

..... The Fort Reno Series · 2

The Lieutenant's Bargain



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Chapter One



DECEMBER 1885
INDIAN TERRITORY

If she'd known there were so few washrooms in Indian Territory, Hattie Walker wouldn't have drunk three cups of coffee at breakfast that morning. The stagecoach jolted over another rut as she pulled the lap robe higher on her chest. She didn't favor leaving the cozy coach and braving the sharp wind, but nature called.

Hattie lifted the heavy leather curtain on the window and blinked as a cold gust caught her right in the face.

"For crying aloud, what do you want now?" Mr. Samuel Sloane, a telegraph operator who'd been on the stage since Fort Smith, had complained every time she'd requested a stop. And she'd requested many stops.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," Hattie replied. "Go back to polishing that big pocket watch and pay me no mind."

The pocket watch had caught her eye, but his cutting remarks offset his fine duds, so Hattie wasn't impressed. Besides, she

hadn't left behind all the agreeable beaux back home to fall for a churlish lout on the road.

"Next stage I catch, I'm requesting a gentleman's-only coach," replied the tired, dried-up Agent Gibson. "A woman traveling across Indian Territory unchaperoned is folly. Better to stay home in the kitchen than come out here in the nations, risking your life." Despite the apparent danger, he pulled his big-brimmed hat down over his face to nap against the heavy traveling bag he'd insisted on keeping in the seat next to him.

Hattie had yet to meet the man whose kitchen sounded more interesting than her plans. She steadied her box of Reeves watercolors and Devoe oils and prayed that she'd made the right decision. Frustrated by her refusal to accept any of the proposals that had come her way, her parents had given her an ultimatum—she could go to Denver and try to find success as an artist, but if she failed, she had to come home and settle down. They feared she was wasting the best years of her life pursuing an unlikely future. When she'd bemoaned the limited resources available to her in Van Buren, Arkansas, they had called her bluff. Two months. That was all she had. Get a painting in an exhibit, sell a work, or come back home and plan for her future.

It had been a terrifying answer to prayer, and now Hattie was traveling with strangers across one of the most dangerous areas of the country, wondering if she had made the right choice. Wondering if the stories about the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians were true.

She pushed aside the curtain again, leaned out into the frigid air, and called up to the driver. "Excuse me, please. I need to stop."

The wheels kept turning even though he barked back an answer. She squirmed in her seat as the coach hit another bump,

knocking her paints against her. “It’s an emergency. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t necessary.”

Mr. Sloane’s mouth turned down with impatience. “And I thought my boss was insufferable.”

The agent sitting opposite her might be hiding his face, but he wasn’t hiding his opinion. “Do you need to get some fresh air, or do you have to refresh your powder? Which emergency is it this time?”

Hattie’s blush spread from ear to ear. They had no idea how uncomfortable it was to be the lone woman traveling in a public coach. Had she known how difficult the journey would be, she would have given it more thought. But what were her choices? According to the directors at the art galleries she frequented, her paintings lacked depth, lacked an understanding of the world, and that was what she was after. If those critics thought she hadn’t experienced enough tragedy to be taken seriously, they should see her now. She was on her way to the majestic Rocky Mountains, and in three weeks she would have a painting ready for consideration in the Denver Exhibition. It was too late to turn back.

Hattie took a deep breath of cold air and leaned out the window. “Stop this coach!” she hollered. “Please.”

Agent Gibson snickered. Mr. Sloane checked his pocket watch and looked fretfully out the window.

The coach rolled to a stop, the brake sounding as it was pushed into place. Before Hattie had the door open, she had already spotted a gully that would give her some privacy.

She pushed the lap robe away, then hesitated. Her box of paints was her prized possession. Separating herself from it was never done without care. She glared a look of warning at the two men before arranging it on the seat next to her and stepping out of the coach.

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Hattie's knees jarred when she landed on the frozen ground. The wind whipped her skirts, the cold air making her errand even more imperative. She paced the gorge, looking for an easy way down the embankment. Finally, sliding on loose dirt, she skidded down and out of sight of the stagecoach to take care of necessities.

Hattie was just about to return to the coach when she heard a loud cracking noise. What were they doing now? Trying to rush her? She arranged the hood of her coat snugly over her bonnet and planted her foot on a high shelf of red clay. Another loud pop—a couple, in fact. The top of the stagecoach came into view as she climbed up. The driver crouched in his seat.

