

# Chapter 1

Mary O'Connor looked around her small room again to make sure all her belongings were tucked inside the hand-me-down suitcase. She straightened the sheet on her bed, squared the pillow, and made sure she'd cleaned all the dust from the surface of the dresser. Then she picked up the suitcase and left the little room..

She found Mister Walsh in his study. The air was already heavy with his cigar smoke, the end glowing as he took hard puffs. His morning newspaper obscured most of his face and her entrance went unnoticed. She took a few paces forward and coughed into her hand. The paper bent and he grinned around the cigar.

"Ah, there you are." The newspaper rustled as he folded it and laid it on the side table. "Are you done then? All packed up and ready to go?"

His deeply wrinkled face was open and happy for her, which made her all the more homesick for him. "Yes, Mister Walsh. The train leaves in an hour."

"Come here." He beckoned her to the chair next to him.

She hesitated, but did as ordered and relaxed into the soft cushion. She folded her hands in her lap.

"Are you prepared for this, Mary?" He was so kind and for a heartbreaking moment, she didn't think she could leave him to his own devices.

She swallowed and nodded. She had accepted a position with a well-to-do family who needed a companion for their ailing mother. The mother was still young and the eldest son had requested a woman to be more of a friend than a maid. A position like that would never have fallen into Mary's lap if not for the fact that the mother lived far away from Chicago in one of the wild towns along the new railroad.

"Will you be alright, Mister Walsh?" She said.

His eyes crinkled, "I'll manage fine. The new lass will be here this afternoon so don't you worry." He leaned back and sighed. "I shouldn't be keeping you." He stood up and Mary followed. "Come here and give me a farewell hug, dear. You'll be missed."

She pressed herself to his narrow body and held on tight. He was strong and kind, and she felt a fool to leave him, but the plans had already been put into motion. He finally let her go and looked her up and down. "Make me proud, eh?"

"I'll write to you and you'll keep me informed about Eloise?"

He nodded.

"Have you heard any news?" She asked.

"Not a drop. But you know her, she'll be fine."

His kissed her cheek and walked her to the door.

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She handed over the money to pay for the train ticket and tried not to feel too dejected about suddenly being penniless. The station was busy and filled with noise. A baby was crying in its mother's arms, but most of the travelers were men.

There was a map on the wall showing the United States of America. Dots with tiny writing above them represented cities and some towns. A line showed where the railroad spanned across the United States. There was nothing in between the two civilized sides except for wild Indians and lots of prairies.

She held tightly to her suitcase as she was forced to stand since all the benches were taken. Instead of staying in the chaotic station she moved to the platform, which was cooler. She'd seen the train tracks before, but she was still curious so she went to the edge and peeked over. The metal was slightly tarnished from wear and the wood beams were under a few layers of dirt here and there.

"Stand back, Miss. The train's coming." A man in a uniform smiled at her and she stepped away from the track.

In the distance, a tower of smoke rose, and eventually, she could hear the train, too. This would be the first time she'd ever ridden a train and her nerves bounced with anticipation.

The train was monstrously big and the noise it made had her ears aching. It slowed to a screeching halt and people poured out from the station to fill the platform.

A man took her ticket and she boarded with wide eyes. There were rows of wooden benches all facing the front. She picked a spot next to a window and watched the passengers board, their voices competing with the still vibrating train.

It was a while before the train left, but finally, the mood changed on the platform as the employees stepped away and either watched the train depart or turned away to some other business. The train jolted and Mary stuck her head out of the window like a child to see the giant wheels turn in ponderous circles. Soon, they had left the station and breeze came in through the window, bringing her the smells of Chicago and the smoky scent of the train.

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It wasn't long before the excitement of the new experience was overshadowed by the uncomfortable jolts and sways of the train, as well as the hard surface of the bench. It was crowded and the ceiling was too low. The design seemed to be better suited for an oven than a means of travel. Mary spent most her time facing the window wondering what it would like out in the wild country.

There were a few stops and she watched as people exited and more people crowded on. Now that the civil war was over the men who had come back alive and unbroken were looking for work where they could, and there were plenty of opportunities out west, even after the railroad had been completed.

During these stops Mary nibbled on the food she'd brought and kept to herself. Mary woke up out of a half-sleep to find the train had stopped again. The sign above the open air platform said: Whitfern Station. She gasped and sat up, her fingers suddenly shaking with nerves. She was here.

## Chapter 2

James Frank visited his step mother's grave while the morning was still young. The little bouquet of wild flowers placed there by William was already wilting from the heat. Helen had been a nice lady, and although she'd been closer to James in age than his father, they had managed to get along despite that.

The graveyard was a sad place to lay to rest for all eternity, but she had his father to keep her company. He supposed that was as best that could be done since she hadn't wanted to be buried in her family plot back in Chicago.

He turned and strode out of the graveyard under its rickety wooden arch in the direction of his home, the grandest building in the area which overlooked the town in one direction and the river in the other.

Lou, the black woman who acted as housekeeper and nanny to his youngest brother William, served him his breakfast. He sat alone at the table since his other brother John hadn't bothered to come home again. A flash of irritation grew suddenly and he clutched his fork, trying to rein it in. His brother was going to get himself killed and then there would be three Frank's in the graveyard instead of two.

