do with the rest of her life.

Her parents were dead. Her marriage was a failure. She would probably never have children or a home of her own. Even this house would have to be sold to cover the cost of her parents' funerals. With no other family and no resources, her future stretched bleak and empty ahead of her.

So what was she to do? Go back to Scotland? To a father-in-law who couldn't abide the English, and a mother-in-law who rarely left her room? Angus's sister, Glynnis, was so busy running the Kirkwell lands she had little time for a husband, much less a friend, and his two older brothers were so involved with their own pursuits they were rarely at home, and when they were, they called her the English girl because they couldn't remember her name. With her husband gone years on end, what reason had she to go back?

She looked down at the heavy signet ring Angus had given her before he rode off to rejoin his cavalry regiment almost a year and a half ago. She hadn't seen him since. In almost four years of marriage, he had written her two letters and visited her once. Four years, languishing at the family's remote Highland estate, the unwanted English bride of a Scottish earl's son, while he played soldier in Ireland.

She had given up her dreams for that?

She almost yanked the ring off her finger and threw it across the room. But she hadn't the energy for even that. After her hurried dash across half of England to get

to the funeral on time, then standing in the icy drizzle as Vicar Collins presided over the small graveside service for her parents this afternoon, she was so emotionally drained just lifting her teacup took an effort of will.

It was all rather meaningless, anyway, if the target of her ire wasn't even there to make note of it.

Beyond the window, the wind huffed and moaned. Tiny pellets of sleet rattled against the window panes. Gusts sent drafts back down the stovepipe to burp puffs of smoke into the still air.

Perhaps he had died. That's what soldiers did, especially rash, high-spirited cavalymen who took needless risks. But she had always thought Angus Wallace was too big, too headstrong, too fearless to die. Besides, if something had happened to him, his family would have been notified—if not his wife, then surely his father, the Earl of Kirkwell.

If not dead, then what?

Utterly indifferent.

The realization left her breathless with despair.

Fearing another onslaught of tears, she looked around the room, seeking distraction. Her gaze fell on the framed photograph hanging beside the door that led into the parlor. A calmness came over her as she studied the smiling faces of her parents, remembering that last holiday at Brighton, and how Papa had cajoled her mother into donning one of those scandalous bathing costumes and testing the waters. Maddie had tried to make them sit still all afternoon. Finally, when they stopped to rest on the wall overlooking the beach, she saw her chance.

It was one of her first attempts at portraiture, and a poor one at that. Blurred lines, misplaced shadows, shoddy composition—all marks of a novice photographer. But it was her favorite, because there was more to it than just an image on paper. For the first time she had captured not just form, but emotion.

There was a story behind those smiling faces. She had seen it, and coaxed it out of the shadows, and trapped it in tintype for all the years to come.

Perhaps she could do that again.

That notion burst into her head, half formed and elusive. But it grew with every heartbeat until it filled her mind. Dare she?

For the next two days, as she set her parent's house to rights and packed away their things, that thought dogged her footsteps like a lost cat.

It was absurd. So far beyond reason and practicality it wasn't worth pursuing. Yet, after her third restless night, she surrendered to the lure of possibility and resolutely climbed the stairs to the attic where her photographs and equipment were stored, determined to at least give it a try.

The Scottish had a saying: "Be happy while you're living, for you'll be a long time dead." And Maddie intended to be happy. She deserved it, Angus Wallace be damned.

The next afternoon, she was sitting before Mr. Reginald Farnsworth Chesterfield's desk at *The Illustrated London News* nervously clasping her gloved hands in her lap and growing more convinced by the moment that grief had robbed her of her senses.

Daughters of baronets and wives of third sons to earls did not seek employment. They did not set up shop, or peddle their wares, or go into business, especially such a male-dominated business as photography. They stayed at home and tatted and traded vague reminiscences about their absent husbands and childless, empty lives until God finally took pity and allowed them to die.

"Hmm," the gray-haired publisher said as he pulled another photograph from the portfolio she had brought for his perusal.

*Hmm?* What did that mean?

She tried not to fidget. A chance. That's all she wanted. She would work for a

pittance—or at least enough to keep her parent’s house so she would have someplace to live. She would even take an assignment on speculation, just to prove she could do it.

