

“Crystal Caudill has hit a home run with this action-packed historical romance. If you like characters who come alive, a hero to make you swoon, and edge-of-your-seat intrigue, you’ll love this story. A fantastic debut from an author I’m looking forward to reading again!”

—Misty M. Beller, *USA Today* best-selling author of
the Brides of Laurent series

“*Counterfeit Love* is sure to delight fans of historical romantic suspense. As Caudill immerses readers in the world of counterfeiting rings and the early days of the Secret Service, she weaves a tale that is simultaneously well-researched and action-packed with delightfully flawed characters who will leave readers rooting for their redemption.”

—Amanda Cox, Christy Award-winning author of
The Edge of Belonging

“*Counterfeit Love* is a dazzling debut! Caudill weaves a tale of intrigue, danger, and romance. Theresa and Broderick will long live in my heart as deep characters who struggle with relinquishing control to God . . . the same struggle many of us have felt to our core. A story to cheer for and an author to watch!”

—Tara Johnson, author of *All Through the Night*

“A thrilling romance, a gallant Secret Service operative, and a courageous heroine—Crystal Caudill’s *Counterfeit Love* is an exceptional tale of tragic loss, healing, and redeeming love.”

—Grace Hitchcock, author of *My Dear Miss Dupré* and
Her Darling Mr. Day

“Caudill’s debut is a fast-paced tale full of brave and brilliant characters, much skullduggery, and conflict that will have you unable to tear yourself away.”

—Erica Vetsch, author of *The Debutante’s Code*

“With swoony romance, fascinating history, gripping plot twists, and strong characters, *Counterfeit Love* is one of the strongest debut novels I’ve ever read! Caudill’s writing voice is pitch-perfect and draws readers immediately into the heart of the story, holding them in thrall until the end. And did I mention the swoony romance? I couldn’t put it down, and I am already eagerly waiting for the next book!”

—Carrie Schmidt, blogger at ReadingIsMySuperPower.org

“Crystal Caudill creates a world of intrigue in *Counterfeit Love* that will thrust readers into a Secret Service investigation paired with a romance that will have you cheering for second chances.”

—Toni Shiloh, author of *An Unlikely Proposal*



COUNTERFEIT LOVE



CRYSTAL CAUDILL



Counterfeit Love

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CHAPTER I

December 31, 1883

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY WE can’t marry sooner. Cincinnati doesn’t require your grandfather’s consent.”

Not this topic again. Theresa sighed as her fiancé tilted the umbrella to shield her from falling sleet and helped her into the closed carriage. She’d spent weeks updating her seasons-old dress with a larger bustle and salvaged lace. Couldn’t they simply enjoy the New Year’s Eve Ball at Bellevue House and for one evening pretend all was right in the world?

“You know I want his blessing.” However, convincing her stubborn grandfather that Edward Greystone was a suitable match would take more time. Lots more.

“I don’t see why.” The carriage rocked as Edward squeezed into the cramped space. “The curmudgeon hardly gives you anything, much less his approval.”

“He’s a good man.” What other grandfather would sacrifice a beloved military career to raise a fourteen-year-old granddaughter? “And he’s all the family I have left. I need him as much as he needs me.”

“You’re better off without him.” Edward turned sideways to allow his long legs room to stretch and speared her with a pointed look. “What did you pawn this week to pay his debts?”

She waved aside the answer as the carriage rolled forward. He didn't need to know the elegant furniture from her parents' bedroom had succumbed to her desperate need. One less creditor on their list of many made the sentimental loss worth it. She owed Grandfather everything within her power to help.

"Can we just enjoy the evening, please? I want 1884 to be the year life takes a turn for the better."

"Then wed me tomorrow." He clasped her hands and rubbed his thumb over the emerald engagement ring she wore inside her glove. "My work at the shipping docks may not afford us a mansion yet, but I can provide for you and save you from Colonel Plane's downfall."

Edward's hopeful expression pricked her conscience. Grandfather would never approve of their marrying, no matter how long she tried to convince him. Edward's vocal southern sympathies earned him no respect from the former Union colonel. Whatever Edward did to cultivate favor, he'd always be the enemy. Would Grandfather ever find any man acceptable? Broderick Cosgrove had shared most of her grandfather's political views, but Grandfather had still objected to him. Of course, he'd been right about that match.

Unbidden, the image of her former fiancé's smiling face filled her mind, and disappointment washed over her anew. She'd waited six years for Broderick to return with an explanation and a desire for reconciliation. Her foolish heart should know the truth by now. He was never coming back.

Edward, though, stayed by her side, whatever the hardship. He loved her. To delay their marriage bordered lunacy. Besides, where her head went, her heart eventually followed.

