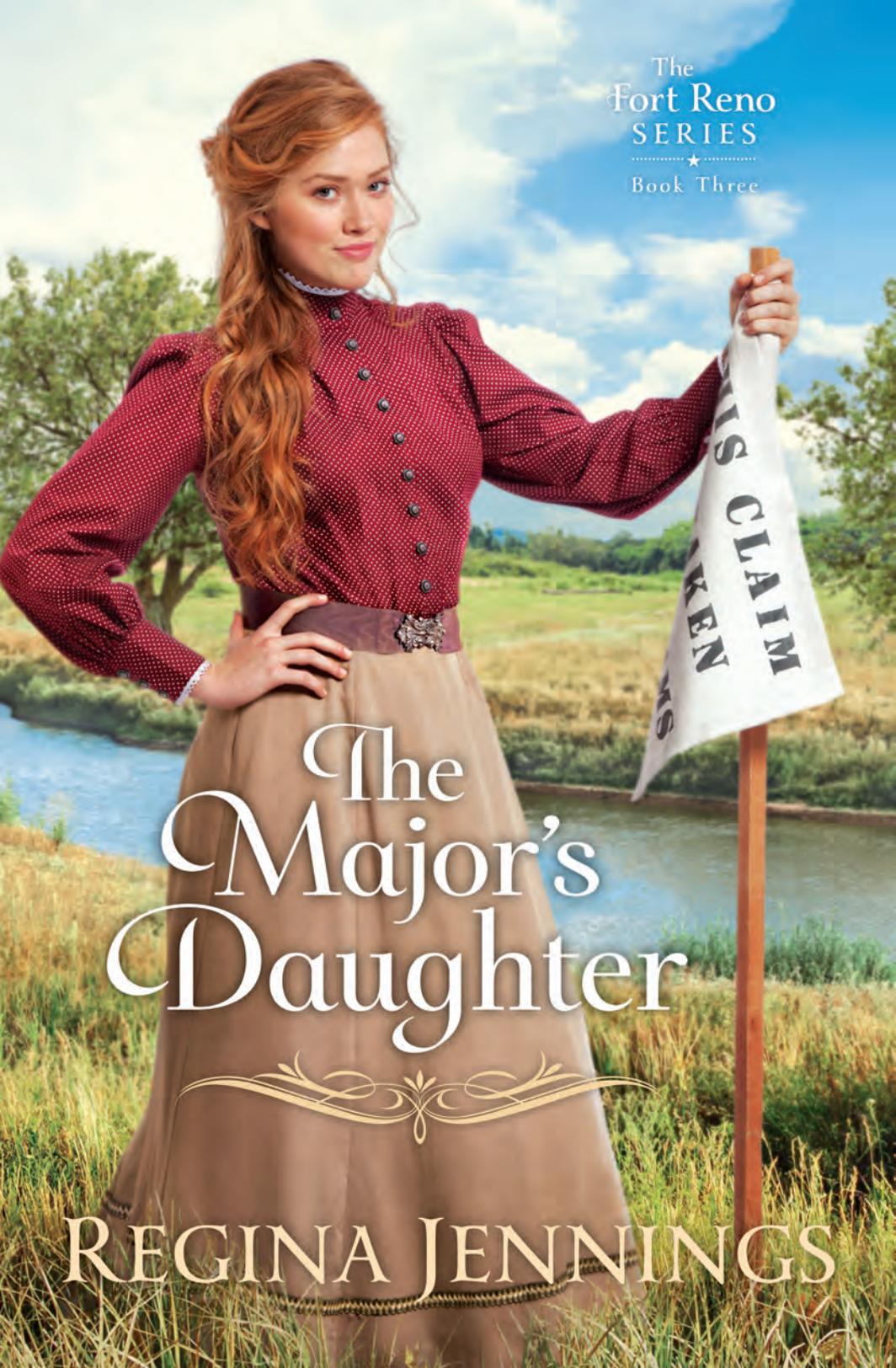


The
Fort Reno
SERIES
.....★.....
Book Three



The
Major's
Daughter

REGINA JENNINGS

..... The Fort Reno Series · 3

The Major's Daughter



REGINA JENNINGS



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Prologue

MARCH 23, 1889
WASHINGTON, D.C.

