

“Crystal Caudill shines in this new story of hope and patient love, all delivered with a hefty side of thrill. Settle in with your coffee or tea and get ready to fall in love with a hero who will top the list of your bookish heroes and a heroine whose tenacity will inspire and intrigue you. If you love a good historical romance served up with adventure, this should be moved to the top of your TBR pile!”

JAIME JO WRIGHT, author of *The Souls of Lost Lake* and
Christy Award–winning *The House on Foster Hill*

“Be prepared—this book grips your heart and won’t let go. Caudill pens a captivating story of redemption and second chances in the midst of a fast-paced plot rife with danger. *Counterfeit Hope* is the kind of book that stays with you long after the final page and leaves you with a satisfied sigh and an enduring sense of hope.”

STEPHENIA H. MCGEE, award-winning author of
The Secrets of Emberwild

“Crystal Caudill once again dazzles with a thrilling tale of intrigue, danger, and redemption. Andrew and Lu’s story is a page-turning adventure flooded with hope and the God who rescues the broken.”

TARA JOHNSON, author of *Engraved on the Heart*, *Where Dandelions Bloom*, and *All Through the Night*

“A stirring novel of second chances and redemptive choices set amid the pulse-pounding backdrop of counterfeiter in Gilded Age America. *Counterfeit Hope* shines light on little known history brought to vivid life through the finely tuned characters of Andrew and Lu. A delightful blend of danger and romance!”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of
The Rose and the Thistle

“With a unique premise and astonishing twists, Crystal Caudill’s *Counterfeit Hope* is an impressive sequel expertly penned that will leave readers eager for the next book from this fresh voice!”

GRACE HITCHCOCK, award-winning author of *My Dear Miss Dupré*, *Her Darling Mr. Day*, and *His Delightful Lady Delia*

“Crystal Caudill’s debut novel captivated me from word one, and her follow-up offering did exactly the same. Even if all it offered was a swoony romance and riveting historical suspense, that would be enough to keep readers glued to the pages. And yet it’s also full of emotional depth, complicated family dynamics, and tender redemption. *Counterfeit Hope* does more than entertain—it wraps the reader in grace. A fantastic sophomore novel from a fresh voice in the genre!”

CARRIE SCHMIDT, blogger at ReadingIsMySuperPower.org and author of *Getting Past the Publishing Gatekeepers*

“Caudill has penned a riveting sophomore novel in *Counterfeit Hope*. From the first page, the story draws you in with characters who engage all your emotions and a fast-paced plot that carries the story just right. Another novel for the keeper shelf!”

MISTY M. BELLER, *USA Today* best-selling author of the Call of the Rockies series

“A round of applause for Crystal Caudill and the fabulous story she penned. The rich, well-developed characters, the plot twists, and Crystal’s unique voice made it a very enjoyable read and kept me on the edge of my seat just waiting to see what would happen from the beginning. I would highly recommend it for any lover of historical fiction.”

LIZ TOLSMA, best-selling author of *What I Would Tell You* and *A Picture of Hope*

“A gripping story of pain, forgiveness and hope. I had a hard time putting this book down! *Counterfeit Hope* is reminiscent of Francine Rivers’s *Redeeming Love*, and I appreciate the Crystal Caudill’s gentle handling of such sensitive topics. I was thoroughly moved throughout the tale and highly recommend this story and series!”

ANGELA K. COUCH, author of *A Rose for the Resistance* and *Where Wild Roses Bloom*

COUNTERFEIT
HOPE



HIDDEN HEARTS OF THE GILDED AGE

Counterfeit Love

Counterfeit Hope

Counterfeit Faith



COUNTERFEIT HOPE



CRYSTAL CAUDILL



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Counterfeit Hope

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To God: May it all be for Your glory.

To Malaki:

You're my baby. You're my boy.

You're my pride, and you're my joy.

*No matter what hardship this life brings, may you always know
the love and hope of Christ in your life.*

I love you.

“For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.”

ROMANS 8:24-25

LETTER TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

The story you are about to read contains a heroine who is created by God but broken by the world. Lu Thorne is a former prostitute, a thief, a person who is suffering abuse, and a widowed mother who is stuck in a criminal family that won't let her and her son leave. You will see what her life is like and the struggles she faces, including some instances of abuse. I tried to handle it with a light touch, but for those who are triggered by such events, I want you to have the warning. Skip over those parts if necessary, but I urge you to continue reading. Lu's story is one God led me to write and one I have bathed in prayer. She does find hope and redemption, but like most of us, it isn't an easy road. Thankfully, God doesn't leave us to walk this journey alone.