She smoothed Edward's waxed mustache and offered a tentative smile. "I—"

The carriage halted, and voices rose.

"Stay here. I'll check with the driver." Edward reached for the door, but the handle jerked from his grip.

The smell of stale whiskey and cheap cigar filled the interior as a

dark-haired vagrant forced his way inside, lobbying the barrel of a gun at them.

Edward lunged in front of her, blocking her view. “Get out.”

“Not ’til I get my money.”

Theresa sucked in a breath. No one forgot that raspy voice once they heard it, and she’d heard it coming from behind Grandfather’s closed office door more than once. Vincent Drake, the money monger, looked as villainous as his reputation.

“Over my dead body.” Edward, the brave fool.

“I can arrange that.”

Her heart skittered. “Move, Edward. Mr. Drake is Grandfather’s creditor.”

He didn’t shift.

The gun cocked. “I’d hate for the bullet to go through you and kill her.”

Edward eased next to her, fists clenched.

“Now, Miss Plane, where’s my money?”

“If you’ll speak to my gran—”

“Already did. All I got were excuses. I’ll not be put off again. A nice filly like you will make what’s owed me in a few nights on George Street.”

Edward lashed out with a growl, and the gun blasted.

Theresa flinched, and her ears shrilled as acrid smoke fogged the air and filled her lungs. She blinked at Drake’s smug smile, then swung her gaze to Edward. *God, please, no.* He was pressed against the side of the carriage, face pale, jaw slack, hand over chest. With breath held and fingers trembling, she pried away his hand. Nothing. No blood. No hole. Not even a tear.

“Consider yourself lucky. Next one won’t miss.” Drake gestured to the narrow space between her and Edward.

Theresa swallowed. A bullet-sized circle next to Edward’s head gave view to the dark, deserted street outside. *Thank You, God.* For once, He’d seen fit to intervene. Unfortunately, with the miserable weather and New Year celebrations, everyone remained indoors. No one would come to their aid, even if the driver dared to call for help.

“How much does my grandfather owe you?”

“Two hundred twenty.”

That much? “Perhaps we can make another arrangement.”

“Unless it involves money in my hand tonight, I think not.” Drake knocked on the carriage’s ceiling and called out “George Street!” The conveyance lurched into motion.

“Even if I had it to give, the banks are closed.”

“Not my problem.”

At the edge of her vision, Edward’s hands flexed. Any more heroic attempts, and he might not survive. She needed a plan of her own. Her gaze dropped to the bump beneath her glove and sparked an idea. It wouldn’t settle the debt, but it should help her negotiate payment for the remainder.

“Will you take a valuable item instead?”

Edward shot her a look, but he needn’t worry about his engagement ring. Praise God Lydia insisted on a literal funeral for Theresa’s past with Broderick. The ritual of burying both his engagement ring and her dreams in the ground next to her parents seemed childish a year ago, but now her novelist friend’s dramatic ways proved a godsend.

“I knew I did right comin’ to you.” Drake’s smirk sent shivers down her back as his gaze swept the length of her body. “Where is it?”

“Hidden.” She took a shaky breath. “In Spring Grove Cemetery.”

The place where her dreams met their death over and over again.

Please, God, not this time.



Decent men dared not venture into Dirk’s Saloon, but Broderick Cosgrove wasn’t a decent man these days. The dimly lit bar held more than a dozen loyal patrons, both law-abiding and those who sought a more lucrative supplement to their income. Dirk’s lookout, more muscle than man, openly scrutinized Broderick from his worn cap to his

scuffed shoes. Assured Broderick wasn't a foolish copper, he returned to nursing his pint.

Good. His day had been long enough without fighting for the right to be here. Broderick leaned against the counter and nodded to Dirk. The portly bartender filled a mug with Broderick's usual and then held out his palm for payment. Dirk reserved tabs only for those he personally trusted, which was no one. After examining the twenty-cent coin for any sign of being spurious, Dirk relinquished the mug.

Lager sloshed over the rim as Broderick walked toward the scum of Cincinnati huddled around a three-legged table steadied by an empty keg. This sorry lot of men made for poor friends—they'd betray their grandmothers for the right price—but their wagers made for interesting nights. Based on the odd assortment of valuables in the center of the table, tonight's wins would require a trip to the pawnshop. If he weren't after more than trinkets, he'd go elsewhere. He approached the table as Fitz collected cards.

"Yer late, Smith." Fitz's Irish brogue accentuated his ire.

Known as Brody Smith to this crew, Broderick stole an empty chair and dragged it to the table. "I was busy with Cat." Or rather, busy avoiding her.