He set the fork down and bile rose as he looked at his plate of food. Helen's death hadn't come unexpectedly, but he still felt the weight of it in his heart. Things had been looking up the last couple months; she'd been going out for walks and had been eating more. He'd let himself hope, but last week she'd gone back to spending all day in bed and then had died three nights ago. All at once little William didn't have a mother and had no way to understanding she wasn't coming back.

He forced himself to drink the coffee and took another couple bites of food, then pushed away from the table to go to his study. Around this time he usually went to the Frank's General Store to oversee the business, but today he had to inform the companion he'd hired for Helen that she wasn't needed anymore. He would invite Eloise Walsh to spend a day or two to recuperate here in the guest room and then pay for her train ticket back. He hoped she would be understanding about it.

He opened the window behind his desk and sat down in the leather seat, the place his father had sat when he'd begun building up the frontier general store. He kept an eye on the clock as he went through the books and order forms, but he didn't need to because the sound of the train coming in was loud enough to hear even if the window hadn't been open.

William burst into his study with a wild grin, Lou following behind him with the expression of wearied annoyance on her face. William had always been endlessly energetic. Ever since he'd learned to walk he would run everywhere, his little feet sliding on the smooth floor, sometimes barely staying upright and other times crashing into walls and people's legs.

William didn't wait for James to pick him up as he started climbing onto James's knees with little fingers and sharp elbows.

"William." James found himself laughing at the boy's enthusiasm.

"Da twain. Da twain." He repeated and as he sat on James's lap he seemed to expect an answer.

"Yes, Willy, the train is here."

Lou stepped forward, available to take custody of the boy if James desired. "Sorry, master Frank, that boy can run."

"Did you escape from Lou again, William?"

William tucked his chin and slouched in a way that reminded James of a turtle.

"You must mind Lou, William. And not go running off."

William seemed to think enough had been said about his bad actions and changed the subject. "Da twain!"

James handed over the small boy to Lou who left while telling William they would go see the train once he'd finished his breakfast.

James could make out the last carriage of the train from his window. He hefted himself out of his chair, weariness bleeding through to his bones. But, he would already be late and didn't want to make Miss Eloise wait any longer.

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The town was called a town only because there was no better name for the collection of tents surrounding the few actual buildings in the area. Whitfern was one of the few railroad towns that hadn't disappeared when the railroad had pushed further west during its construction, it's following of workers and whores trailing after it like flies on a carcass floating down a stream. This spot, unlike most other areas along the line, had a river and some fertile land. A few farmers grew and sold their produce, either

from ramshackle stalls or through Frank's General Store. It was an ideal point for the train to refuel and give the passengers a place to eat and stretch their legs.

James moved quickly along the boardwalk, nodding at citizens he recognized, but not staying to chat. There were only a few respectable ladies in town, now one less, and plenty of common whores who worked at the saloon or any of the smaller whorehouses. A shot ran out a few streets over in the tent neighborhood and only a few people bothered to turn their heads. Most of the men who lived in the tents worked at the coal mine, then spent their money on drink and women.

The platform came into view and he tried to spot the lady, but it seemed the entire trainload of passengers had chosen to mill around on the plank stage and he didn't see her. In the telegram, he'd been told to look for blond hair on a tall woman who would be wearing blue.

He bounded up the steps and wandered through the crowd. He grew nervous as he failed to find her. The conductor blew a whistle and his voice carried over their heads, alerting the passengers that the train was leaving soon and they should start boarding. Maybe Miss Eloise had got off at the wrong station; that had been known to happen from time to time since plenty of stations didn't bother to paint a sign with their name.

The crowd grew thinner and he scanned the remaining people. A woman with a baby was arguing with a lanky man and a group of workers was sharing a smoke. A small woman looking lost was wandering too near the tracks and a group of wild boys ran across the platform in ragged clothes, teasing the smallest boy as he followed behind. The children mostly belonged to the whores and to the wives of the workmen who'd foolishly brought them to this godforsaken place, his father included. He had brought his new wife to this town when it was even worse than it was now. At least he'd had the capital to build the general store with an apartment overhead so his wife didn't need to sleep in a canvas tent.

The train began its slow crawl as thousands of tons of machinery were pushed into motion by steam. He usually enjoyed the display, but this time he was cursing the woman for getting herself lost.

The small woman he'd noticed before was walking towards him with hesitant steps. She had a worry line between her brows. Perhaps Miss Eloise wasn't the only lost woman around.

He focused his attention on the woman and waited for her to ask for directions or if he'd seen her no good husband. Another shot rang out and the woman jumped, turning her head to try to find the source.

"Don't mind that, Miss." He said, "You'll get used to the sound if you're staying for awhile." Mary turned back to him even less certain of herself now that she seemed to be in the real wild west where gunshots were commonplace. She was almost sure this was James Frank, the man who had sent for a companion for his mother. He was well dressed and tall enough that she had to lift her chin to look him in the face. He was handsome, too; young and masculine. She could imagine him galloping a stallion across the plains with a cowboy hat that threatened to blow away while urging the horse on. In his suit, he looked almost stuffy and he stood too straight, except for his hair which was a tad too long and was trying to get free of it's combed state.