I like to assume my readers are personally familiar with who Jesus is and the hope He provides, but I know that's not always true. If you want to learn more about who Jesus is and how much He loves YOU—yes, you—then I invite you to visit crystalcaudill.com/hope, or email me at crystal@crystalcaudill.com. Romance stories are good, but the greatest romance ever told was God's love story for you.

With prayers and sisterly love,
Crystal Caudill

CHAPTER I

Landkreis, Indiana
August 18, 1884

THIS WAS THE LAST TIME. After tonight, she and Oscar would be free from the den of thieves they called family.

Bill's bar mates hooted and hollered as Lu Thorne sidled up to the drunkard and leaned in to kiss his bearded cheek. She filched his coin purse quicker than he could turn his head to catch her lips and left him with a mouthful of hair instead. After months of lightening his pockets, the man ought to know better than to allow her within arm's reach. Still, Bill never failed to be distracted by the low cut of her bodice, her bare arms, or her ankle-baring skirts. Beauty had long been her greatest weapon and biggest curse.

"One of these days I'm gonna get that kiss, Lu."

She tucked the purse into a hidden pocket and stepped away. "Ain't today, sugar."

"Aw, let me have another go. I'll be quicker this time."

"Can't. Ma Frances's rules. Gotta give the others their chance."

"But who'll reward me for my hard work?" Bill's bottom lip pouted as his hands reached out to caress the curve of her waist.

How about his faithful wife or the nine kids he left near starving at home?

She smiled instead of toppling his chair. A lifetime of dealing with men like him told her he'd not learn a lesson from the act. "How about a drink?"

"I suppose that'll do"—his gaze swept the full length of her—"unless you want to offer me something better."

Not even if he was breathing his last. "Horace"—she turned to the bartender—"pour him a shot from the bottom right." The cheap stuff ought to sour Bill's stomach and send him packing. "It'll be on the house."

Horace paused his reach for the bottle. "I don't give free drinks."

Oh, he was a bold one tonight. He should know better than anyone that opposing any member of the Thorne gang equaled trouble. One word to either of her brothers-in-law and he'd regret that boldness for the rest of his life. Though given the ill temper Clint was in, Horace wouldn't even last the night.

"That so?" She leaned an elbow on the counter and stared him down.

Horace's jaw worked side to side for a moment before he grabbed the bottle and thumped it on the counter.

"Thank you."

He ignored her as he filled a glass halfway.

Well did she understand the bitterness of forced compliance, but Horace only had to suffer it on occasion. She'd spent an entire lifetime under the thumb of one master or another. Tonight was no different.

But tomorrow will be.

Lu tempered her smile as Bill gulped his free drink. Membership in the Thorne gang may not have been a choice for her, but that didn't mean she had to stay. Not now that US Marshal Walt Kinder offered an escape from the matriarch's claws. After Walt smuggled her and her five-year-old son to Newburgh, they'd give him the slip and disappear forever. It was a risk to double-cross the US Marshal, but testifying against the Thorne family equaled a surefire death sentence. Their only safe future lay in a town where nobody knew them. A place where she could become one of those new creatures Pastor Newcomb talked about and give Oscar the life she'd never had. An honorable one.

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

She patted Bill's shoulder and continued her routine of visiting the saloon's patrons. Despite the number of passers-through, the picking was dismal. The two coin purses and spattering of coins would never be enough to satisfy Ma Frances's demand for stolen goods, provide for her and Oscar's future, and support Bill's and Widow Zachary's families. In truth, Bill's family could survive without Lu's help. They had for years before her arrival. But it was her fault that Widow Zachary's husband died. Lu couldn't leave the woman and her daughter without the means to flee Landkreis and the constant harassment of the Thornes. The former sheriff's widow had no means to get the funds herself. Lu could steal whatever she and Oscar needed while on the run. One day she'd be able to abandon this life of theft completely, but for now it would have to suffice that she and Oscar were leaving Landkreis and Widow Zachary would have the means to do so too. If Lu was going to help the Zacharys, and herself, she needed a fresh mark.

She examined the rows of stained tables sprinkled with patrons in various states of stupor, and a thundercloud of truth washed away what remained of her hope for a bountiful evening. Every man here already had their pockets lightened tonight. So much for this being her last time picking pockets.

She pivoted toward the exit as the door swung open.

Two weary travelers entered and claimed standing spots at the bar's end. Lu blinked. Pastor Newcomb spoke of God's providence, but even she knew better than to think that extended to people like her. Especially given the fact that she was responsible for the church's fiery demise. Yet, was it possible God had provided for her in this moment? She scoffed. That preacher's nonsense was getting to her. God wouldn't provide someone to steal from. This was a coincidence.