The madame was indefatigable in her quest to have him rent a girl along with the room Fitz had arranged for him. Broderick's residence at the brothel supported his cover as a counterfeit wholesaler and strengthened his relationship with Fitz. A necessary evil considering Fitz's position as gatekeeper to the counterfeiting ring the Secret Service sought to eradicate. Even so, other than to sleep, he avoided the place.

"Living with Cat has benefits, sure." Fitz grunted as he shuffled the cards. "Up for another beating, lads?"

Broderick sacrificed a coin to the blind bid as Fitz dealt the cards. Everyone peeked at their hands, and grumbles followed. Fitz stacked the deck better than anyone Broderick knew, and his tardiness hadn't bought him any favors. Five unpaired cards with a high of seven. The

lousy hand matched his mood. Worse cards replaced the three he discarded, and the Irish scoundrel smirked. Broderick bit back an exclamation. Calling out the cheat meant an encounter with the bark of iron.

Smoke hung thick as fog over the Ohio River, growing denser as the hours passed. A barmaid well past her prime kept their mugs filled and flaunted her wrinkled bosom barely contained by her low-cut dress. The volume and severity of insults grew with each round of drinks. These kinds of nights wore on Broderick, but perseverance would pay off. It had to.

The magnitude of this counterfeiting ring made any of his previous cases trifling in comparison. The Secret Service had removed \$265,000 in counterfeit tens from circulation over the last nine months alone. All of them came from the same imperfect issue, whose origins he'd traced to one man in Cincinnati.

Fitz held his cards close to the chest as the call to raise the bid shifted to Broderick. "If it's a drowning you're after, don't torment yourself with shallow water. Double or nothing."

The gatekeeper showed no mercy at the gaming table, nor did his lips ever loosen with information about his partners. Broderick could arrest the thirty-eight identified dealers and wholesalers, but that would only slow distribution. To end the counterfeiting ring's success, he had to infiltrate the very depths of the production firm.

Broderick pushed his small pile of money reserved for nights at the saloon to the table's center. "I'm all in."

Fitz tsk-tsked. "Never bet against me. You'll always lose." He laid down a royal flush.

From the bar, Dirk shouted, "You there! Grab a bucket and clean up the mess out front."

Fitz tensed beside Broderick and turned his gaze. The rumble of conversation returned after several beats, but Fitz ignored his winnings and focused on the stranger staring at them from the counter.

The announcement must have been a prearranged signal.

Masking his observation by downing the rest of his drink, Broderick

noted the new man's stubby build and dark, thinning hair. Gray and black stained the fabric of his clothes except for a clean area where he likely wore an apron. A printer or machinist? "Stubby" gave a curt nod and then passed the bartender a note. With nothing more, he disappeared into the night.

Fitz returned to playing cards until Dirk brought a tray of drinks a few minutes later. He grabbed the lone shot of whiskey, not quite managing the sleight of hand necessary to hide Stubby's note, then quaffed it. After a brief grimace, he stood.

"I'm out, lads. It's been a pleasure." He shoved his winnings into oversized coat pockets, then nodded to Broderick as a signal and left.

Broderick clenched his jaw as he accepted a new hand of cards. One man always left ahead of the other for their rendezvous, but that note could contain evidence—or worse, the revelation of his true profession. Convincing Fitz that he was a wholesaler in search of good counterfeits to sell to his extensive number of contacts had taken months of substantial purchases. If anyone in the counterfeiting ring discovered Broderick marked his initials on each banknote used for payment, they'd know the truth. Only officers marked money.

"Smith must have a terrible hand." Grubber, a usual at the gaming table, ribbed his neighbor. "His finger's tapping as fast as the needle on my wife's newfangled sewing machine."

The possibility of exposure ate at him worse than a swarm of mosquitoes. He needed to know what that note contained. "You're right. I'm out."

Broderick discarded the flush hand facedown and rose. As long as he followed at a distance, he shouldn't raise Fitz's suspicions. He exited through the back door into the night fit only for penguins. Cold drops of sleet slipped down his collar as he scanned the gaslit streets for Fitz, but he saw only a creaky carriage and an off-key drunkard slogging through the slush. Fitz hadn't traveled the direct route to their meeting place off George Street, but he couldn't have gone far.

Growing up in a family of detectives had its benefits. Broderick's father had required all his sons to become walking maps, memorizing

every alley and private path that cut through Cincinnati. Few options moved Fitz in the right direction while still providing cover. Broderick picked the most likely choice.

Within three minutes, he spotted Fitz ahead, folding and then shoving the note into his pocket. Lack of information always left Broderick with knots in his shoulders, doubly so now.

Fitz continued to their usual meeting spot without speaking or signaling to anyone. Broderick held back and checked the cylinder of his Colt single-action army revolver. Though costly, the reliable six-shooter never failed him. Whatever Fitz planned, Broderick would be ready.

