

 THE LUMBER BARON'S DAUGHTERS :: ONE

The
ELEMENT
of
LOVE

MARY
CONNELY

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a red dress with small white polka dots and a dark sash, stands in profile looking towards the left. She is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image. The background is a lush forest with a large tree trunk cross-section on the left side. The sun is setting behind a mountain range in the distance, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall scene is framed by the large, circular cross-section of a tree trunk, which has a rough, bark-like edge.



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This book is dedicated
to my four very smart daughters.
It was easy to believe in women engineers
in the 1800s because I know my girls
are capable of anything.
I'm proud of you,
Josie, Wendy, Shelly, and Katy.





CHAPTER

ONE

MAY 1872

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

THEY WERE RUNNING AWAY from the threat of misery, pain, and degradation. And running straight toward danger. Deadly danger.

Margaret Stiles Beaumont chose danger.

What's more, she chose it for her daughters and prayed without ceasing that she'd chosen right.

Even worse, the girls had to face that danger alone. Going back by herself was the only way to be sure the girls made their escape.

In silence, Margaret and her three daughters slipped into the night.

She waited until they were far enough from the house no wandering servant, absently looking out the window in the night, could see. Then she lagged behind her rushing daughters, her beloved, precious girls.

Clouds scurried across the sky. The dew-damp grass around the house ended in a dense forest. As soon as the forest swallowed them up, she stumbled and fell. Well, truth was, she stopped running, sat down, and cried out in pain. Softly. She most certainly didn't want Edgar to hear, though he drank enough that he usually slept heavily.

Laura whirled around and rushed back, Jillian a step behind. Michelle brought up the rear.

Laura, her sweet, compassionate child. The blue-eyed blonde who was a fine-boned, feminine version of her father, Liam Stiles. Laura, who knew how to blow things up.

Jillian, with her oddly mathematical mind and nearly photographic memory and the skills to use them wisely. She'd been educated to build trestles across vast gorges and railroad tracks into the heart of a mountain. A fiery green-eyed redhead, a throwback to her papa's Irish grandmother.

Michelle, the calm one who took charge of the sweet Laura and the fiery Jillian, and they mostly let her. Michelle, the mechanical engineer who saw all the details and made everything and everyone work together. And in her spare time, she worked with machines, mechanisms to help the girls' future projects excel. She already had two patents with plans for a dozen more, if she could just get the ideas in her head to become reality. Michelle was the oldest, the brunette with the shining blue eyes who looked like her mama the most.

"Mama what happened?" Laura dropped to her knees on Margaret's right.

"Let us help you up." Jillian rushed around to her left and took Margaret's hand, ready to lift.

"No." A sob broke from Margaret's throat. The tears

were easy to find. Her daughters were about to risk their lives because of Margaret's mistake.

Michelle stopped, hands on her hips, at her mother's feet. They were all dressed in breeches. They needed to move silently and safely through the dense forest.

"I've hurt my ankle." Margaret fought down the tears. To overdo it would make the girls suspicious. "It might be broken."

Her ankle was fine. But she wore a heavy stocking with a bit of padding under it to make the ankle appear swollen. Her girls were very smart, so Margaret tried to be smarter. She had to stay behind, and the girls might stay with her if she didn't handle this just right.

"We'll carry you." Laura slid her arm under Margaret's shoulders.

"No, I can't."

Michelle knelt at her feet and reached for her ankle.

Margaret used every bit of the emotional pain of her second marriage to let out a quiet, true cry of pain.

"It's swollen. It might be broken, Mama. We have to take you up to your room."

"Michelle, no. You have to go." Margaret didn't want them examining the padding on her ankle too closely.

"We'll wait until you're healed. And pick a new night to run." Michelle was planning, reasoning, just like always.

Margaret leaned forward and grasped Michelle's hand to stop her from pulling down her stocking. "You have to go. You know tomorrow night the men will come."

She'd asked them to go without her exactly once—right at the start of this. The protest had been so great she'd never suggested it again. But they'd never get away if Margaret

didn't stay. She had a plan that was going to give her girls time.

"It's out of the question, Mama," Michelle insisted. "We aren't leaving you with him."

Margaret squeezed Michelle's wrist until she left the ankle alone and paid attention out of pain.

"Go. You know we can't wait." Her voice broke, and she struggled to speak. "Go, please, I am begging you. I know we planned to escape together, but I'll never make it. If you go on alone, you have a chance. If. You. Go. Now! Tonight. You know I'm right. You know what happens if you're here tomorrow."

Michelle endured the pain and met Margaret's eyes dead-on. Margaret had to win this daughter over. If Michelle agreed to this, the others would follow.

The wind whipped up and made the branches dance and wave. They were in a dense woods in northern California. Liam Stiles had created a dynasty here. A massive treasure trove measured in cordwood. When the country ran west to find gold, he'd realized, after he'd dug a nice stack of nuggets himself, that wood was selling for as much money as gold, or near enough. And while gold was hard to come by, the whole of northern California was covered in trees.

He'd parlayed his gold into a stake to hire men, build a sawmill, and invest in vast acres of trees. And he'd become a titan. The house behind them in this remote woods was possibly the most beautiful home in all of California.

But her beloved Liam was dead, and the girls had to escape.

"No, Mama. No! We won't leave you." Jilly's voice had a note of panic. "He's going to be furious, and he'll take it out on you. He might—might k-kill you."