She adjusted her dress to accentuate all the right parts while she evaluated the two men. The shorter one with dark hair, mutton chops, and mustache looked to be a dour, unfriendly sort. His ratty suit with more patches than original material proved him miserly. Likely what little he did carry would be hidden in his socks.

He set a leather doctor's bag on the ground and addressed Horace. "Coffee."

Did the man mistake where he was? The poor doc wouldn't last long in town, nor was he likely to be enticed by her.

Though coated in a good layer of dust, the taller dandy held more promise. Here was a man concerned about the opinion of others. Dark blond hair curled despite the obvious use of pomade, giving his face a boyish appeal that not even his sideburns could age. His tailored sack suit with checkered material, long silver fob, and silk broadcloth vest screamed wealth unheard of in Landkreis. When he leaned against the wall to cross his ankles and fold his arms in a lackadaisical pose, the now-visible outline of a hefty wallet in his coat pocket affirmed she and Oscar could start life out right with what he carried. Wealth alone didn't make a good mark, but by the way he considered each serving girl, he was a lady's man on the prowl. When Pretty Boy's eyes landed on her, a full-toothed smile declared his approval. He'd found his mark, and she'd found hers.

Lu sauntered over, placing a hand on her hip and pulling her shoulders back. If he wanted a show, she knew how to give it. His gaze dipped to the low cut of her bodice then snapped to her face. Red crept up his neck and his throat bobbed. Oh, he was greener than she expected. Far too easy to distract. Such a pity. She would've enjoyed one last challenge to her skill.

"Y'all new in town?" She thickened her natural accent as she gave both men a saucy grin.

Doc looked away, but Pretty Boy twisted toward her. "Fresh off the horse and looking for a place to stay."

"Sorry, sugar. I heard the hotel is full up, but I bet I could persuade Horace to open a room above stairs"—she leaned in—"for the right price, of course."

This was usually the part where her mark's face lit up and he took the liberty to touch her, but Pretty Boy remained motionless and focused on her face. Had she misjudged what type of entertainment he sought?

“We’re not staying here.”

The objection came from behind, so she shifted to give Doc the most advantageous view. Even misers succumbed to her on occasion. “Are you sure? I could get you a great deal.”

Doc stared at the rear wall like she was too vile to even lay eyes upon. “We’re not interested. Go find someone else to pawn your goods to.”

Heat roiled through her and raised her hackles. She’d be more than happy to never “pawn her goods” again, but her son deserved a better future.

“Don’t pay him any mind,” Pretty Boy smoothed over. “We’re looking for long-term boarding.”

She turned her back on Doc, purposely butting him with her bustle, and traced a finger up Pretty Boy’s vest. All she needed was for him to want her touch long enough to snag his wallet. “I know Ma Frances has a couple of empty rooms she’d be willing to rent. I can make introductions.”

A confident smile returned to his face. “And how is that possible if we’ve never been properly introduced?”

Finally, she was getting somewhere. “My friends call me Lu.”

“And your enemies?”

Lu ignored Doc’s comment and leaned into Pretty Boy until he likely couldn’t tell the difference between the press of her body and the dig of the counter holding his coat slightly open. “And what do your friends call you, besides handsome?”

His throat bobbed again, and he seemed frozen against response to her unabashed attention. The poor man was too easy to manipulate. She rubbed one hand along his chest, while the other stole into his coat pocket. Her fingers brushed the soft leather just as the billy noodle decided to go church-boy on her. He pushed her off him, and she stepped back with a stumble, hiding the wallet in her largest skirt pocket.

“That’s enough.” Mortification painted his face. “I’m not that kind of man.”

“My mistake. I’ll let you be, then.” She had what she needed.

Doc blocked her retreat. “Not before you return Joe’s wallet.”

“Excuse me?” He had to be guessing. No one had ever caught her before.

Pretty Boy—Joe—patted his pockets and then more frantically searched for the missing item. “It’s not here.”

“Of course it’s not.” Doc widened his stance and tucked his chin like a charging bull. “You have three seconds to return it, or we’ll hand you over to the sheriff.”

“Is that all? By all means, Doc.” She lifted her wrists as if the man might carry his own fetters and smiled. “But you have to take me yourself.”

Momentary surprise dropped into visible mental calculations.

Whatever decision he arrived at, she’d be fine. Ever since her brother-in-law Clint shot Sheriff Zachary and took over his position, the only crimes that resulted in punishment in this town were crimes against the Thorne family. The Stendal police were too scared to act. If Doc did summon the sheriff, Clint might delay her for a little while by playing his own game of “kiss the girl,” but she’d tolerate it knowing it was the last time.