He waited a few minutes to give the illusion of having followed directions and then ducked into the dark alley, where a pig snuffled through the refuse at the entrance and caused him to stumble. The feral beast grunted its displeasure before moving to another pile, where the dim gaslight failed to penetrate the darkness.

Light from a match flickered, and the orange tip of a cigarette burned to life. "Get in here afore someone sees you." Once Broderick reached him, Fitz removed a roll of bogus banknotes from his pocket. "I brang six hundred."

The note must not pertain to their meeting. Fitz wouldn't move forward with a deal if he suspected treachery. Broderick's muscles eased a little.

"Only six hundred? I wanted twelve." The Secret Service demanded he purchase only the minimum amount required to forge relations with their suspects, but a change to the deal didn't bode well. "Did you sell part of your boodle to my competitor?"

"I didn't. We ran out, but more's being printed. I've a better offer from the big gun."

So Broderick had finally earned the leader's attention. He exchanged his marked money for Fitz's false. "What's better than tens for three each?"

Fitz flipped through the bills as he spoke around his cigarette. "Exclusive rights to the first run o' fifties."

The words landed a punch with the strength of a floorer. How had the production firm created such a lucrative note without arousing rumors? His network of informants would trip over their feet to bring him news of such a large denomination. Fitz's invitation to exclusive rights provided a small measure of solace. Every wholesaler wanted to secure sole purchasing rights so they could control the counterfeiting market. Rarely was it offered.

"Any other buyers know about the fifties?"

"They don't. Yet." Fitz moved toward the street's light and then examined one of the marked banknotes.

Broderick gripped the heart-shaped rock he always carried. May God prevent Fitz's discovery of the initials hidden in Benjamin Franklin's kite. Fitz adjusted his bowler, exposing red curls, and brought the note closer to his nose. Broderick squeezed the rock until it no doubt left an impression on his palm. After a moment, Fitz scrubbed the note's surface with the tip of his nail. His face relaxed, and he shook his head.

"This weather be making me eyes cross."

Fitz tucked the payment into his pocket. When he removed his hand, a paper fell to the mud. Broderick noted where it landed but said nothing.

Fitz took a long drag on his cigarette and stared at Broderick with calculating measure. After a slow release, he flicked the cigarette to the ground. "The big gun's looking to be adding another partner. You pay for exclusive rights, and you're in."

If the leader sought to add another partner, the production firm must be running short on legitimate cash. No surprise considering most counterfeiters spent more than they saved. "Investing sight unseen is risky. Got a sample of the fifty?"

"I don't. The engraver be making a few adjustments afore they go to print, but the same engraver who done the tens be doing these. So what say you, Smith? I'll not be offering again."

"Will I meet the other partners? I don't trust anyone I haven't met."

"You won't. And you won't be seeing where the fifties are made either, so don't be asking. That's my deal, or I take it elsewhere."

Not the answer he wanted, but it wouldn't keep him from uncovering the other members' identities.

"If the notes are as good as you say, I'm in." He extended his hand, and they shook.

"Grand. We'll meet here a week hence, and I'll have a fifty on me."

Broderick waited until Fitz disappeared down a side alley before he retrieved the sippy, dropped paper, then shoved it into his pocket and followed. Fitz avoided direct paths. Anytime he crossed a street, he risked his neck to cut in front of a carriage midway down the square. At corners he pivoted at the last second—a tactic employed to expose anyone who shadowed him. Broderick recognized the trick and traveled down the next alley to continue the trail. After three squares of moving into the heart of downtown, Fitz hired a hack.

Unable to follow, Broderick ducked under the canopy of a closed mercantile. Though he should count this as a case-breaking evening, urgency pricked at the nape of his neck. Who was the big gun? What role did he play? Had Fitz been honest about not offering the fifties to other wholesalers and dealers? Should those fifties get into circulation and people found out, panic could lead to another market crash. Businesses already reported a steep decline in profits, and railroad expansion had slowed considerably over the last few years. Families were hurting. The fragile economy couldn't withstand another blow without teetering back into depression.

Lord, I know You care about these people. Help me. Don't continue to allow these men to hide in the dark.

At least tonight's deal gave hope to his stagnant case. He wrapped his hand around the wad of counterfeit money his partner Josiah Isaacs would document. Too bad he wouldn't have something more tangible to add to his report to Chief Brooks, like a name or location. Once the man discovered fifties were nearly ready for production, he'd lose any remaining patience with Broderick and Isaacs.

Broderick tucked the wad into a safer spot and then reached for his rock. Damp paper grazed his fingers. The message. Hope flared in his

chest as he peeled the edges apart. Water smeared ink across the page, leaving *midnight* the sole legible word.

