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*For Steve and Debbie Korrell,
my longtime friends,
with much love and gratitude*

Prologue

Montana Territory
Spring, 1865

The other men wore masks, but Devlin Gallagher's face was bare to the chilly midnight wind. His insides churned, and bile stung the back of his throat. Though he had no love for the condemned, Gallagher dreaded what they were about to do to Jay Forbes. Gallagher was, after all, an officer of the court, duly licensed to practice law, and he'd sworn an oath to *uphold* justice, not make a travesty of it. And for all that, here he was, riding with an unlikely band of vigilantes, fixing to hang a man, and not in broad daylight, either, but secretly, in the dark of night.

Forbes stood quietly in the bed of an old wagon, his murdering hands tied behind his back, his ice-blue gaze fixed on Devlin and glittering with fear, but there was mockery in those eyes, too. When the posse had finally run him to ground, only a few hours before, after he'd

robbed a freight wagon and killed the driver, Forbes had laughed, a crazy, cackling sound that sent shivers down Devlin's spine.

"You're doin' this 'cause I took away your woman, Gallagher—'cause it was me she wanted 'stead of you."

It was true that Devlin had more reason to hate Forbes than the others did, but the once-sharp edge of his fury had been blunted by time; he hadn't seen Chastity, his former wife, in over three years. Since then he'd divorced her, courted and married Evadne Jessup Marshall, a young widow he'd met in San Francisco, and come back to Virginia City, backbone straight, head high.

Devlin's jaw tightened a little; it still gave him a twinge of sorrow to remember Chastity's betrayal, though he'd given up on her long ago. Not a day went by, though, that he didn't yearn to set eyes on his son. Steven had been a small boy when he'd seen him last, only four years old. "This has nothing to do with Chastity," Devlin finally rasped out, "and you damn well know it."

One of the other vigilantes climbed up into the wagon bed to stand next to Forbes and fling a rope over a sturdy tree branch, testing it with a hard pull. Forbes's star-shaped badge flashed in the bright light of the spring moon as he shifted his stance, as if bracing himself against the inevitable.

The springs of the buckboard creaked under the weight of the two men, and the shadows of leaves danced, silver edged, over both of them.

"You people is killin' an officer of the law!" Forbes burst out, finally accepting the gravity of his situation,

and his throat worked spasmodically as the noose was slipped around his neck. His long hair was stringy, his lean jaws marred by scars from an early bout with the smallpox.

Devlin didn't wonder what Chastity had seen in Forbes, way back when, because he reckoned he knew. Some women favored meanness in a man, figured they deserved such, maybe, and even seemed to find it exciting.

With a wrench, he brought himself back to the task at hand, grim though it was.

Right or wrong, he'd be glad when Forbes was dead, because a dead man couldn't thief and rape and kill. Forbes had done plenty of all three, though Devlin hadn't known the true extent of his crimes until recently. He would never have eaten or slept or rested if he'd been privy to the truth.

He'd tracked Chastity and Forbes to Montana, turned the whole territory upside down, looking for his boy, with no luck at all. The worry chewed at his gut, when he let himself think about all the things that could be happening to Steven.

As wild as she was, how could Chastity have put her own pleasure before the safety and well-being of her *child*, and Devlin's? He'd begged her to leave Steven with him when she went off with her outlaw lover, a man she'd met in a backstreet beer parlor. She'd flaunted her penchant for Forbes, thrown him up to Devlin, almost daring him to turn her out onto the streets, said she'd be going away for good as soon as the arrangements were made. At the time, the heartbreak had been almost more than Devlin

could take, and fool that he was, he'd still cherished the hope that Chastity might change her mind, come to her senses, and stay.

They had a good life, a nice home, a son.

Chastity had wanted for nothing.

She'd made up her mind about leaving, though it took some time, but she'd promised, sweetly, tenderly, and tearfully that she'd leave the boy behind with Devlin when she left.

It would be better for Steven to grow up there, in San Francisco, with his father, she'd said.