Minutes ticked by. Maddie’s confidence dwindled to quivery jelly. After almost a half hour of silence, she was on the verge of snatching up her portfolio and fleeing the building.

This was all a horrid mistake. It was time to accept her fate and go back to Northbridge, and learn to speak Gaelic and eat haggis without gagging.

“I had to look at them one more time,” Mr. Chesterfield finally said as he slid the photographs and *cartes de visite* back into the heavy canvas folder. “Just to be sure.”

Maddie tried to keep her breathing even.

After tying the closure tabs, he tipped back his swivel chair and studied the ceiling, his brow furrowed in thought, the forefinger and thumb of his right hand idly plucking at the gray hairs sprouting from his top lip. “It’s a rather forward-thinking notion,” he mused, more to himself than to her. “Revolutionary. Still . . . It just might just work.”

Abruptly he swiveled around and stared at her across his desk. “Have you seen the photographs of Matthew Brady?” he demanded. “Those he took in America during their recent rebellion?”

“Y-yes.” Her voice sounded like a mouse squeak, so she cleared her throat and tried again. “They are most evocative.” Astounding. Haunting. Compelling. Everything she wished her photographs could be.

“And those of William Jackson,” he pressed. “And Tim O’Sullivan?”

“The ones of the American West? They’re fascinating. Each image seems to tell a tale all its own.”

“Yes!” The elderly man beamed, showing small, crooked teeth beneath his gray

muttonchops. “But they only present one side of the story, don’t you see.”

Maddie didn’t but nodded politely, her fixed smile starting to wobble. “One side.”

“The male side, as it were.”

“Ah. The male side.” She wondered if he was insane. And what he would do if she cast up her accounts on his desk. Perhaps she should leave before she did.

“But to see it from a whole new perspective, that’s the challenge. That would certainly catch your eye, would it not?”

“Indeed.” Clearly insane.

“Of course it would! So what do you think, madam?”

Maddie felt that thickness in her throat again. “About what, sir?”

“The female perspective!”

“Well . . . insomuch as it’s the only one I have, I rather like it.”

He gave a sudden bark of laughter that made her jump. “You misunderstand. I’m asking if you would like to travel to America, Mrs. Wallace, and photograph the West from the female perspective.”

Maddie was too astounded to respond. *America?*

“I have been wanting to send an expeditionary photographer over there for some time.” His voice grew more enthusiastic with every word. “But a woman! Now that would be unheard of. Revolutionary!” He startled her anew by slapping the flat of his hand down on her closed portfolio. “You have the talent for it, madam. But have you the will? What say you?”

She couldn’t say anything. Her tongue wouldn’t work.

“I would advance you travel expenses,” he added before she could form a response. “And those of your husband, of course, as I assume he will be accompanying you.”

“I . . . ah . . .”

“Unless you think he might object? Shall I contact him directly? I realize this is highly unusual, but if he—”

“There is no *he*,” Maddie blurted out, astounded by her own audacity and the lie she was about to tell. But how could she *not* do it? A new start. A new life. A whole new *country*, even. “That is to say, I’m”—*forgive me, Angus*—“a widow.”

“A widow?” The idea seemed to delight him. “Well, then, there’s nothing to hold you back, is there?”

“Not a thing.” And for all intents and purposes, she truly was a widow. Angus had left her in spirit almost two years ago. This physical parting was simply the final step in accepting the death of her marriage so she could begin a new life without him.

“Excellent. I’ll book passage for . . . shall we say, two weeks? That should give you time to gather what equipment and supplies you’ll need. Have the bills sent to my office.” He smiled, all but rubbing his hands together in glee. “Any questions?”

Dozens of them. Thousands. “No.”

“Excellent! Then we’re agreed.” Hopping up, he held out his hand.

Maddie rose on shaky legs and placed her fingers in his, hoping he didn’t feel the tremors in her hand. “Agreed.”

And as simply as that, it was done.

Two weeks to pack, put the house up for sale, restock her supplies, and send a note to Northbridge to inform them of her plans in case Angus ever inquired about her absence.