“Stay down,” he yelled, waving her away.

“What?” She caught the edge of her hood to keep the wind from snatching it.

The leather window covering flapped open, and a pistol emerged. Smoke puffed out of it, and a second later a sharp crack split the air. Agent Gibson was shooting at someone, and Mr. Sloane was right behind him. The door opened, and the agent used it to shield himself as he continued to return fire.

Hattie felt the blood drain from her face. It couldn't be. The hard dirt scraped her cheek as she ducked and hugged the ledge. The driver had turned and taken up the reins.

“Wait!” All her paints and canvases were on that stage. They couldn't leave her behind.

But then she saw the horseman racing toward them. The driver of the coach was hunched over the reins, urging the team forward, when suddenly he stiffened, then slumped to the side. The stage's horses jerked into motion even as he fell out of his seat.

Hattie ducked out of sight. No. Why? Suddenly the boorish

men she'd been traveling with didn't seem so bad, and they needed help. But what could she do?

Another shot made her rise up just in time to see Agent Gibson topple out of the door as the stage careened away. She could only see the back of the outlaw, but she could feel his deadly intent as he walked his horse slowly toward the crumpled figure.

If Agent Gibson wasn't dead already, he would be in the time it took to twitch a trigger finger unless she intervened. She rested her chin against the ledge. Why was she considering such a reckless act? She didn't owe the agent anything.

Before she could think better of it, Hattie stood to her full height and waved her mittened hand over her head.

"Over here!" How small her voice sounded on the prairie. How frail. But it was enough. The killer led with his pistol as he turned his horse toward her. His nose twitched like a dog on the scent, and his mouth hung open like he was tasting the air.

Of all the dumb decisions Hattie had made in her life, this was the worst. She might have bought Agent Gibson a few minutes to make his peace, but at what price?

With a quick prayer for the men scattered on the plain, Hattie dropped to the dry creek bed and ran down the narrow corridor of the gully, following its twists and curves, looking for a way to save her life.

The hooves pounded behind her. The outlaw's voice echoed through the canyon, furious at her disappearance. Her stays pinched her ribs as she forged on, expecting to see his dark figure above her at any moment. As she ran, the ground rose beneath her feet, and the gully grew shallower.

Zing! She heard the high-pitched buzz streak past her ear before she heard the report of the gun.

Hattie dropped to the ground. He was hunting her. The ditch wasn't deep enough here. She would be exposed. She had to

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go on, but the maze was running out. Who knew when she'd reach a dead end? But she couldn't stay here.

She remembered that the dry creek bed had split a few yards back. If he was looking for her up ahead, maybe she could get back to the turn and get away.

She felt tears on her face. Her side hurt. Knowing the consequences if she raised her head, she scrambled back the way she'd come and prayed that she could beat the killer to the fork and find a place of safety.



An hour later, Hattie was still alive and praying with every breath. She held her frayed mittens to her mouth and blew warm air onto her numb fingers. She'd burrowed into the deepest, darkest crevice she could find, her heart racing at every noise. The driverless stagecoach had raced away, the terrified horses dragging it and her paints along, but the killer had stayed, pacing the flatlands above her.

She was so cold and miserable that part of her wanted to stand up and get it over with, but he might decide not to kill her right away, and that uncertainty kept her huddled in the muddy ditch with icy water pooling around her feet.

Reins jangled and hooves could be heard retreating. Was he finally giving up? Straining her ears for any clue, Hattie shivered as the seconds ticked away.

She had to get out and find help, but what would she face when she left her sanctuary? What would she see when she climbed up?

As much as she'd hated the shooting, it had meant that her traveling companions were fighting back. But it had stopped long ago. She knew she was the only survivor, and she had a job to do.

It wasn't until the moon had risen that Hattie found the courage to creep out of her hiding place and toward the two motionless bodies that lay discarded on the cold ground. No one created in God's image should be left out there without a kindness shown. Teeth chattering and tears icy on her cheeks, Hattie scurried forward, bent double against the wind. She reached the driver first. He lay on his side, crumpled over with both hands holding his middle. She wouldn't look at his face—that she had already decided. Instead, she pushed against his shoulder. His whole body rocked. Even the strange angle of his blood-covered fingers remained set. Forcing down the bile in her throat, she removed his hat and put it over his face the best she could without looking. Saying a quick prayer to God for the family he might have left behind, she scurried to the next man.