After several long moments, Doc spoke. “Then I propose a trade. My friend’s wallet for your stolen goods.” He pulled out not one, but two of her filched coin purses.

Impossible. She’d felt nothing, not even the lightening of her skirts. It had to be a trick. No one out-pickpocketed her. He must carry two with him. After all, she hadn’t really looked at the bags she’d stolen. She discreetly patted the spot where the purses should’ve been, but the material gave with no resistance.

She tensed. He’d actually done it. “How?”

“Distraction is an art of the trade, and you did that well enough for the both of us.” Arrogance curled his lips.

Doctor, my foot. Even confidence man was too polite a term. Once the Thorne family discovered they had competition in town, they’d tear him to bits. The right thing to do would be to warn him, but he

was a smart man, by all appearances. He'd figure it out. The risk of losing her tomorrow wasn't worth engaging in war today.

She pulled the wallet from her pocket and held it aloft while extending her other hand. "On the count of three."

Doc nodded.

"One. Two. Three." The purses dropped into her hand. "I hope I never see your sorry faces again."

Doc passed the wallet to his friend. "The feeling is mutual."

For dramatic effect, she huffed and then stomped out the door. Once it slammed on her back, she darted to the tree line. Sweet victory! Doc might have bested her initially, but he didn't know he worked against "Lightning Lu." She pulled a thick stack of banknotes from her pocket. Pretty Boy's stash would allow her to return all of Bill's money to his wife, provide for Widow Zachary, satisfy Ma Frances's demands, *and* leave herself a tidy sum for starting a new life with Oscar. Now to tie up a few loose ends and then head home.

Tomorrow and freedom were almost here.



Andrew Darlington stared at the closed saloon door, still envisioning the fierce blue-gray eyes framed by waves of black hair. That woman was dangerous and quite possibly the best pickpocket he'd ever seen work solo. She'd wielded the gift of beauty God gave her like a weapon and skewered Josiah alive. Had Andrew not once shared her skill of picking pockets, he would've mistaken her flash of movement as an attempt to catch her fall.

"Lu stole my money!" Josiah Isaacs tossed his long leather wallet onto the counter.

Andrew picked it up and lifted the flap. Not a single bill remained. Impressive. It required considerable dexterity and skill to remove the banknotes without notice while being watched. He squelched his traitorous smile. The skill of a thief, no matter how profound, should not earn his admiration. He was a man of the law, albeit undercover.

Thieves, no matter their sex or physical appeal, deserved to go to jail, and it was his duty to send them there.

“Guess you’re paying, *Doc*.” Josiah dropped onto the barstool with a grunt. “That’s all I brought with me for expenses.”

“I told you to keep some reserved in your socks.”

The bartender poured two mugs of coffee as he eyed the empty wallet. “Looks like you met the welcomin’ committee. Lu has a special fondness for visitors.”

Josiah leaned forward. “Any idea where I can find her and retrieve my money?”

If he’d done as Andrew suggested in the first place, the man wouldn’t be needing to avoid a reprimand from their district superior. The Secret Service audited expenses down to the penny. Captain Abbott was a fair man, but Josiah’s allowance of a woman to turn his head to fluff would not go well.

“Everyone in town knows where to find Lu and her rotten family.” The bartender plunked the coffeepot on the corner stove. “Best gallop out of town and forget about that money.”

“Wish we could, but we’re here to do business with Eli and Walt Kinder. We plan on staying a while.” Months, maybe even a year, if Andrew guessed correctly.

Normal counterfeiting cases usually took at least that amount of time, and this was no normal case. Already the surrounding counties had suffered for months under the tyranny of cutthroat bandits and the cowardice of local authorities who refused to take action.

When US Marshal Walt Kinder infiltrated the Landkreis community with the help of his brother, Eli, they had found that the rumors paled in comparison to the true magnitude of the situation. Illegal whiskey manufacturing, coordinated bank and train robberies, and thousands of dollars of counterfeit coins all stemmed from one network of criminals. Given the extensiveness of the counterfeiting, the US Marshals had asked the Secret Service to partner with them—a rare concession given the decades-old tensions between the agencies. Even at this point in the case, and even with Walt’s informant willing

to testify, it would take much more time to discover all those involved and gather the needed evidence.

“The Kinders are good folk. Fair prices and friendly to boot. I’m Horace.”

Andrew extended his hand. “You can call me Doc Andrew.”

“Joe.”

Horace shook their hands before casting a glance toward the other patrons in the room. Satisfied, he leaned closer. “Word of warning, don’t upset anyone in the Thorne family, and that goes for Lu too.”

A strangling dread tightened Andrew’s throat. “Did you say Thorne?”