From the growing ruckus outside the door, President Harrison could tell the time was approaching. Men who'd arrived early had tried to keep their voices down, but their excitement couldn't be contained.

One scrawled signature, and the news would go flying across the country. Congressmen would rush to their offices, newspapermen would run to their wires, and the message would race from coast to coast.

Rush. Run. Race. That was the chaos his pen would unleash. The greatest race in history, with a starting line over three hundred miles long and the finish line wherever one found it. In less than a month, tens of thousands of people would line up on foot, on horse, in wagons, buggies, trains, and even on bicycles to race for the greatest prize ever—their share of a nearly two-million-acre bonanza, almost three thousand square miles of prairie.

President Harrison took one last sip from his cup of Darjeeling tea and set aside the tariff proposals he was studying. He

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motioned for his secretary to clear his desk before the impatient guests entered and the ceremony commenced.

This proclamation represented hope to so many—immigrant farmers crowded on the East Coast with no room to plant, black sharecroppers from the South who'd never found the freedom the war had promised, young men and women ready to strike out on their own and leave behind the dusty duty of their fathers' trades. With all the Indian tribes settled, the Un-assigned Lands sat fertile and empty while the nation waited, breathless, for his decision.

Congress had already amended the bill. All it lacked was his signature.

They entered with a burst of energy. Handshakes all around, with whispers from the Kansas delegation about the hordes already amassing on their border. Most of the representatives crowded around his desk, but some lingered by the door, jockeying to be the first out to make the announcement. The country held its breath. Across the plains, cannons were primed for celebratory firing, and punch bowls were set out for more genteel festivities.

There were no guarantees. Many would suffer disappointment, but he was giving them a chance. That was all they wanted.

President Harrison dipped his pen into the inkwell. Let them run. It was in the air and in their blood.

With the stroke of his pen, the matter was settled, and the core of the nation was forever changed.

Chapter One



APRIL 16, 1889

PURCELL, CHICKASAW NATION

We're getting a town lot, and it's purt near guaranteed. You see, we ran into this man selling town lots in Fort Worth, so we've already put our money down for a corner spot, but we're going to run anyway. I figure, why not? Make a claim on a 160-acre homestead, and then we can decide whether we cotton to the farm or the town. There'll be plenty of losers out there to sell to when we decide which one we want. Easy money. That's what I'm saying."

In Caroline Adams's opinion, the train from Garber, Texas, didn't need steam power. It could have been propelled solely on the hot air provided by its passengers. She turned her face toward the window to squelch the impulse to challenge the braggadocian man seated behind her. Did he not understand the nature of the race? Why did he think someone in Texas could sell town lots in the Unassigned Lands when no one was permitted inside yet? And what town? Besides some depot workers, no one lived in the region. There were no roads, no houses, no neighbors. The whole idea was ludicrous.

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Having grown up on the fort that protected the lands, Caroline had insight that no one else on the train possessed, but they wouldn't credit it to her. They'd think her too fine a lady to know about the untamed lands they were headed toward—just as the society people in Galveston thought she was too uncouth to know her way around a drawing room.

There was a sharp jab on her leg, and Caroline turned to see her friend Ambrosia Herald wielding her parasol.

"You have that look on your face." Amber's blue eyes twinkled. "Scowls can cause irreversible damage to your skin, and once a wrinkle appears on the surface, it will never completely disappear. It lurks there, waiting for fatigue or age to summon it and mar your complexion."

"You and your faux facts," Caroline retorted. "You're as full of malarkey as every other speculator on this train." But while Amber was jesting, the passengers on the overcrowded train believed the tall tales they were spouting.

"Do you think you'll see him?" Amber asked. "Do you think the infamous Frisco Smith will make the run?"

Caroline rubbed her nose. It had been two years since she'd seen the man in question, and his name still left her disconcerted.