But then one day Forbes had come for her, and Chastity had sneaked out of their fine house, with its beautiful view of the Bay, and they'd taken young Steven with them. According to the note Chastity left for Devlin, Jay Forbes had always wanted a son and she couldn't deny him anything.

There had been one insane encounter with Chastity, during the intervening years, but Devlin had never again laid eyes on his boy.

"Murder!" Forbes ranted on, struggling against his bonds now. "It's cold-blooded *murder*, what you're doin' here! You've gotta let me go."

"Don't you go yammering on to us about murder!" raged Mance Pickering, the editor of Virginia City's fledgling newspaper. "You've shot four men that we know of, and Lord knows how many we don't. That freight driver you gunned down two days ago was barely twenty years old, you son of a bitch, just married and the wife with a babe on the way!"

Forbes shook his head quickly, like it was all an unfortunate misunderstanding. He was sweating hard now, and his gaze kept shifting off into the distance, as if he was expecting to be saved. "He drew on me," he argued, almost whining the words. "It was kill or be killed."

"You're a liar," Pickering spat out. "Tom wasn't wearing a sidearm or carrying a rifle, and you probably put that bullet through the poor kid's heart before he even had a chance to *think* about going for that old squirrel gun he kept stashed under the wagon seat."

Forbes's voice took on a pleading note, a mite on the shrill side. "You gotta listen to me—this is all a mistake, I'm innocent! Gallagher here, he just wants to see me swing from the end of a rope 'cause his woman's livin' with me—his woman and his boy!"

None of the others so much as glanced in Devlin's direction, but he could feel their embarrassment, sense their awkward sympathy. All of them knew the story, or some version of it.

"Where is my son?" he asked hoarsely. "Where is Steven?"

For all his quaking, a smug look crossed Forbes's face. "You'd like to know that, wouldn't you, Gallagher? Well, you ain't gonna hear it from me, not unless you let me go, like you know you ought to do, 'stead of takin' the law into your own hands this way."

Devlin merely stared up at the man. He didn't say a word.

"You'll go to hell for this!" Forbes croaked out.

"I'll see you there, if I do," Devlin told him.

Forbes began to blink rapidly, and the front of his shirt was soaked, even though it was cold out. "There's a lot you don't know," Forbes went on, almost blathering now. He turned his head, rubbed his beard-stubbed chin awkwardly against one hunched shoulder, as though it itched. "You hear me, Gallagher? There's a lot you don't know."

"I reckon there is," Devlin agreed evenly. He couldn't rightly say he cared overmuch about Chastity's situation, though he had once—she'd made her bed and she could damn well lie in it—but his fear for Steven was like a spear through his middle. It had been seven years, which meant the boy was eleven years old now.

"We've got two boys of our own, Chastity and me," Forbes said. "Coy and Reilly. They need me, Gallagher. They need their daddy."

For once in his miserable life, Devlin figured, Forbes might be telling the truth. "A boy needs his pa," he said quietly. "I never got a chance to say good-bye to my son. I guess you and his mama must have told him I wanted no part of his raising."

The noose was drawn tight around Forbes's neck, and Pickering, who had put it in place, climbed into the seat of the wagon itself and took up the reins. "Let's just get this over with," he said.

"Wait a minute!" Forbes begged. "Wait—I got some-thin' more to say!"

"Ya, and you'd talk all night if you thought it would save your hide," said Swede, the blacksmith.

"No," whined the onetime lawman gone bad, "you gotta listen, I tell you! Gallagher, I know where your boy

is, and your little girl, too! Don't you want me to tell you where Chastity's got 'em hid?"

The hanging would have proceeded if Devlin hadn't held up one hand to delay it. "What little girl?" he demanded in a gruff undertone.

Forbes laughed like the madman he was. "*Your* little girl, Gallagher—your baby daughter. Chastity calls her Willow."