A meeting, then, and likely tonight. He shifted into the full light of a gas lamp and squinted at the partial letters.

Sp—— G——

D-xter Maus———

Midnight.

Given the organization and capitalization of words, he held the details to a secret meeting between ring members. *Sp—— G——* could be part of a business or a street name. He'd need a directory to check business names, but Stubby likely referred to a street. Tracing the thin edges of his rock, he closed his eyes and examined his mental map of Cincinnati. No downtown place fit the partial words. Residential areas in the hills had expanded since he left six years ago, but none of the new ones he'd memorized contained anything close. Clifton Heights held no possibilities, but the outskirts of town provided a candidate.

Spring Grove.

The long street covered over five miles with any number of possible meeting places. He referenced the paper again. No street numbers or indication they'd smeared.

D-xter Maus——— could be the name of the leader. Headquarters might match the partial name to a record, but that required time and he would likely return empty-handed.

Or *D-xter Maus———* could be a something.

The thought stilled his hand. He'd learned to rely on God's prompting Spirit over the years. More than once, it had saved his life. Spring Grove Cemetery, home of the Dexter Mausoleum. He must

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be growing dull not to have immediately recalled the cathedral-like mausoleum near the Plane family plot. First kisses were hard to forget, especially when they occurred on the steps of that cryptic building.

The tip of the rock bit into his hand like the unwanted memory bit into his soul. He shoved both where they belonged—the rock in his pocket and the memory in the recesses of his mind.

Fitz worked seasonally at the cemetery, so the location made sense. He had access, and no one would question his presence if discovered. Broderick flicked open his pocket watch. Under an hour remained to travel through downtown, up the Mount Auburn incline, and past Clifton Heights.

It would be close, but he had to make it to Spring Grove Cemetery before he missed his chance.

CHAPTER 2

CONFOUND IT!

Theresa frowned as lantern light flickered over the locked iron gates and empty gatehouse of Spring Grove Cemetery. Of course, nothing worked in her favor. The unusual absence of Louis, the night watchman, must be another snub from God. Any other night the man would be hunkered inside, away from the foul weather, ready to offer her a cup of tea and listening ear.

She glanced to where Drake held Edward hostage and grit her teeth. “We’ll have to break in.”

Drake spat, the tar-colored glob striking her gown’s hem. “Ain’t no *we* to it. I ain’t going in there.”

“Surely you’re not afraid of spirits?”

He sneered, crinkling the scar running the length of his face. “You’ve got thirty minutes to bring me those valuables or your beau here will need an eternity box.”

Ice threaded through her veins. Spring Grove Cemetery covered over four hundred acres. It would take thirty minutes just to reach her family’s plot. “I’ll never make it. Give me an hour, please. I beg you.”

He narrowed his gaze and remained silent for far too long. “Forty-five. Not a second longer.”

Not sufficient, but what choice did she have? “I need Edward to lift me over the fence.”

“Fine, but try anything funny, and I’ll shoot.”

To her relief, Edward walked with her to the four-foot fence with no heroic attempts. His hands wrapped around her waist, and he lifted her with no more trouble than if she were a child. Granted, she wasn't much larger than a twelve-year-old boy, but the ease of his effort still startled.

When she reached the height of his mouth, his breath fanned against her neck. "Don't come back."

"But he'll—"

"Go." He eased her over and lowered her to the ground.

As soon as she found steady footing, she faced him. He couldn't seriously expect her to leave him. Before she spoke, the butt of Drake's gun cracked against Edward's skull. Edward staggered. A second blow followed, and he crumpled against the fence.

"Edward!" She dropped to her knees and sought his face in the shadows. Was he conscious? Or dying before her eyes?

"Don't get any heroic ideas. The next hit comes from a bullet." Drake kicked Edward over as though he were a sack of flour. Edward groaned.

No matter what Edward said, no honorable soldier left another behind. She touched his hand through the bars. "I'm coming back for you." Then she rose and ran, Drake's shouted reminder of her deadline overpowered by the thrumming in her ears. She'd reach her parents' gravesite in twenty minutes if she ran. Too bad corsets weren't designed for exertion. She needed to be smart, or she'd waste time in a faint.

Forcing control of her breathing, she slowed to a jog and skirted the edge of an iced pond. Sleet beat against headstones as she wove her way between the familiar rectangular mounds and plot boundaries. Mud pulled at her shoes, and biting cold numbed her feet and legs by the time the Dexter Mausoleum loomed ahead.

A few minutes beyond the Gothic cathedral, she reached her parents' graves. Slush slid down the simple marble of her mother's headstone like a tear. How her parents must grieve to know the trouble their only child faced. She kissed her fingertips and then pressed them

to the surface. “Pray for me.” If God listened to anyone’s prayers, it would be her saintly mother’s. Even from heaven, she’d be interceding.