*America*. Just the thought of it made her giddy.

## Chapter 1

*Heartbreak Creek, Colorado Territory*

*September 1870*

The Fifth Viscount of Ashby—or Ash, as his new London friends called him—rode slowly down the muddy street, Tricks padding wearily at his side, his rough coat dripping rain and mud.

A sad place, Heartbreak Creek. Judging by the faded store shingles hanging over the warped boardwalk, and the hulking structure perched on the bluffs above the canyon that sheltered the town, it had once been a prosperous mining community. But now the machinery sat silent, the mine dark, and few people walked past the unpainted wooden buildings with their sagging roofs and boarded storefronts. It looked no different from dozen other wee villages he'd ridden through in the last months.

He had seen worse in Ireland—which would probably never recover from the devastation of the potato famine—and in Scotland, where the Clearances had left a trail of empty huts and overflowing graveyards across his beloved Highlands. But it was always disturbing to see a town die.

Yet, despite the obvious decline, there were still signs of life in Heartbreak Creek. Two wagons stood in front of the Mercantile, Feed, and Mining Supplies store, and the hotel looked freshly painted and bore a fine new sign over the front

doors. But without steady commerce from mining, timber, or the railroads, the town would soon die.

So why had she come to such a bleak place? To hide from him? He had once been a forward rider with the Rifles of the Light Division, and a man never forgot training like that. Dinna she realize that no matter where she went or how far she ran, he could still find her? She had led him a merry chase, so she had. The lass was as elusive as peat smoke, but he sensed that finally after twenty months of searching, he was getting close.

Reining in at the rail in front of the hotel, he stiffly dismounted, twisting as little as possible as he swung down. For the last hour, pain had been gnawing at his left side like the starving hounds of hell, and he knew he would pay a high price for riding so long in the rain. Cold dampness always made his slow-healing wound ache—the crossing had been a bloody nightmare, made worse by the constant pitch and roll of the ship. But the dizziness had eased once he'd stepped onto solid ground in Boston Harbor, and he hadna suffered a single headache in well over a month.

“Stay,” he ordered Tricks as he looped Lurch’s reins over the rail.

The dog grinned up at him, tongue lolling, his bushy brows spiky with rain and clumps of mud.

“I mean it. You’re bloody filthy, so you are. And since you willna allow a bath, you’ll stay out here. That’s an order.”

Ignoring the animal’s pitiful whines, Ash stepped through the double front doors and was pleased to see that Heartbreak Creek Hotel was as dapper inside as it was out. Dark paneling gleamed. Lush green plants rose out of tall clay urns. There were no patches or stains on the upholstered chairs gathered around a tufted hassock, and no dusty cobwebs dangling from the sparkling chandelier. Even the bald spot atop the head of the old man at the front desk looked polished, and the

brass clasps on the braces worn by the freckled bellboy posted inside the doors would have satisfied the most demanding sergeant.

A well-run establishment. Ash nodded in approval.

“Hidy,” the clerk said as Ash crossed to the front desk. “Help you?”

“Aye. I need a room. One with a big bed.”

The old man’s grin showed a lack of teeth, and those that remained were marred by rusty stains. “Planning a party, are you?”

Ash looked at him.

The grin faded. “All our beds are the same size.”

“Then one without a foot rail.”

The clerk gazed past Ash’s shoulder. His faded blue eyes widened. “Great Godamighty! What is that thing?”

Ash dinna have to guess what had caught the old man’s attention. “A wolfhound. The room?”

Still staring toward the door, the elderly fellow said, “Dogs—assuming that hulking beast is a dog and not a starving, long-tailed bear—ain’t allowed inside.”

“I told him that but he dinna listen. You’re welcome to give it a go.”

Whirling, the old man fled through the open doors into what appeared to be the dining area. “Miss Hathaway! You better come quick!”

*Bollocks.* Ash felt a gob of mud hit his ear and turned to glare at Tricks, who was slinging water and mud in a ten-foot arc as he wagged his long, thin tail. “Now look what you’ve done,” he accused. “I should sell you to the Chinamen, so I should.”