A tremor went through Devlin Gallagher's sturdy frame. Almost three years before, he'd caught up with Chastity, his runaway wife, at Bannack, where he'd had a mining claim. He'd begged her for news of Steven. Devlin had shared one night with Chastity—she'd cried in his arms and said she'd made a terrible mistake by leaving him, but in the end she'd slipped away, taking a poke of his gold with her while he still slept. Come the rueful morning, he'd known no more about his son's whereabouts than before.

"He's just stalling, Dev," argued Pickering. "Trying to buy time."

"Where are they?" Devlin asked, with a calm that belied the churning emotions inside him. "Where are my children?"

Forbes shrugged. Even now, when he was about to die, there was something cagey about him. Probably not surprising, Devlin thought.

"Most of the time, Willow lives with a Mexican woman we know," the outlaw allowed slowly. "Chastity thinks the baby oughtn't to grow up in hideouts and on the trail. Maria looks out for her."

"Damnation," the storekeeper broke in. "Devlin, Forbes is lyin' to you! There probably ain't no little girl or no Mexican woman, neither."

A cloud drifted over the wide moon, and every man there shivered. It was then that they heard the eerie screaming.

She rode down through the gulch at a breakneck pace, did Chastity, her thick, fair hair trailing out behind her, her slender frame draped in a dark cape. She might have been a ghost or a beautiful demon just escaped from hell. Her disjointed shrieks of outrage and desperation were etched forever into the minds of everyone there to hear them.

Reaching the scene, Chastity fairly leaped off the back of her lathered black mare, flung one frantic look at Jay Forbes, then stumbled toward Devlin. She wore trousers, like a man, and a ragged white shirt that was open at the throat. "Stop them!" she sobbed, grabbing at him, clutching his lapels. "For God's sake, Devlin, don't let them do this!"

Devlin stared at her, stunned. She was like a specter, a mirage. He couldn't believe she was real.

She was fevered, her eyes wide and imploring. "Please!" she cried, in a keening hiss.

Devlin didn't—*couldn't*—speak for a long moment. Then slowly, sadly, he shook his head.

"Hang him," he said.

Chastity flung herself at Devlin then, a fierce creature, not entirely human, it seemed to him, clawing and kicking and biting, screaming obscenities. As they grappled,

she somehow, wild in her terror, managed to catch hold of his Colt .45 and wrenched it out of the holster. "I'll kill you before I let you do this, Devlin!" she screamed. She had the gun, gripped it in both hands. "I'll kill you all!"

At that moment, the driver of the wagon yelled and slapped the reins down onto the backs of the nervous team. Forbes gave a strangled shriek and Devlin lunged for Chastity, desperate to wrest the pistol from her hands.

She was remarkably strong for such a slight woman, and the struggle was ferocious. When the gun went off and Chastity flinched and then fell, Devlin froze, unable to believe she'd been hit.

But she had.

The bullet had torn a crimson gash in her middle.

Eyes wide with disbelief, Chastity slipped out of Devlin's hold and slumped slowly to the ground.

With one ragged sob, Devlin sank to his knees in the dirt and gathered Chastity close. Her blood drenched him, soaking through his clothes, hot against his skin.

"Weren't your fault, Dev!" cried the storekeeper. "We all saw that it weren't your doin'!"

Devlin rocked Chastity's lifeless form in his arms, weeping unashamedly into her hair. It would be a long time before he could think of this night without numbing himself with whiskey beforehand—and even longer until he found his children.

➤ 1 ➤

Montana Territory
June 9, 1883

The church was a weathered, unpainted structure surrounded by undulating summer grass. Organ music wheezed out into the bright June day.

Gideon Marshall kicked at the ground with the toe of one boot and groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was walk into that modest wooden building and interrupt a wedding, but as things stood, he didn't have much choice.

Much choice? Thanks to his older brother, Zachary, thanks to his own youthful high spirits, he had no choice at all.

He squared his shoulders and approached the open doors of the sanctuary.

Might as well get the unpleasant duty out of the way.

Willow would be furious, of course. Who could blame her?