Jilly's voice broke, and she wasn't one for tears. But then Margaret knew Edgar had done something to Jilly, though she wouldn't admit it when Margaret had asked.

"Mama." Michelle caught hold of Margaret's hand. "Please, we'll make it. Let us carry you."

"Jilly, he will *not* kill me, and furthermore"—the strength of her voice drew all of them deep into her words—"your father's will makes it so he loses everything if he kills me."

"It does?" Jilly watched with such intensity that Margaret realized this must be at the root of everything. What had Edgar told her? Had he said to Jilly the same threatening things he'd said to Margaret?

"Yes." Margaret looked from one of her girls to the next. "Because of that, I've decided I'm not taking another second of his abuse. I've let him scare me, dominate me, but no more. If he comes at me with his fists, he'd better be ready to take a fireplace poker to the head. Today begins the day I fight back. I can do that if you girls are gone. He won't be able to hold harming you over my head."

She saw that they'd never realized before that he did this. A second look at Jilly gave her pause. Maybe one of her daughters suspected. But what point had there been in telling them before now?

"Tomorrow night those men come," Margaret said. "I wouldn't put it past Edgar to let them take you along when they go, even without wedding vows. You have to be far away before they arrive. Please, I am begging you. Go now. Fast. Find husbands to secure your inheritance. Find men strong enough to protect you from your stepfather. But good men. Don't make the same mistake I did. Find good men, then get back here and save me."

She paused, letting her words sink in. All her girls liked to analyze, think before they acted. She gave them time for that now. She looked hard into Jillian's eyes and watched her quietly reason it out, adding and lining it up. When it had been long enough, Margaret went on. "I raised you girls to be smart. Jillian, you especially have an analytical mind. You know you have to leave me. It's the only way."

A crack of thunder rumbled across the night sky. Margaret turned to look to the east and saw jagged lightning. It was still miles away, but it was coming. It made this a harder night to escape, but the sound of their passing would be hidden, any tracks would be covered.

"She's right," Jillian said the words as if they tore her in half. Her green eyes were drenched with tears. Very little made her middle daughter cry.

"Mama, no!" Laura sobbed as she launched herself into Margaret's arms. No great surprise in Laura's tears, she was prone to them.

"There's no time for this." Margaret tore Laura's arms loose from her neck. "Please. Go. Go. Go."

She touched the cheek of each of her hovering daughters. "Go with God. I need you to escape, find husbands, then get back here."

She looked to Michelle, the oldest, the leader. The orderly one. Michelle's skin was ashen as she swiped a tear from her eye. Then she gave her chin one hard jerk.

"She's right. Laura, Jilly, she's right. We can't be here tomorrow, and Mama will be safe." Michelle leaned close. "I've got a pistol tucked in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe in the bedroom we sleep in. Use it if you need to."

Margaret gasped in shock. She had sensed that her daugh-

ters might have kept things from her just as she'd kept things from them. Trying, each of them, to bear burdens alone to keep them off the shoulders of one another.

"You should have taken it with you," Margaret said.

"I didn't think it would survive the water." Michelle, the one who knew mechanical things, including guns, was probably right.

"We need to help you back to the house first." Michelle reached down.

"No, there's no time. I'll crawl or hobble or whatever it takes. You're not going back into that house."

That earned her a long moment of silence.

"Go with God, Mama." Jillian leaned down and kissed Margaret on her forehead, brushing back the dark curls.

Laura hugged her again, but she didn't cling. "I love you, Mama. I'll go snag a husband and be right back."

That wrung a smile from Margaret when she'd've said no smile was possible. Laura was the one who'd probably marry first. She was lighthearted and cheerful and a bit of a flirt, and as pretty as a picture. It all covered what was probably the finest, sharpest, most educated mind in the family.

"Now, sisters. Now. We go before we're found out." Michelle took charge again. She'd either find a husband she'd be able to take charge of, or if she did well, she'd pick a husband so smart and strong, she'd be glad to let him take charge of her.

The first kind of husband would be easier to find than the second because few people on this earth were as smart as any one of her girls.

"Go with God, my girls. I love you."

One by one, they nodded, then turned and ran into the woods.

Margaret listened. She had to make very sure the girls were long gone. The thunder cracked again, and lightning flashed. She sat on damp grass that was mostly gone only a few paces farther into the woods.

When she was sure, and with long prayers that she'd made the right decision, she hopped to her feet and, on two perfectly fine ankles, ran toward the house. As she reached the edge of the woods, despite the darkness and the threat of a storm, she paused to look at her house. Her and Liam's house.

They'd had highly trained architects and skilled workmen in to build it. But Liam and Margaret knew lumber, and both had ideas of how they wanted their home to be.

Some might have called it a castle. But those who knew the Stileses were aware they wanted to create something beautiful, and they'd succeeded.

Two full stories and a third story of fanciful turrets, peaks, and gables. A porch wrapped all the way around with sweeping steps up on three sides, and a roof over the open porch was supported by elaborately turned support posts. When the Victorian mansion was done, Liam had declared it the most beautiful house in the world.

Shaking away the sadness the house held for her because she'd failed Liam and her daughters so terribly, Margaret ran on.

She had a lot to do before dawn. A lot to do to prepare herself, including getting the padding off her ankle and taking off these footman clothes before Edgar met her announcement about the girls with rage and a heavy fist.