“Sir!” A woman marched out of the dining area, the clerk hot on her heels. A blond woman, with eyes as green as Ireland and a look on her pretty face that would send the devil into retreat.

“Animals are not allowed in this establishment.” She waved a hand at the

double doors. “Take him outside immediately!”

“He willna stay there without me.”

“Then I’ll bid you good day, as well.”

The old man snickered.

Ash sighed. “I’ve come a long way, so I have, and I’m in desperate need of a warm, dry room. One with a long bed, so my feet willna hang off the end. Can you make an exception this one time?”

Her pretty eyes narrowed in suspicion. “A long way from where?”

“Scotland.”

“I told you he wasn’t from around here,” the clerk muttered.

“Yancey, I’ll handle this!”

But Ash could see his answer had startled her, and he wondered why.

“What is your name, sir?” she asked.

“Ashby.”

“That’s it? No first name?”

Ash shrugged. “Some call me lord.”

Understanding came quickly—the woman was blade sharp. “Lord Ashby? Is that a joke?”

“Regretfully, no. I’ll pay double,” he added to distract her.

“Why are you here? In Heartbreak Creek?”

“I’m seeking a woman.”

The clerk snorted. “Aren’t we all.”

With a hiss of exasperation, she whirled on the old man. “Yancey, please assist Miriam upstairs. Billy”—she waved to the freckled boy watching with wide-eyed interest from his post by the front door—“fetch Sheriff Brodie, if you will. Now.”

After the boy dashed out the front door and Yancey stomped up the staircase that rose along the wall separating the lobby from the dining room, she returned

her attention to Ash. “What woman?”

Ash frowned, put off by the challenge in her tone. Not many would dare. Especially a female. But he had no wish to sleep on the ground again tonight, so he kept his tone pleasant. “Madeline Wallace.”

“Why?”

“I have news of her family.”

“What news?”

*Bugger this.* He started toward the door.

“Ah . . . double, you say?”

He stopped, debated, then thinking of the cold dampness that awaited him if he left, turned back. “Aye. But the bed canna have a foot rail.”

“You’ll bathe your dog?”

Ash thought of the last attempt. “Aye. If you have four stout men to aid me.”

“You can bathe him in the trough around back. I’ll send out Yancey and Billy with drying rags.” Her green eyes flicked over him. “You may use the tub in the washroom off the kitchen. But not the dog. And we don’t have stables here, so you’ll have to take your horse to the livery on the edge of town.”

It took Yancey, Billy, and two lengths of rope to get Tricks into the trough, but the deed was done without loss of limb. When Ash left the washroom an hour later, clean and freshly dressed with his pouting and mostly clean wolfhound at his heels, he found a man leaning against the wall beside the door, working at his nails with a penknife. By his expression when he saw Ash, it was apparent he had been waiting for him.

“Heard you were looking for Maddie Wallace,” the man said, studying Ash through dark eyes from beneath the brim of his black flat-crowned hat. He was even taller than Ash and solidly built, and he would have carried an air of authority even without the sheriff’s badge pinned to his vest.

Ash nodded. "I am."

"Mind if I ask why?"

Ash did, so he dinna respond. Tricks plopped onto his belly by Ash's boot, his rangy body taking up most of the hallway, and began licking the dampness from his front legs.

"Impressive dog," the man said as he folded the penknife. "Is he as dangerous as he looks?"

"Not to me."

The sheriff nodded and slipped the penknife into his pocket. Bending down, he let Tricks sniff his open hand, then gently stroked the knobby head.

Ash was surprised. Like most of his breed, Tricks was standoffish with strangers. By accepting the sheriff so readily, it only confirmed Ash's assessment of the man. A reasonable fellow who wore his position well.

The sheriff straightened. "See that table in the back corner?" He pointed across the hall to the open door that led into the dining room. "The one with the ladies?"

Ash followed his direction and saw the blond woman seated with a dark-skinned woman and a pregnant sandy-haired woman. All three were staring their way. And frowning. "Aye, I see them."