“Yeah. The whole family’s a bunch of ruffians. Showed up last November, robbed the Stendal hotel, and killed the sheriff. After buryin’ one of their own, they made Landkreis home. Lu’s the best of ’em. She only steals from you. The rest’ll cut your throat or shoot ya if you cross hairs with ’em.” Horace shook his head, lines creasing from the corner of his mouth. “My boy stood up to ’em once and was fair near beat to death with a set of lead knuckles. Ain’t never been the same since.”

Thorne was a common enough name. The likelihood of it being the same Thornes bordered impossible. “Did you report the attack?”

“Won’t do no good round here. The sheriff’s Lu’s brother-in-law.”

Not surprising considering Lu’s response to his earlier threat. “Good to know. We need long-term boarding. What do you know about Ma Frances’s place?”

“Didn’t you listen to a word I said? You don’t want nothin’ to do with those Thornes. You’d be better off travelin’ back and forth from Stendal.”

“What’s the name of the other family members?” Alarm clawed at Andrew’s composure as Horace unfolded the nightmare.

“Cyrus is the oldest, similar build and appearance to yourself, ’cept mangier. Clint’s the sheriff now that he killed the last one. He’s a stout fellow with strength enough to wrestle a bull and win. Priscill’s his wife, but you ain’t likely to see her much. You met Lu. She’s got a son—Oscar, I think. Frances Thorne looks like anyone’s favorite

grandma, but don't believe it. Oh, and watch doin' business at Grossman's. He ain't family but might as well be."

No mention of Irvine or Richard Thorne, but there was no mistaking it. It was the same family. *His* family, or former family anyway. Andrew gripped the mug. He couldn't tip his hand to Horace. Or to Josiah. After the corrupt dealings of operatives during the previous couple of decades, the Secret Service had strict guidelines about who they hired. Middle-class men with a spotless record. Discovering Andrew's bit of criminal history would get him fired.

"Thanks, that's been helpful. Hey, Doc"—Josiah nodded toward Horace—"pay the man so he can get back to work."

Andrew fished out a coin for payment and sent up a wordless prayer. Of all the cases to be assigned, of all the criminals to face, it had to be them.

Once Horace was out of earshot, Josiah leaned back and folded his hands over his stomach. "Well, that was informative and convenient. Guess we know who to go to for gossip. How long do you think it will take us to make an in with the Thornes?"

Forever, if he could help it.

A curse exploded from the other side of the bar. "She done it again!"

"Quit your squallerin'. I saw Clint patrolling the streets before I came in. You'd have lost your money either way."

Andrew stared into the black sludge that masqueraded as coffee. He'd sworn long ago to rid the country of criminals like his former family. Now God had brought him full circle. Arresting the Thornes would prove once and for all he'd risen above his past and become something they never could be. Honorable. Respected. A hero.

He couldn't hide in the gray areas of omitted information. If there were any hope of maintaining his reputation and the prestige of being a Secret Service operative, he'd have to confess his past to his superiors. Allow them to scrutinize everything he'd ever said or done. It was a risk, but God willing, they'd see what his extraordinary adoptive parents, the Darlington, had. Criminals could reform.

“Cat got your tongue?” Josiah asked. “Or are you too scared to venture a guess and be wrong?”

“You just worry about assisting Walt with his informant.” Andrew stood. “I’ll figure out the rest.”

By God’s grace, this case would not be the end of his career, but a chance to right all the wrongs of his past life.

CHAPTER 2

THE CLOUDLESS, MOON-FILLED NIGHT ILLUMINATED Lu's return to town. Not that anyone would question her late-night walk through the countryside. Most people assumed she worked as one of Molly's girls on occasion, an assumption wholly unfounded but not unusable. The fewer questions asked, the more likely her real secret would never reach the Thorne family's ears. Although after tonight, it wouldn't matter.

Come morning, Bill's wife would find her hidden jar in the chicken coop fuller one last time. A few extra families had even benefited from the bounty Pretty Boy provided. Lu's only failure came in providing for Widow Zachary. Once again Widow Zachary had refused to accept "blood money" from the woman whose family murdered her husband. The ever-present noose of guilt cinched tighter around Lu's neck. Had she not lied to protect herself and hide the truth of her husband Irvine's death, Sheriff Zachary might still be alive and his wife and daughter not condemned to poverty.

Or worse, forced to become one of Molly's girls.

Lu shuddered.

Maybe she should reconsider losing Walt Kinder and testify against the Thornes after all. If the trials were as successful as he promised they would be, they'd never torment the Zacharys in retribution for Irvine's death again. Lu could discard guilt's noose and become Luella Preston, a mother who provided Oscar a safe home, acceptance in the

community, friends with other children, and an education. She'd never have to look at her son and worry when she'd lose the battle for his innocence.