Frisco Smith—roguish frontiersman and boomer—had spent more time in the guardhouse at her father's post than at the illegal homesteads he tried to establish. She shouldn't feel foolish about her youthful infatuation with him. He was, after all, uncommonly handsome and debonair. But when she'd left the isolated fort to move into society, she learned what her father had known all along. Men like Mr. Smith had nothing to offer a lady. She had to think about her future, which was exactly why she'd returned to Oklahoma Territory.

"Oh, I'm sure Mr. Smith will be about. He won't pass up a spectacle like this," Caroline said. "But you'd better prepare

to see Bradley. He'll be on tenterhooks, waiting for you to get to the fort."

Bradley Willis was the younger brother of Caroline's step-mother. Four years earlier, he and Amber met when she and her father were riding a herd of camels across Indian Territory. Of course Bradley would fall in love with a spunky camel-herder. And as both girls were daughters of cavalry officers, Amber and Caroline had much in common. They'd been fast friends ever since, often spending the hot summers together at Caroline's grandmother's house in Galveston.

Amber dug the tip of her parasol into the wooden floor of the train car. "I hope Bradley is eager. He claims that he's determined to let his enlistment expire in a few weeks. If that's the case, then there's no reason the wedding won't go on as planned, as long as he hasn't changed his mind."

Caroline snorted. "He fell in love with you in August. In Oklahoma Territory, any two people who can tolerate each other in August are in love. Otherwise the heat would make them too cranky to bear. He hasn't changed his mind."

"Purcell Station ahead," the attendant called. "Last stop on the southern border of the Unassigned Lands. Thirty-minute stop, and then we're pulling toward Oklahoma Station. If you are continuing on, don't be late."

Amber stood and shook out her white-and-green tartan dress. "Come on, Caroline. Let's see the town—or at least, let's let the town see us."

Taking her reticule, Caroline stood in the aisle amid the boisterous passengers collecting their belongings. When she'd heard that the railroad had increased the number of trains to Purcell, she should have expected the town to be crowded, but nothing prepared her for what they encountered when they stepped foot on the platform.

It was like being caught in a cornfield that pushed back.

No matter which way she turned, Caroline couldn't see past the wall of humanity that milled around her. The air was stale with nervous sweat. Someone stepped on her toes. Amber was jostled against her with nothing more than a grunted apology to cover the offense. It was as if the denizens of every bank, tenement, and saloon had congregated in this small town in the Chickasaw Nation. And there was nowhere for them to go. Not enough hotels or public rooms. Which accounted for the odor.

"Have you ever seen the like?" Amber asked. "If you're looking for a beau, there's plenty to choose from."

"Among these men?" Caroline responded. "Needle in a stinky haystack." Still, the thought of who she might meet was exciting.

"If we want to get off this platform, we're going to have to push through." Amber linked her arm with Caroline's. "Ready?"

Caroline set her hat and nodded with a grin. This was better than sipping lemonade in the sweltering humidity of Galveston.

The ladies wove their way forward. Occasionally they were knocked off track by someone swimming upstream against the passengers departing the depot, but they finally found a path through the crowd and into the street.

"Watch out!" Caroline twirled Amber around just in time to keep her from being hit by a team of horses barreling through. Standing still clearly wasn't advisable. "Why don't we see what the mercantile has to offer?" Caroline said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was sold out," Amber said. "These people are like a horde of locusts."

There was nothing Caroline needed to buy. Unless something had changed, the shops here didn't supply the scented soaps and creams she'd grown fond of. Besides those, her stepmother would provide everything she required. But Caroline wanted to be a part of the enterprising crowd. She wanted to share in their excitement and judge if there was any place for her among them.

Amber pushed the door to the mercantile open halfway, then

had to wait for a hardscrabble woman to shift her basket over before they could squeeze inside. Amber spotted a basket of dried fruit and went to the counter to fill a sack.

The familiar scents of the store brought back years of memories. The smell of leather reminded Caroline of shopping for shoes with her father. The sharp nutmeg pulled up scenes of cooking at Christmas with Louisa and Daisy. All homecoming smells, but the woman staring at Caroline was a stranger. With a chapped hand, she wiped her mouth and took in every detail of Caroline's garments.

