

DRAFT

Her Knight With a Shining Star

by Shannon Bailey

Belching streams of ashen gray smoke, a black engine and its body consisting of two coach cars and a caboose, noisily wound its way through sheer rock-walled canyons and it rambled along the valley floors of the Rocky Mountains as it headed toward the northwestern territory of Colorado.

Save for a slight confrontation with some strikers at Trinidad, the journey up from Texas had been tedious and uneventful. But U.S. Marshal Ethan Davis knew the worst was yet to come and he figured it would be wise to catch some shuteye while he could.

With Aspen now behind them, he tried to relax, but the rail car was as hot as Hades and the wooden seat was hard as a rock and much too small for his long, lean frame to sit comfortably in. Removing his hat, he leaned back into the corner of the seat, resting his shoulder and head against the rattling window and extended his legs into the aisle. He covered his face with his hat and crossed his arms over his chest. Once he finally settled in, the rocking motion of the car lulled him to sleep and he dozed between stops.

At the fourth shrill blast of the train's whistle, Ethan sat up and raked his hand through his dark hair before pulling his hat. Out his window, to the left and across the river, he saw white smoke billowing out of a pair of smokestacks from a cropping of buildings, and

the wooden trestles of a coal mine operation entrenched into the side of a steep mountain range. As they continued, and the tracks curved to the right, he spied another mine operation at the west end of the town ahead.

As the train slowed, it rumbled past the backsides of small clapboard houses and outbuildings and larger wooden, brick and limestone structures, before squealing to a stop at the New Castle Midland Depot.

A large number of people had gathered at the station and it was clear to Ethan, by the crowd's reaction to their arrival that he and his fellow officers of the law were about as welcomed as saddles sores on Sunday. Judging by the words and phrases being shouted at them, he figured the angry group was all fired up for all the wrong reasons. They were thinking that he and the other Marshals had come to haul out the last of their coal cars, but that just wasn't so. The truth was they had been employed by the Colorado Midland Railroad to escort the mail trains up and down the line, and to ensure their safety—nothing more. He didn't like the look of things and he knew this little misunderstanding him and the others were caught in the middle of, had all the makings for real trouble, and he cursed.

As he stepped down from the train, his eyes scanned the mob of nearly two hundred angry folks, looking for any man who posed a real threat. While he noticed that dozens of men had knives and guns strapped at their waists, the only ones daring to draw their weapons were the little boys with their toy pistols.

Ethan continued to observe the increasingly hostile throng until his eyes came to rest a pair of ladies

standing just a few feet in front of him. They wore black veiled bonnets and were dressed in long-sleeved, high-necked widows' weeds that made them look completely out of place amongst the other brightly garbed women.

When the taller of the two threw back her veil, Ethan could see that she was young and pretty, and when her troubled eyes looked directly at him, their gaze locked. Out of respect, he acknowledged her with a tug of the brim of his hat and she quickly looked away. She dipped her head to speak to her companion and in the next moment, she crumpled to the ground, her dark skirts pooling about her.

Without a second thought, he raced to her side and knelt down as the other woman dropped to the ground next to them. "Oh my heavens!" she cried, snapping open the fan she held. "I just knew something like this was going to happen! The poor child isn't well! She has been through so much this past week!" she explained loudly as she began to wave it wildly before the woman's pale face.

When Renee's eyes fluttered open, she saw her aunt's veiled features hovering over her and then a man's face appeared. "Ma'am, are you all right? Can you stand," he hollered at her over the din.

Although dazed, she nodded. "Yes, I believe so." she mumbled weakly as she stared up into his warm, golden brown eyes.

Ethan couldn't hear her reply and he figured if she didn't have the strength to talk, she more than likely didn't have the strength to walk. He gathered her into his arms and as he stood, her bonnet tumbled onto the ground unnoticed.

"Please, *sir*, this isn't necessary! Please set me down," she pleaded feebly.

Ethan shook his head against her request and while keeping his eyes trained on the crowd, he bent his head toward her ear and said, "Ma'am, you shouldn't be here! It isn't safe! Will you let me take you away from here?"

The past week's grief, combined with the frightening madness surrounding her had finally broken Renee's resolve and she sobbed, "Yes, all right! And please hurry!" she cried and covered her face with her hands.

Aware of the lady's emotional state and the growing danger around them, Ethan wanted to get her away from there as quickly as possible and he ordered people to make way as he carried her through the unruly mob.

Renee was embarrassed by her fainting spell and emotional outburst, but by the time the trio reached the corner of 7th and Main Street, she had regained most of her composure. However, when the gentleman set her back on her feet and she saw that her rescuer was the very same Marshal she had locked eyes with at the train, she was so mortified that she nearly fainted again.

When Betsy flung back her veil, it was obvious by the stricken look on her face that she was still quite shaken from the ordeal as well. "Oh, God bless you, Marshal!" she gushed. "If you had not come to our rescue, I don't know what I would have done! My heavens we could have been trampled to death!" she declared hysterically.

He nodded curtly. "Well, I'm happy I could help out, ma'am," he told her politely before turning his full attention to the young lady before him.

Now, Ethan had known and appreciated many pretty gals in his time, but none was as beautiful as the refined lady standing before him. She was, even in her current weary and disheveled state, quite a beauty. She was tall and slender, but with ample curves in all the right places. She had a pert nose and pointed chin, and her full lips were the color of a ripened peach. Save for a dark beauty mark high on her right cheek, her skin was smooth and flawless, like fresh cream. Full black brows arched high over her almond-shaped eyes of dark blue and although her dark hair was presently pulled back into a severe bun, he could tell it was a long, thick mane that would, when unpinned, fall to her tiny waist in shimmering ebony waves.

"Will you be all right from here on, ma'am?" he kindly inquired.

Renee brushed a stray wisp of hair from her eyes and smoothed her skirt with a shaky hand. "Yes, I'll be fine. Thank you," she muttered softly, dropping her gaze.

Ethan knew the lady was just saying that to be polite. He knew she was a long way from feeling fine. He could see the sadness in her eyes and he had felt her trembling in his arms, but what could he do? He was a stranger to her. "Are you sure you won't be needin' any help in gettin' home?"

Having fully regained her equilibrium, Betsy spoke up. "That will not be necessary. I shall see to my niece, but thank you all the same, Marshal."

With as much courage as Renee could muster at the moment, she raised her eyes to his again and shyly said, "Yes, we can manage from here, Marshal . . ."

Ethan swiped his hat from his head and eagerly supplied, "Davis, ma'am. Marshal Davis."

She smiled softly. "Well, again, thank you for your assistance, Marshal Davis," she said, graciously extending her gloved hand to him.

Gently taking her hand in his, he shook it and before he could reply or ask her name in return, the aunt had stepped between them. "So, if you will excuse us, Marshal, we really must be going," she said in an abrupt manner that was clearly meant to dismiss him.

Tugging at the brim of his hat, he bade the ladies farewell and turned to go. *Aw. It just as well*, he thought. He had never chased after a widow's skirts before and he wasn't about to start now. Now matter how pretty she was.