Truth shattered her fantasy. A trial changed nothing. The Zacharys would still be in the same position of poverty. Worse still, questions might arise about Irvine's death and reveal Lu's secret. Then no agreement would save her. At best, Oscar would be tossed into an orphanage. More likely, he'd end up with whatever Thorne wriggled their way out of sentencing—probably Ma Frances, given her wily ways—and raised to become the criminal Lu feared. No, testifying wasn't an option. Too much could go wrong. Once she and Oscar made their escape, she would send money back to Widow Zachary. The woman wouldn't be able to refuse it that way.

Lu cut past the tack shop, through the treed border, and across the fallow fields toward the Thorne family house. The only way to provide for both the Zacharys and Oscar meant continuing with her original plan—escaping with Walt Kinder tonight and then deserting him when she and Oscar were far from Ma Frances's reach.

Light filtered through the front parlor window of the barn-shaped house, and Lu stopped to gather her wits. Though the house was cozy on the outside with its matching rockers on a wooden veranda and wreath of silk flowers on the door, the woman who reigned inside was cold and calculating. If Ma Frances suspected anything amiss, even an out-of-place smile, her and Oscar's freedom would be at risk. Best to smother all thoughts of the future and focus on displaying the submissive daughter-in-law Ma Frances required.

Inside, the sweet aroma of forbidden baked treats filled her nose and tantalized her tongue. Ma Frances must have decided to spoil Oscar with dessert again. Lu smirked. Maintaining her appeal to men meant keeping a trim waist, and imbibing on sweets would do her no favors, but beginning tomorrow, she could be as ugly as a possum. A tiny bite now wouldn't hurt. She walked through the parlor to the empty kitchen.

Perfect. An elderberry pie with a large wedge already missing sat on

the table. She pinched off a bit of a mushy berry and flaky crust, then called up the stairs. "Oscar, I'm home."

The pitter-patter of running feet didn't come. Odd. He must've fallen asleep. That boy could sleep through a tornado if given the chance. After this bite, she'd go up and carry him to their new future. Cradling her hand to catch the drippings, she lifted the morsel to her mouth.

"Stop!" Ma Frances swept from the back veranda into the kitchen, countenance as dark as her mourning gown.

Lu froze with the bite halfway to her lips. Couldn't the woman allow one nibble? It wasn't as if she'd gain a hundred pounds.

"What have you told Walt Kinder about our operations?"

Lu dropped her hand and sweat beaded between her shoulders. Ma Frances couldn't know her plan with Walt. They'd been too careful. Even his windbag brother Eli remained unaware of her role. Lu forced a calm she didn't feel. "I didn't say nothing. He's just another mark at the saloon."

"He's a traitor. Tell me everything you've ever told him." Ma Frances grabbed her wrist and shook, flinging the bit of berry and crust across the room.

"Same thing I tell every man. That he's handsome and every girl's dream."

Ma Frances released Lu's wrist with a disgusted huff. "I should know you've only one thing on your mind. Once a harlot, always a harlot."

A wave of prickles set Lu's hairs standing on end. Her former profession had been forced upon her, not chosen. So long as she breathed, she'd never submit to such a life again. "What makes you think Walt's a traitor? Just cause the gang's had a few bad runs don't mean nothing."

"He's a copper. Clint found proof this morning."

Terror grappled with logic. Ma Frances must not truly suspect her, or Lu would be dead by now. "I can't believe it. Walt's too smart to be a copper. Are you sure Clint ain't just being jealous?" His obsession with her was well-known and might cast doubt over his claim. "What so-called proof did he find?"

Ma Frances grabbed a stack of papers off the table and shook them in the air. “Pages and pages of notes detailing our little outfit. He even had a source who’d been supplying him information and agreed to testify against us.”

Lu’s knees wobbled, and she grabbed the chair’s back for support. Ma Frances must know the truth. How could she not with that information? All her talk was nothing more than a cat toying with a mouse until positioned for the final blow, and Lu was good and cornered.

“When I find out who’s squealing on us, they’ll be as dead as Walt.”

Lu blinked. “You don’t know who it is?”

“The blasted man disguised their identity.”

Giddiness bubbled through her veins, rejuvenating her strength. She was safe. Tonight she, Oscar, and Walt could—

“Wait. Walt’s dead?”

“Of course he is—or will be soon enough. I can’t let the man ruin everything.” She hiked a thumb over her shoulder toward the table. “Gave him pokeberry pie and a good dose of laudanum to knock him out until the effects start. I want that man to suffer for the trouble he’s given our family.”