Caroline had already noticed that the farther into Indian Territory they traveled, the hungrier the women's gazes when they spotted her and Amber's new gowns. When she'd moved to Galveston, it had taken her half the season not to despise the constraining layers of the latest fashions. By the time she'd learned to appreciate their beauty, she'd found the carousel of societal expectations even more exhausting.

A girl about Caroline's age joined the staring woman. Decked in the same threadbare fabric and with similar hobnailed boots, she stood by her mother and gaped. "You don't think she's running for a homestead, do ya?" she whispered. She arched her back and stuck out her derriere to imitate Caroline's bustle.

Caroline turned to the side, pretending not to hear them, and instead perused the nearly empty shelves.

"Probably." The mother wiped a drop from her nose with the back of her hand. "Rich girls think they can do anything, but don't you worry none. That contraption on her backside will bounce her plumb out of the saddle."

Caroline fumed. That people would speak about her thus in Oklahoma Territory was unfathomable. They must be strangers come to town—that was the only excuse. Otherwise, they would know of her. And how presumptuous of them to assume she couldn't ride a horse! Nothing could be further from the

truth. Perhaps most ladies wearing a pleated accordion skirt couldn't jump astride a bareback horse and outrun a cavalry unit, but Caroline wasn't most ladies.

Although she was usually quick to speak her mind, Caroline was unsure in this moment. It was possible that these women had encountered ladies dressed like her before and had reason for their scorn. How could she explain that she was different? Before she decided, the mercantile door was pushed open, and this time it was she who was bumped out of the way.

A tightly coiled cowboy stepped inside, took one look at her, and whistled. "Wooo, doggies, ain't you far from home."

Caroline found her tongue. "No, actually. I lived here. Ever since—"

"You ain't going to run, are ya?" the cowboy asked. "What would you do with a homestead, anyway? Ain't likely that you're going to break ground and put in a crop."

Of all the impertinent upstarts. Where was Amber? They'd spent enough time in this place.

Emboldened, the woman stepped forward. "Don't intend no disrespect, but he's right. This contest ain't for the likes of you. Your kind won't last long out here."

Her kind? Caroline's eyes tightened. "I'm sorry to contradict you," she said, "but you've misjudged me. I am a capable lady who knows more about Oklahoma Territory than any of you. If I chose to homestead, there'd be no challenge that I—"

"You won't believe what I found!" Amber appeared at Caroline's side. With a flourish, she produced a paperback booklet titled *The City Girl's Guide to Homesteading for Novices*. "I bought the last copy," she said.

Caroline cringed as laughter erupted in the room.

"They going to homestead by a book?" The woman braced herself against her daughter's shoulder as she laughed.

“I hope they got a plow and draft horses hidden in those pages,” the cowboy guffawed.

This wasn’t the awed reaction Caroline had expected on her arrival. Taking Amber by the arm, she pushed out of the store, leaving the mocking homesteaders behind.

“What was that about?” Amber asked. “Are we offended?”

“We don’t have time to be offended,” Caroline said. “We can’t miss the train.”

“We do have time for ices. See that sign? That’d help wash down some of the dust I’ve swallowed.”

An ice did sound good, but one look at the line and Caroline shook her head. “I’d rather do some exploring. You go ahead. I’ll meet you on the platform.”

Amber dug through her green-fringed reticule as Caroline moved along the crowded boardwalk. The streets were awash with men. For the most part, the women wore their faded, Sunday-best dresses and stayed against the buildings, protected by the shade and out of the press of people. Many eyes watched Caroline as she made her way down the sidewalk. She tried to smile at the ladies in return, but they often looked away as if embarrassed to be caught staring. Why were they acting like that? What was wrong? But then she took another look at her dressy cotton sateen gown and realized that she stood out like a piglet in a hatchery.

Surely some wealthier people had come to invest in the new land. They couldn’t all be poor. Then again, if a man had funds to secure one of the few hotel rooms in the city, his wife wouldn’t be standing outside, trying to find shade.

A group of people gathered around a freshly painted board advertising maps of the Unassigned Lands for ten cents. Caroline took the top one off the stack and was immediately addressed.