Agent Gibson lay on his back with arms outstretched. Still hunched over, she began a wide circle around him so she could approach away from the direction he was looking. Something about being caught in the sight of a dead man's eyes made Hattie supremely uneasy.

She'd almost reached the formerly apathetic agent when she heard the first yipping howl. Hattie spun around. Wolves? Coyotes, more likely. Another reason she shouldn't be out on the frontier alone. While coyotes weren't difficult to scare away, she didn't like being out in full view of anyone who happened to be watching. What if the murderer returned? She needed to be far from here.

In the melee, the agent had lost his hat. Hattie lowered the hood of her coat to untie her bonnet and carefully laid it over his face. The wind would blow it off, but it was the best she could do. The fact that he didn't flinch when the bonnet touched him told her that he was already beyond any help she could provide.

Mr. Sloane's body hadn't fallen out of the stagecoach. She'd

seen him just briefly through the open door, pistol drawn, but he'd undoubtedly met the same fate. His body could be miles away, beyond her help. She uttered another quick, desperate prayer, more to remind herself that God was there and that she wasn't alone than to ask for anything specific, and then she had to go.

She shivered and held her hands over her ears to keep the wind out until she'd slid down the slope and into the gully again. The red clay felt like ice, but it was the warmest place she could find. This time, instead of hunkering down and hiding, she kept moving, putting distance between her and the scene of the massacre until she had no more strength. Then she huddled against the dirt wall and tried to stay warm.

How long before her parents learned of her fate? When she failed to show up at the boardinghouse in Denver, the proprietress would surely contact them. Hattie could imagine their anguish when they heard she was missing. Most of all, she didn't want them to blame themselves.

Hattie's parents had always encouraged her considerable artistic talent. They'd bought her the box of paints, paid for lessons, and taken her to every exhibition within fifty miles of Van Buren. But when she'd reached adulthood, they expected her ambitions to change.

It wasn't as if Hattie hadn't made an effort. She'd had more beaux than Ole Red had fleas, but one by one, they'd disappointed her. Inevitably, the more comely the man, the less he'd developed the finer qualities. With every rejected offer, her parents' desperation grew. Just as she was fine-tuning her talent, they expected her to set it aside, but she'd yet to meet the man who could tempt her to quit. She'd be better served finding beauty on a canvas than in a corduroy suit.

After what seemed an eternity of sleepless exhaustion, the

eastern horizon began to glow even as the temperature continued to drop. Hattie's fingers were stiff, and she couldn't feel her toes at all. Her stomach growled. Her teeth clattered. But the worst part was the fear. She was lost, without a town or a house in sight. The only thing she knew for sure was that there was a very bad man about, and he had murdered the only decent people in the area.

Marginally decent people, anyway.

At least they were people.

How long before anyone realized she was missing? Would the stagecoach make it to Fort Supply? How long before someone came looking for her, and would they find her?

She licked her lips. They were dry, and her nose was so cold it was painful. She shook against the dirt hill she'd cuddled up on. She had to do something or she'd freeze and starve, and she wasn't sure which would be first. At least it was morning now. There were no more coyotes howling in the darkness, but she knew not to return to the bodies. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity.

She got to her feet, but her legs felt as thick and stiff as barrels. Bouncing up and down, she forced the blood to start pumping beneath her tattered wool coat. The tears started pumping, too. She had no plan besides running in terror from all threats.

When she climbed out of the ravine and took a look around, the helplessness of her situation assaulted her again. If she had her paints, she could have captured the remote, wind-scraped landscape with all the elements of tragedy the gallery directors could ever desire.

Which way should she walk? She hadn't paid any attention to where they were. Landmarks were scarce on the prairie. She looked at the morning sun, but there was no going back. Her only hope lay ahead, although she could see many miles and

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nothing on the horizon could be deemed promising. With her hands in her pockets and her chin tucked beneath her dirty scarf, she started walking west.

Not a thought cheered her until she saw some horsemen in the distance. Frantically, she wrestled her scarf off with inept fingers. She waved the scarf over her head and yelled as its length caught the wind and the horsemen's attention. It wasn't until they got closer that she realized her mistake. What if they were more bad men? What if she'd attracted deadly attention to herself?

But they weren't outlaws coming toward her. It was even worse.

They were Indians.