“You can’t kill him.”

“Says who? That high-and-mighty pastor? He don’t watch out for our family. I do. When Irvine demanded you for his wife, it’s me who bought you from the madam. Me who let you sit on your pregnant backside while the rest of us scraped by. Me who didn’t sell you to Molly when Irvine died. You owe *me* your loyalty, not some pastor.”

“But if Walt’s a copper, won’t others come looking for him? We’ll have to skip town.” At least not all hope was lost. She and Oscar would disappear in the chaos of running.

“We ain’t ever skipping town again. Irvine’s buried here and I ain’t leaving him. Cyrus and Clint will make Walt’s death look like an accident.” Ma Frances tossed the papers into the fire. “I’ve taken care of the evidence. You’re going to take care of his brother.”

“I can’t kill Eli!”

“Everyone has a job in this family. You sayin’ you ain’t part of this

family? Because if not, we can do without the money you steal.” Ma Frances reached into her pocket where she always kept a derringer at the ready.

An ache spread through Lu’s white-knuckled grip. There had to be a way to delay or disappear before adding to her list of unforgivable sins. “It’s too late to try anything tonight. He’ll suspect and overpower me.” The gun glinted halfway out of the pocket. “But if I bring him pie in the morning, he’ll just take it as flirting.”

Ma Frances stilled and seemed to consider Lu’s words. After a moment, the gun returned to its home. “Fine, but go before the shop opens. He’ll get sick while working and die with a crowd of witnesses around him. No one can pin it on us if we ain’t there when it happens.”

Lu nodded, though her head pulsed. “Where’s Oscar?”

With any luck, they could shinny out the garret window after everyone was asleep and take Walt’s horse. He certainly wasn’t going to need it anymore.

“He’s camping with Priscill. I didn’t want him sneaking bites of poisoned pie behind my back.”

Perfect. “Should I change places with Priscill and free her up?”

“Nonsense. You have a job to do. Fail and I’ll sell you to Molly or see you buried next to Irvine. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now give me tonight’s earnings and get upstairs. I can’t have Clint coming in and getting distracted by you.”

Lu dropped the smallest purse into Ma Frances’s outstretched hand and then trudged upstairs. How had everything turned upside down? Wasn’t God supposed to save her? Mary Newcomb said He wanted to, and Lu had almost believed He would when Walt offered her a deal. But now?

She stopped at the top of the stairs and peered out the garret window at the endless starry sky. What a fool she’d been. If she hung one sin on each of those stars, she’d run out of stars before sins. God didn’t want her to be counted among His saints. Her sins were too many, too unforgivable. And tomorrow she’d be forced to hang another in

the sky. She pinched the bridge of her nose and the sticky residue of poisoned pie stuck to it.

Pie. That was the answer to her dilemma.



Walt Kinder's body might have arrived dragged by the stirrup of his horse's saddle, but it wasn't a fall that killed him. Andrew pulled Eli's patchwork quilt over Walt's bruised face, but it did little to dampen the stench of vomit and diarrhea. Given the purplish stomach contents still clinging to the man's clothes and lack of other lethal injuries, Andrew suspected poisoning was to blame. No one deserved to suffer such a death. Certainly not a man who sought to bring justice to a town ruled by villains. May Walt's soul rest with God now.

Leaving behind the quilt-covered body on Eli's parlor couch, Andrew walked down the hall and entered the kitchen.

Josiah looked up from his position next to Eli at the table. "Find anything useful?"

"If he had anything on him identifying the informant, it's gone now." Along with the actual informant. Whether they double-crossed Walt, were dead too, or were in hiding, they never showed for last night's meeting. "The gang must have discovered Walt was a marshal. It looks like they beat him before they killed him."

Eli's head hung between his hands, and his brittle voice cracked. "What am I gonna tell his wife and kids?"

"That he loved them." Josiah pushed a glass of water toward the man, but Eli ignored it, still sobbing.

Andrew shifted uncomfortably. The man had every right to grieve, but they didn't have the luxury of time. On the chance that the informant was alive and in danger, they needed to identify who it was. "Did Walt give any clue to who he worked with?"

Eli ran an arm under his nose as he took a moment to answer. "No. I was lucky to know he was a marshal. He never trusted me with

anything. Used to joke that three can keep a secret if two are dead, and he'd hate to have to kill me."

Smart man. Too bad that left them with no direction to turn except southwest. Although Eli had every right to bury his brother, staying in Landkreis any longer than necessary risked his life. "We'll take care of all the funeral arrangements, but you need to leave town now."

"I can't leave. The tack shop's my livelihood, and I'm too old to start over elsewhere."