“That’ll be ten cents, ma’am. No free looks allowed.” The

compact salesman had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and dollar bills sticking out of his arm garter.

"That's ridiculous," Caroline said. "How do I know it's a good map if I can't open it?"

Three young men approached. They tipped their hats at her while one of them dropped a dime in the palm of the salesman, then took a map.

"Are you going to buy one or aren't you?" the map man asked her.

Another man, this one of a rougher sort, handed the salesman a dime, but when he took his map, he managed to pick up two.

"Hey, you only get one. . . ."

Caroline used the distraction to open the map in hand. She spun it around, trying to place the railroads marked on the map with where she knew them to be. And that lake? There wasn't a lake like that anywhere that she'd seen. She held the map closer and squinted at the title. The word *Oklahoma* was carefully printed over *Ontario*.

"Thief!" she gasped. "These aren't maps of Oklahoma Territory. They aren't accurate at all."

A burly man with two sons scowled. "What d'ya mean, miss?"

"I mean that this man is a huckster. These maps are useless." She raised her voice along with the map. "Don't buy these," she announced.

The peddler stuck his nose right in her face. "You'd better be mindful of name-calling. What do you know about it?"

"Everything, I suppose." Caroline brushed back a wisp of her red hair. "My father is the commander of Fort Reno, and he and his troopers will not look kindly on you taking advantage of these people."

Before the madness of this land run had brought strangers to the nations, everyone knew who Caroline was and who her

father was. She had to admit it was gratifying to see the effect the information had on an outsider.

He snatched the map from her hand, and even though his tone was congenial, his expression was not. "Are these the wrong maps? My goodness, I must have pulled the wrong crate out of the wagon." He lifted the stack of papers and tucked them under his arm. "I'll just put these away." And with that, he spun on his heel and took long, quick steps away from the crowd. Judging by the way the burly man took after him, Caroline had no doubt the peddler would be giving back at least one dime.

A strong young fellow with a double cowlick nodded at Caroline. "Fine work clearing him out," he said. "If you think that's something, you should see the chap over there. He's not just selling maps, he's selling the land itself." The boy snorted. "As if he can lay claim to any property yet."

The infamous city lots that her train companions were talking of? Caroline checked her watch. She had time to right one more wrong. Honestly, with this many swindlers about, how would the new territory ever get lined out straight? Thanking the young man, she followed his gesture to another group of people gathered around a man doing business on the end of a barrel.

She couldn't see much, but looking through the crowd, she could see a paper spread over the barrel and money exchanging hands.

"That's lot ninety-six on Buchanan Street, just north of Tenth. Here's your certificate."

The lucky buyer, a young wrangler wearing chaps and a bandanna, popped out of the crowd, waving the paper over his head.

"Excuse me, may I have a moment of your time?" Caroline asked the cowboy. His eyes lit up at the sight of her. In this case, the scarcity of well-dressed women on the street worked to her advantage. "What exactly did you just purchase?"

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“It’s a city lot in Redhawk. It’s not on a main thoroughfare, but I only paid one dollar for it.”

A dollar? Caroline fumed. “And where exactly is Redhawk located?”

He shrugged good-naturedly. “On some fertile soil with a healthy creek and a railroad passing through.”

“Step on up. Only thirty-eight lots left in Redhawk,” the barker chanted. “You can trust me, folks. I know this land better than my own reflection.”

It was too much. “You should get a refund,” Caroline said before excusing herself to confront the barker. She huffed as she wedged her shoulder between two men and made herself a space, although they weren’t pleased to have to make room for both her and her bustle. Caroline tugged her skirt to pull it out from under a boot. It was worth a ruined hem to disrupt this huckster’s game.

With the charlatan still bent over the map, the first thing she saw was the top of a bowler hat, then a nice tailored suit. Nicer than she’d expected from a confidence man. Evidently he was successful at his deceit.

“I apologize for disenchanting your audience,” she said, “but by whose authority are you selling city lots in a town that doesn’t exist?”