"The blond is Lucinda Hathaway," the sheriff explained in a friendly tone. "Owns the hotel. Yankee. Smart. Carries a pepperbox pistol. Far as I know, she hasn't killed anyone with it. The dark-skinned woman is Prudence Lincoln. She lives at the school the ladies set up for ex-slaves and anyone else who wants to come learn. Whether she likes it or not, she's under the protection of a Cheyenne Dog Soldier. Ever heard of them?"

Ash had. He'd never seen one, but he'd heard of their legendary fierceness in battle and admired them for it. He was Scottish, after all. But right now he was less curious about Indians than why the sheriff was telling him all this.

“Now that blue-eyed beauty,” the man went on, his voice softening as he looked at the sandy-haired woman. “She’s Edwina Brodie. She might fool some with her southern charm, but she’s pretty handy with a shovel and once even faced down a mountain lion with a bucket of salad greens. And if that’s not enough to give a man pause . . .” Swinging his gaze back to Ash, he gave him a hard look. “There’s me.”

Ash heard the challenge but gave no reaction. “And who are you?”

The sheriff touched the tips of two fingers to the brim of his hat. “Declan Brodie. I’m temporary sheriff here at Heartbreak Creek. And her husband.”

The warning was clear, although Ash had no idea why Sheriff Brodie had issued it. Maddie Wallace was the woman he had come to see, not these females. “Why temporary?” he asked.

“Because I’m a rancher,” Brodie explained, which explained nothing. “As you can see,” he went on, glancing back toward the women, “the ladies are upset. It’s not good when they get upset.”

“Which of us is in trouble?” Ash asked, although he had a fair idea.

Brodie flashed white teeth in a crooked grin that changed his austere face to one that women might find handsome. “Hell, I’ve got four kids and a pregnant wife. I’m always in trouble. But this time, it’s you.”

“What have I done?”

“That depends.” No longer smiling, the sheriff stepped toward Ash.

Immediately Tricks rose.

The sheriff paused, looked from the dog to Ash, but came no closer. He showed no menace, yet Ash sensed an unbendable resolve within the man. He respected that, since it was a trait they had in common.

“Why are you looking for Maddie?” Brodie asked again.

That was the second time the sheriff had casually used the shortened version of

Madeline's name. Ash dinna like the sound of it on another man's tongue. "As I told the Hathaway woman, I have news of her family," he said stiffly. "Is she here?"

Brodie remained silent. Ash suspected he was being assessed by the lawman, and although he dinna like it, he withstood it without showing his growing irritation.

The women continued to watch them and whisper quietly amongst themselves. Ash could feel the censure in their eyes and wondered what he'd done to cause it.

"She's off making pictures," the sheriff finally said. "Should be back in a week or so, then she'll be leaving again for the big meeting up in Denver."

"Meeting about what?"

"Political thing. Statehood. Delegates are coming from all over the territory. Promises to be quite a gathering."

"She's a delegate?" That surprised him. Despite her father's leanings, she had showed no interest in politics before. But then, that she was here instead of Scotland where she belonged showed how little he knew her.

"No, I am. Part of the job. Or so I've been told."

Ash heard the disgust in the man's voice and guessed the sheriff wasna excited about the trip. But he'd heard enough to know this was the woman he sought, and his natural impatience caused him to speak more sharply than he intended. "I canna wait another week. Where is she now?"

The sheriff reared his head back and subjected Ash to another lengthy assessment.

Ash was weary of it. "It's important that I speak to her."

"You'll not hurt her?"

"I dinna hurt women."

After more scrutiny, the sheriff sighed, as if he'd come to a decision he might

later regret. “She headed up to the Alamosa a month ago.”

“The Alamosa?”

“Alamosa River. Things are hopping up there since the strikes.”

Brodie must have seen Ash’s confusion. “Gold strikes,” he clarified. “Miners are pouring in from all over. She wanted to document it. Photograph it. She’s a photographer. Didn’t you know that?”

Of course Ash knew. It was through her photographs that he had tracked her this far. But he thought the woman had more sense than to go haring off to a place as dangerous as a wide-open mining town. “She dinna go alone, did she?”

“She’s got Wall-eyed Willy with her, not that he’d be much protection.”

*Bluidy hell.*

“You going after her?”

“Aye. I’m going after her.”