"Would you rather start over elsewhere or be murdered here?"

Josiah skewered Andrew with a silent reprimand. "Listen, Mr. Kinder. Once we root out the Thorne gang, Landkreis will be safe for you to live in again. Why don't you go to Walt's family and comfort them? We'll stay behind and mind the shop."

"We're not here to run a business, Joe."

"It's the perfect cover. You're an itinerant nostrum vendor and I'm an investor looking for a job." He threw his arms out wide. "Looks like I found one, and it comes with lodging."

Eli nodded. "It doesn't take much to run the place. Lots of folks come here just to chew the fat. I'll give you half the shop's profits if you help me leave town and run the place while I'm gone."

By the way Josiah rubbed his hands together, the decision was made whether Andrew agreed with the idea or not. Fine. Private living quarters worked better for their needs anyway. "Pack light and be ready to go in ten minutes."

Eli scuttled out of the kitchen and down the narrow hall to his bedroom.

"What's the plan?" Joe leaned back and stretched his legs out like he owned the place.

"I'll escort Eli to Evansville and put him on a train to wherever Walt's family lives. You start mingling with the people in town and winning them over."

A knock sounded at the apartment door.

"I've got Eli." Josiah joined him in the bedroom.

Andrew took position beside the front door, ready for a gunfight. “Who’s there?”

“Only the best thing that ever happened to you.” The raised female voice was familiar. “Open up, sugar.”

The lilt and use of a pet name confirmed the speaker’s identity. Lu Thorne. A beautiful decoy to get the door opened and allow access to any number of gang members. He strained to listen for groans on the steps to the shop below. Anything to signal more than she stood on the landing. Nothing. “I’m not dressed yet.”

“All the better. I brought pie for breakfast and an offer you can’t refuse.”

Given her behavior last night, that offer could lead to the bedroom, or, given that she was a Thorne, it could lead to the grave. Neither appealed.

After an extended silence, she added. “Please, Eli. I sent you a note that we needed to meet. It’s important.”

A meeting with Eli? Andrew glanced back at the closed bedroom door. Was Eli playing him and Josiah for fools? Better to twist this situation to his advantage and find out. To uncover valuable information, nothing worked better than knocking a criminal off their balance.

He opened the door and yanked Lu inside.

She stumbled against him in a flurry of red and black, her focus on keeping ahold of the plate in her hand. “My, you’re an eager one this morning.” Plate secure in her grip, she looked up. Her eyes widened and all pretense of a smile dropped. “You.”

“Lu.”

She lurched away with the pie a shield between them. “What are you doing here?”

“I’d ask the same of you if it weren’t obvious.”

Sizzling fury burned him before it simmered into an alluring, saucy grin and a distracting shake of her bare shoulders. Lu was a confidence woman to the end, but she’d met her match in him. Andrew locked his eyes on her blue-gray ones instead of letting them wander to where she dictated.

“It ain’t polite to treat a lady so poorly.”

“My apologies, I didn’t think you qualified as one.”

Pie smashed into his face and the glass plate clattered to the floor. The warm sticky mass dropped in chunks at his feet. The barb of his words hit him belatedly and shredded his conscience. He deserved every bit of her reaction. Lu’s shoulder clipped his as he scooped globs of berries from his eyes and flicked them to the floor. He fumbled with a handkerchief to wipe the rest away, and then followed her into the parlor.

Lu gawked at the blanket-covered body. “Is that . . . Did you . . .” Her face swiveled toward him, and the terror there suggested she believed him a cat and she a canary. “Did you kill Eli?”

“No.” He could pull the covers back to prove his claim, but he wouldn’t subject even her to the gruesome scene. “He skipped town as soon as we found his murdered brother being dragged behind a horse.”

Her relieved sigh reached him from across the room.

“Eli said the Thornes would kill him next. Am I to assume that’s why you are here?”

Her fists perched on her hips and her head tilted in challenge. “I said I needed to meet with Eli.”

“And why was that?”

“That’s none of your concern. Why are you here if Eli’s gone?”

“He sold us the business and left Walt’s arrangements to us.”

“Sold? So he ain’t coming back?”

“No.”

A grin the length of the Mississippi stretched her lips. “I’m sorry to hear it. I would’ve enjoyed sharing one last piece of pie with him.”

At the mention of pie, warning bells clanged in Andrew’s mind. Between the purple color of Walt’s vomit and the purple stain on Andrew’s handkerchief, sharing “one last piece” suggested poison would’ve reunited the two brothers if Lu’d gotten her way. Poison that likely seeped into Andrew’s system as they stood here talking.

“Eli’s gone, and it’s time you left.” He gripped her arm, ready to drag her out if necessary.