The pen paused over the map. The customers surrounding the barrel straightened to get a better look at her. Caroline met their wary gazes. They would thank her for interfering if they understood what she was protecting them from.

The man in the bowler hat raised his head, and a pair of sparkling dark eyes met hers. His smile was as slow as honey dripping from the comb. “Miss Adams, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Frisco Smith. Caroline’s hand went to her stomach. She’d thought she was prepared to see him. She was wrong.

“Mr. Smith,” she stammered. “I didn’t recognize you.”

He folded up the map and gathered his papers into a worn traveling bag. “That’s all for now, folks. As you can see, I have to attend to more pressing matters. I’ll be back in half an hour, as soon as I settle some business with this kind lady.”

He was laughing at her, probably remembering how she’d idolized him when she was younger. Well, she was grown up. She’d been in society—real society. Now it took more than a flowery compliment and dashing smile to turn her head.

The time he took gathering his things gave her the chance to compose herself. “Where are your buckskins?” she asked. “In that fancy suit, I took you for a city attorney.”

“That’s what I am.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I’ve heard a lot of malarkey associated with this event, but that tops them all.”

“Who do you know that has spent more time in court than me? And all those hours in guardhouses and jail cells? Instead of carving on a pine knot like my incarcerated neighbors, I read law.” He picked up his traveling case and offered her his arm.

Another lawyer? She’d met enough of those in Galveston. With his black curls and swarthy skin, he looked more like a pirate than a solicitor, so obviously he wasn’t spending all his time at a desk. She eyed the offered arm warily. She had grown. She had matured. Having an escort through a crowd was no sign of weakness. She slid her hand into the crook of his arm and allowed him to part the crowd as they headed toward the depot.

“And I suppose that was legal work you were doing just now,” she said. “Selling lots off a map in a town that doesn’t exist?” Her tone might be cool, but she wanted him to know that her options for entertainment were no longer limited to his incarcerations at the fort.

“Well, it is legitimate. I’m well aware of the legal constraints.” Caroline bit her lip. If anyone knew the Unassigned Lands, it

was Frisco Smith. On that, he was telling the truth. He'd been a boomer for years, petitioning the United States government to open the territory for homesteading while leading forays into the forbidden land to show its benefits. Every time her father's troopers caught him, he was confined to the guardhouse at the fort until he could get a court date. If it weren't for Frisco and his allies, this land run wouldn't be happening.

"Perhaps it isn't technically illegal, but is it ethical? The nature of this contest should be kept pure. An attempt to fix the outcome—"

"I appreciate your attempt to explain my errors, but with your train departing, I don't have the time or inclination to defend myself further."

"I'm sure it's so complicated that someone like me couldn't understand," she said.

He drew his head back and studied her through narrowed eyes. "I've never questioned your intelligence, Miss Adams. I hope you don't give me reason to now."

"What do you mean by that?" Caroline asked.

"It seems you've changed a lot since I knew you."

So he had noticed. "Yes, I'm no longer the impressionable child I used to be."

They'd stopped before the depot, and Amber was making her way toward them, her parasol bobbing over the crowd.

Frisco followed her gaze to Amber. He released her arm and took her hand. "You might have been young, but you weren't ignorant," he said. "At least then you knew that fancy manners are no substitute for substance."

Caroline inhaled so sharply that she hissed. When she tried to pull her hand away, he pressed a firm kiss on the back.

His black eyes sparkled under a rakishly tilted bowler. "It was a pleasure seeing you again, Miss Adams, but I'd recommend that you get back to the fort and stay there. This here game is

high stakes and could get rowdy. Better stay close to your daddy and out of the way.”

Caroline yanked her hand free, dismayed that her heart had skipped a beat at his kiss. He was little more than a criminal. No fortunes, no prospects. All that gallantry that had been directed at her over the years hadn’t meant a thing. Just a charlatan trying to get under the skin of a major enforcing the law.

But before Caroline could fire back with a sharp retort, Frisco tipped his hat and disappeared into the crowd with his satchel. He no longer wore the frontier garb of the interlopers, but he still had the heart of one.

But he didn’t have *her* heart. For that she could be thankful.