Fireworks exploded in the distance, announcing the end of 1883. Already, 1884 proved no better.

Theresa shook her head and focused on her task. Mud seeped through her petticoats as she knelt by the shared brownstone obelisk where Grandmother Plane long awaited her husband’s arrival. At the base, Theresa slid aside a loose slab of limestone and peered into the shallow grave. The canning jar representing the death of her once cherished dreams still lay there. How ironic that the man who’d abandoned her would be the one to rescue her now. She pulled both gloves free, placed her emerald ring in a pocket of her skirt, then twisted the jar’s lid.

Memories long buried clawed at her as this ring’s weight landed in her palm. The proposal on a tender spring day. Broderick slipping the large opal onto her finger and then gathering her into his arms. The way he’d attributed each seed pearl encompassing the opal’s perimeter to a cherished memory. *To help you remember how much I love you whenever we’re apart.*

Emotion clogged her throat. His love had proved as fleeting as the rainbow that once gleamed off the opal’s surface. Despite Lydia’s insistence that burying the ring would bring healing, the pain in Theresa’s chest burned with the same intensity it had the day she’d discovered Broderick gone forever. With a shaky breath, she shoved the ring where Edward’s should have been, then tugged her gloves onto damp hands. All that mattered was the ring’s monetary value—not the man, not the memories, and certainly not the finality of letting the ring go. Edward needed her, and she would not fail him.

When she reached the path again, lantern light glowed from the side of the Dexter Mausoleum. Unexpected relief eased the tension in her body. Perhaps God hadn’t forgotten her after all. Louis could go for help while she stalled for time at the gate.

She darted across the footpath and into the light. “I’m glad I found you.”

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Louis did not return a greeting. Instead, flinty eyes narrowed over the bulbous nose of a short man. Tangled hair draped past his matted beard in greasy strings, and clothes unlikely to have ever seen wash water stretched over thick arms and a broad chest. His taller, cleaner companion brandished a weapon and revealed himself no more civilized.

Was the entire world naught but villains and scoundrels? She pivoted and fled.

Feet pounded behind her, growing louder with each stride. A rancid body crushed her into the ground, and mud filled her mouth and nose. Pinned, she thrashed, but the thug's grip tightened around her throat. Light flashed. Her heart pounded. Try as she might to breathe, air neither entered nor exited her lungs.

"Let herself up, Grimm."

The iron grip released, and she gasped. How many times must she stare into death's face before it claimed her?

The one who'd pinned her—Grimm, apparently—yanked her to her feet. "Scream, and I'll cut out your tongue."

If he believed a scream was the worst she could offer, he was about to get the surprise of his life. She slammed a knee into his groin. A curse exploded from his mouth, and he bent forward without releasing his hold. *If your first shot doesn't work, take the next, and don't hesitate.* For once, she didn't rebuke Broderick's voice in her head. Grimm's nose extended like a tree limb, big and hard to miss. Theresa rammed forward. The crack of breaking bone turned her stomach but granted sweet release. Grimm stumbled, hands trying to staunch the free flow of blood.

She retreated until a cold circle of metal pressed into the nape of her neck.

"Be still, lass."

Really? Heat flared throughout her body, and she clenched her hands into fists. This wasn't fair! Wasn't God supposed to protect His children? She took a steadying breath and raised her hands. Reacting in anger would get her killed, and Edward needed her.

“Better be learning to recognize your boss’s kin,” the Irishman said. “What Miss Plane done to you ain’t nothing to what he’ll be doing when he finds you touched her.”

The Irishman’s words jumbled in her head, jarring her senses. How had he known her name? Were they creditors too? No, they couldn’t be. He’d called her the boss’s kin, but they couldn’t be pressmen from Grandfather’s printshop either.

“Then what’s she doin’ here, Fitz?” Grimm glowered at her as he nursed his nose. “He send ya to spy on us?”

“I’m sure the lass has herself an explanation.” Fitz slid into view and gestured toward the tree’s shelter with his gun. “That so?”

Not an explanation they would believe. She hardly believed the truth herself. Theresa swiped mud from her face as she moved toward a lantern and ragged carpetbag. Given they were in a cemetery at midnight, the contents of the bag must be illegal. What had Grandfather gotten them into?

“Well, lass?”

If Grandfather were indeed their employer, that had to buy her some power. She straightened into the soldier he’d raised her to be. “I owe you no explanation, and you will let me go immediately.”

An amused smirk creased Fitz’s face. “Sorry, lass. I can’t be doing that.”