"Are you Mister Frank?" She asked.

"That's me." He said, "What can I do for you, Miss?"

She'd gone over what she should say when she finally got here, but the words were in a pile and she wasn't able to sort out their correct order.

"I... I'm here for the companion position." She winced then tried to come on less strong. "My name is Mary O'Connor and I'm here instead of Miss Eloise Walsh." She was doing a damned job at introductions.

Mister Frank was staring at her silently and it was making her even more nervous. Finally, he spoke. "Miss Walsh isn't coming?"

She could tell he was displeased. She knew she had her faults, but she didn't think he should assume right off the bat that she would be a bad companion. She could read and she'd been told she was nice company.

Before she could think of a way to raise his opinion of her he had turned to the side to think.

He turned back to her. "Why wasn't I notified that Miss Walsh wouldn't be coming?"

"She had to leave unexpectedly, sir."

"And so she sent you instead."

She wilted a little under his stern glare. "No sir, her grandfather sent me."

"And who are you?"

"Mary O'Connor, sir."

"No, Miss O'Connor, who are you in relation to Miss Walsh?"

Mary gulped. "It's actually it's Mrs. Calder now."

"What?"

"Eloise is no long a Walsh, she's a Calder."

He stared at her and when he didn't speak, she went on. "You see, Mister Walsh wanted to send Eloise out here because she'd got it into her head to fall in love with Mister Calder, who is no good, at least in Mister Walsh's eyes. But Eloise has always been stubborn and instead of doing as her grandfather bid, she up and eloped with this Calder man!"

The silence seemed to be ringing loudly in Mary's ears. She wished the train hadn't left so she could escape on it. She was making a full mess of the situation.

She couldn't hold his eyes and she tried not to shuffle her feet. Had she really thought him handsome only moments ago? He was terrifying.

"Miss O'Connor, who are you?"

She let out a shaky breath. "I worked for Mister Walsh."

She could tell he was getting impatient with her. "In what capacity?"

"As his maid, sir."

James looked down at the young woman who was being as evasive as she could manage and he gritted his teeth. It was something of a blessing that he wouldn't need to turn away the Walsh girl, now a Calder, but he wanted to have words with this grandfather who would send his maid as a replacement for his well-bred granddaughter. If he'd wanted to hire a common woman to be Helen's companion he could have found someone a lot sooner. He'd wanted Helen to have a friend who she'd have something in common with and this maid wouldn't know the first thing about being a respectable lady.

She was dressed in a shapeless dress that was worn and hemmed a bit too short. He could see that her laced up shoes were scuffed and a little torn. Her brown hair was tied into a knot at the back of her neck and without makeup she was plain. It hardly mattered that Helen no longer needed a companion, it was an insult that Mister Walsh had sent this girl.

"Miss O'Connor, the position is no longer available, so I suggest you wait for a train and go back to Chicago. I'm sure Mister Walsh will be in need of you."

Her head shot up and he saw she wasn't going to make this easy.

"Mister Frank, oh please give me a chance. I can be a good companion to your mother. Mister Walsh wouldn't have sent me if he didn't think you'd be pleased with my work."

"That's beside the point." He sighed as memories of Helen's grave came to him. "I understand you want a chance to prove yourself, but you see, Helen died three days ago."

Her mouth formed a little O of surprise and she blinked, then the crease between her brows returned.

"So you see, Miss O'Connor, there is no longer a companion job."

"I see." She was nearly whispering and her face was once again turned away.

"There will be another train coming by this evening. I suggest you book passage on it and go home."

He felt a moment of sympathy for the foolish girl who was only doing as her employer bid, but he had his own affairs to attend to and didn't want to spend any more time standing under the hot sun.

He tipped his hat to her. "I apologize for the trouble. Have a good day." Then he left with her standing on the platform, staring after him.

Mary wanted to cry, but she pushed away the impulse as Mister Frank left her with the news that all her plans had just been crumbled into dust.

She hadn't even given him her condolences. No wonder he was so unfriendly; he was mourning the death of his mother.

She turned around to look at the place where the train had been. He'd said another was coming this evening, but she didn't have the money for a ticket. Kind, old Mister Walsh had told her that Mister Frank would reimburse her for the cost of the ride out, but Mister Frank hadn't offered and she winced to imagine chasing after him to beg him for a handout.

She turned back around to the wide street of the town. On either side were buildings made of rough wood. The road itself was plain dirt. A wagon carrying crates bumped down the road, its wheels dipping into deep potholes.

She tried not to think about how trapped she was in this ugly town. As soon as she had the idea to send Mister Walsh a telegram asking for money she dismissed it as too humiliating. Besides, she was no longer his servant; he had another now. He was a friend, true, but she refused to ask for money from friends.

Feeling exposed just standing on the platform, she made her way to the steps and down to the road. She jumped as she noticed a grungy man lying against the platform post, his legs splayed out and his mouth hanging open. He was asleep and he smelled terrible. She hurried away from him.