



Leather and Lace

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Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. Psalm 1:1 KJV

Prologue

It's a perfect time to ride out of here. They won't be back for hours, maybe not 'til tomorrow with this storm coming. A good rain will hide my tracks . . . make it harder to trail me.

Casey O'Hare scanned the early morning horizon and noted the mounting storm clouds gather, roll, and spread across a blue-black sky. A brisk wind from the east swept up small sticks and leaves, tossed them lightly then plunged them to the ground. In the distance, lightning flashed a jagged path across the sky. No rumble of thunder, just a warning of what lay ahead.

The fresh, earthy smell of rain teased her nostrils. Heavy drops hammered onto the dry ground, faster and faster, as though daring her to escape this savage life. Riding in the open during a thunderstorm would be dangerous, but so was the day-to-day survival with a gang of outlaws.

She could do it alone. She could stop the wishing and dreaming and change her sordid life. I will not become like them. Somewhere in this wide country was a place called home--and she'd find it.

April, 1884 Utah Territory

Chapter 1

Fugitive Casey O'Hare had gone days without food, but never without her gun. She knew how to call an outlaw's bluff and when to listen. She recognized desperation in wanted men and could smell trouble by the turn of the wind. But her senses turned to sickening dread when she found herself looking into the steel barrel of a Winchester .44.

With an inward gasp, she studied the man towering over her. The stranger could be one more man on the run. He could be hungry for the reward. Or he could have orders to shoot her on sight. Glancing above the ominous man's head to the cold, starless Utah night, Casey tasted bitter gut-wrenching fear.

Was he alone?

"Evenin." She mustered the courage to smile. "You look right cold. Sit yourself by my fire."

"I might." He didn't budge. "Soon as I take care of a few things." His gloved finger rested a hair's breadth from the trigger. Too close for her to jump him. A fresh sprinkling of snow reflected from the firelight and sparkled like silver across the top of the rifle barrel. He stuck his snow-caked boot under her Winchester, lying across her lap, and lifted it into his hand.

"Have some coffee, mister. It'll warm you up. Mighty cold t'night. Take my mug. I've got another one." She searched his shadowed features for something that might call his identity to mind. Remote hideaways and grim corners produced nothing, and she'd always taken pride in remembering a face.

Keeping her hands in full view, she reached for the coffeepot teetering on the crackling fire and poured the strong brew. Tossing it in his face crossed her mind, but the rifle under her chin reined in the thought. "Here you are. Hope you aren't hungry. I'm fresh out of grub."

"No thanks."

Her gaze lifted above the rifle to the shadowy figure looming above the blaze. Flames danced high enough to touch on his silhouette, yet provided too little light to scrutinize his every detail. Beneath a snow-dusted, wide-brimmed hat, pulled down tightly over his eyes, glared a face as dismal as nature's call to the winter night. Ice clung to his amber-colored

mustache and beard. Casey recalled a man frozen to death who looked friendlier than this one.

“Mind if I get another mug from my saddlebag?”

“I’ll get it.” He reached for her saddlebag and pulled out her Colt and derringer. “No mug here.” He hunkered down onto a stack of drying wood and shifted the aim of his rifle from her face to her chest.”

“I must have left it somewhere.”

“Give me the knife in your boot. Nice and easy like.”

She obliged and let him think he had her—for now. While he gulped the hot coffee, she tugged at the worn army blanket around her neck.

She inched closer to the fire and watched the red-orange flames lick greedily at the dry wood. The popping and snapping broke the silence like an old man who’d settled down to ease his bones.

How do I get out of this one? Who is he?

“Good coffee.” His voice rose barely above the sputtering fire.

In the firelight, she saw his piercing eyes--deep turquoise, as hard as the stone and matching in color. She’d never seen eyes like his; she’d have remembered. Not once did his intense stare leave her face or show a trace of emotion. “State your business, mister.”

“Jenkins's men got caught up in the snow, but come daybreak they'll be back on your trail.”

“Did Jenkins send you after me? Are you after his reward?”

“Neither,” he said.

“The law?”

“No.”

“Have I wronged you?”

“No, ma’am, I’m passing on a word of warning. If I can read your trail in the dark and snow, they won't have any trouble come morning.”

“Guess I'd best be getting out of here.” She hesitated a moment more. “Look, mister, I need my rifle. Without it, you’re marking my grave.”

"I'm keeping it," he said. "Do you know the way down out of these hills?"

"I'll find it." She kicked at a loose log on the fire. "And I don't need your help."

"I'm not asking. I'm telling."

"Why? You got a fondness for Brown's Park and gettin' caught in a snow storm?"

"I have my reasons." He spat his words like venom.

"Let's get one thing straight," she said. "I don't intend to let Jenkins catch up with me, or let a judge sentence me to hang, or lace a man's pocket with bounty money. You, belong to one of them. And you'd better not be around when I find out who you are."

He chuckled. "I never say anything I don't mean, and I don't doubt you'd blow a hole right through me. I want Jenkins for myself, and by sticking with you, I'm bound to get him."

Must be a money-grubbing bounty hunter. She shivered. With a price on her head, a bounty hunter didn't hold any better credentials than an outlaw. She should have shot Jenkins when she had the chance. More so, she shouldn't have gotten mixed up with a gang of outlaws in the first place. Seemed like her life had gone from one bad decision to another—except this last one to leave it all behind.

"Do you have a name? I need to call you something," she said

"Morgan."

"I reckon you already know me."

"Casey O'Hare, Davis Jenkins's woman." Morgan wrapped his gloved fingers around the coffeepot.

"I'm not his woman, never was, never will be."

A hint of amusement flashed across his face and sparked an angry flame within her. He poured a second cup of coffee. "You're prettier than the stories and the wanted posters, but the fire's the same . . . must be the red hair."

She stared hard into the stranger's face. His mouth curved into a slight smile. Casey observed what she could see of his face in the shadows and searched for a defined mark of deceit, but she saw only a clever stranger. Could this Morgan be an angel sent to deliver her or the devil setting her up for a kill?

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