Theresa held his unwavering gaze. He stood too far away to strike her, but he held a gun. If she ran, would he really shoot? After all, he’d warned Grimm of punishment for touching her. How much more would this man suffer if she were shot?

The Irishman seemed to read her thoughts and cocked his gun. She could call his bluff—

A branch snapped. “There you are, Reese.”

Her head jerked toward the all-too-familiar voice, though her heart cried out at the impossibility of it. Only one person called her that. The ghost of her dreams emerged from the shadows. “Broderick?”

He’d grown a full, unruly beard and shaggy hair. An ill-fitted overcoat disguised the slender build that fooled many into thinking him

an easy opponent, but it didn't deceive her. Before her stood the man who'd stolen her heart, then pulverized it and abandoned her without a second thought. Punching his handsome face would be so satisfying.

But she wouldn't deny his help. The skunk was her only ally in this situation, and he was the type of man everyone wanted at their side during a fight. Likely, Broderick's sharp appraisal took in every detail and his keen mind formed a brilliant plan of escape.

Fitz shifted next to her. "What do you be doing here, Smith?"

Theresa stiffened. Smith? Broderick must still be a detective, working undercover, and her little slip of his name might cost them their freedom.

"Theresa asked me to escort her to her parents' graves."

Plausible, and if the Irishman knew her family at all, believable.

"Then why weren't you together, Miss Plane?"

He *would* ask her directly. She ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips. "I . . . uh . . ." Her gaze landed on the trees behind him. "I needed to use the necessary."

"In a cemetery?"

Heat flamed her face, and she dropped her gaze. "It was an emergency."

Heaven help her. If she didn't die of a bullet wound, she'd die of mortification. Fitz stood in prolonged silence as if judging the truth of her words. A hand slipped around her elbow, and she dared a peek. Broderick's spring-green eyes looked down on her, concern etching the crinkle of his brow. If he was so worried about her, he should have returned sooner.

When the Irishman bent to retrieve the carpetbag, Theresa crushed the toe of Broderick's shoe with her heel. He jerked, but uttered no sound.

"Shove off, Grimm." Fitz straightened. "We're done."

"What about them?"

"I'll be taking 'em to the boss."

"No, you will not." The words escaped before she'd given them consideration, but it didn't matter. If Grandfather was their boss, she'd see

him on her terms. And if their boss was someone else? This mire was treacherous enough. She would go no deeper. As it was, Edward's life depended on her getting back to the gatehouse without further delay.

"Come again?" That infernal weapon reappeared.

If Fitz wanted to play that game, she'd call his bluff. "I said, no."



Had Theresa lost all sense? Broderick pulled her behind him, but the stubborn woman wrenched free, then planted fists on her hips and stared Fitz down as if he held a flower, not a Remington revolver.

If she wouldn't allow him to defend her, he could at least divert attention. "What she means to say is, Do you want to be the one who delivers your boss's kin injured and bleeding?"

Fitz squinted at Broderick, his lips flattening. "Is that so?"

Broderick tensed as he realized his slip. The mention of Theresa's connection to the boss occurred before he'd abandoned his hiding spot to rescue her, not after.

Ignoring the rising tension, Theresa continued to assert her position. "Yes. Grandfather's protective of me, and I doubt he'll accept any excuse you offer. In fact, I'll ensure he doesn't. That is"—she folded her arms—"unless we're allowed to leave of our own free will."

The silence stretched as Fitz's gaze shifted between Broderick and Theresa.

She moaned, swaying and lifting a hand to her head. "I'm starting to see double, and the world is spinning. I think I might have a concussion." The corner of her mouth curled.

It was a good try, but her best artifice wouldn't deflect Fitz's suspicion. They were in trouble.

Grimm burst into the lantern light. "Guard comin'."

Fitz cursed, breaking the silent standoff. "Get herself out of here, Smith, and be sure she don't get caught." He holstered his gun and disappeared into the darkness with the carpetbag probably full of evidence. Grimm escaped in the opposite direction.

Broderick faced Theresa. Clumps of dark hair fell from her once-pinned style, and mud stood in stark contrast to her pale face. Her wrestling match with Grimm rendered her cloak and dress beyond repair. This wasn't the safe, quiet life he'd envisioned for her, but the how and why of her presence would have to wait. Seeing to her immediate safety took precedence.

"Let's go." He tugged her hand, but she remained rooted to the spot.

"The only place I'm going is with that guard."

The woman still had a habit of digging in her heels at the wrong times. "I'm not leaving you behind."

"Not leave—" Her eyes flashed, and her arm drew back.

Before the fist could crash into his face, he deflected it and pinned her against him. The fit of her small frame against his body stirred memories best left forgotten. She wasn't his anymore, and she could never be again. Her breath warmed his face, and he looked down. He should release her, but he didn't dare. "Most women thank their rescuers, not swing a right hook."

"Most men don't leave the woman they supposedly love to fight for her life alone."

His breath whooshed. Love hadn't been the problem. His brother's betrayal had. "It's complicated."

Gravel crunched behind them, and another lantern added to the light from the one left behind. "You're under arrest for trespassing."

There went an escape without discovery. Broderick released Theresa.

Her whole body relaxed. "Louis. Praise God!"

Broderick faced the elderly man in a soaked overcoat and drooping hat and winced at his hobbled step. Louis should be in bed nursing his rheumatism, not policing a cemetery.

"Well, this is something I never thought to see again." Louis shook his head in disappointment. "What will your fiancé think, Miss Theresa?"

Fiancé? Broderick's gaze fell to her gloved left hand where an

unnatural bump bulged from her ring finger. He mentally kicked himself. What did he expect? That she'd live as a spinster forever?

"It's not what it looks like." Theresa's face reddened in the lantern light. "Louis, please, I'm in trouble. I need your help."

Louis hobbled toward Broderick. "A night in the cemetery jail ought to teach you to leave Miss Theresa be."

"As much as he deserves it, Broderick's not the issue. Grandfather's"—she glanced at Broderick—"obligations forced me here, and I need to return to the gate with all haste."

"What obligations would force you here at this hour?" Louis peered at Broderick as if trying to sort out the truth.

"The kind where lives are at stake."

The trauma of her encounter with Fitz must have caught up with her. "You're safe, Reese. The danger's passed."

"No, it hasn't." Fear and determination mingled in her eyes before she stepped past him toward Louis. "Please, give me the gate keys and see that Broderick leaves unseen. I don't have time to explain, and you know I wouldn't ask if it weren't urgent."

Louis extended a ring of keys, and Broderick covered her hand as she grabbed them. "Whatever trouble you're in, we can figure it out together."

Her anxious gaze met his. "Not this time. You need to leave and never return." She took the keys and ran.

"Meet me at our spot tomorrow. Usual time!" She gave no acknowledgment of his raised voice. He turned to the elderly man. "I'm sorry, Louis. I can't let her go by herself, and you'll never keep up."

Louis grunted his acquiescence as Broderick jogged after Theresa.

The exertion did little to ease the growing tension in his body. Was she warning him off the case? Surely not. The determination to ferret out justice once pulsed through her veins as strongly as his. How often had she pushed or challenged him on cases deemed hopeless by his father's detective agency? Yet Fitz's words made her connection to the counterfeiting ring undeniable.

Any involvement must be the result of her grandfather's scheming.

Colonel Plane might be a war hero, but the honor transformed him into a self-interested curmudgeon who didn't deserve to be Theresa's guardian. Not that anyone could convince her. The woman was loyal to a fault, and Colonel Plane twisted that loyalty for his benefit. Whether Theresa wanted it or not, she needed Broderick's help.

Halfway to the gate, the unmistakable sound of gunfire echoed in the distance.

"No!" Theresa hiked her skirts and charged forward.

Broderick closed the distance between them. Whatever she'd hoped to prevent, it was too late now. She reached the gate ahead of him, then unlocked it before tossing aside the keys. A man with dark hair and a scarred face waited on the other side. Broderick ducked into the line of bushes and crouch-walked closer.

"I thought that might hurry you," the man rasped. "Where is it?"

"Edward!" Theresa dropped to her knees next to Goliath's blond cousin. Though hunched with his head in his hands, he sat nearly as tall as Theresa stood and twice as wide. A carriage with a clearly distraught driver waited nearby.

"He ain't shot, but that can change."

Theresa turned a murderous glare on the speaker and yanked off a glove. She slid a ring from her finger and threw it at him. "It won't cover the full amount, but I have buyers waiting."

Buyers? Broderick's throat tightened. Was she selling counterfeits?

"I'll make deliveries this week and provide the remainder plus ten percent interest to you by the end of the week."

God, please don't let it be true.

"Fine, but no more chances." The brute retrieved the jewelry from the ground and shoved it into a pocket. "I will get what's owed me, one way or another." Dragging the driver from his carriage perch, the evil man climbed up and drove off.

Theresa waved the driver toward town. "Go to the police, but tell them only that your carriage was stolen." After he left, Theresa turned to Edward. "Come on. We need to go."

“We need to report this.” He wobbled as he struggled to stand, and Theresa’s attempt to bolster him resembled a mouse supporting a lion.

Edward grumbled when she ignored him, but whatever injury he’d incurred left him unable to withstand Theresa’s stubborn will. As they hobbled away, Broderick scrubbed a hand over his face. Had the woman he loved become one of the criminals he hunted?