



The Heart's Pursuit

Chapter 1

May 1873

Bright sunlight glared down upon the small town of Twin Springs, Colorado, as Jared Newman stopped his pinto gelding in front of the saloon. Silence reigned along the main street. If he hadn't ridden through here three days earlier, he would have thought the town abandoned. Not a soul in sight.

He removed his battered Stetson and raked his fingers through his hair, then stepped down from the saddle. He hit the hat against his pant leg a few times, shaking loose the trail dust. He was bone weary, and his temper had seen better days. The latter was due to the unseasonable heat. The former was due to the man who rode with him.

"Get down, Peterson. We could both use something to drink."

His prisoner obeyed, sliding to the ground, his wrists cuffed in front of him.

With a jingle of spurs, Jared ushered Lute Peterson through the swinging doors of the Mountain Rose Saloon. The narrow room was dimly lit and musty smelling. Two men, a circle of smoke lingering above their heads, glanced up from their game of cards. A blonde in a dress that might have been in the height of fashion a decade or two earlier lounged against the bar.

Behind her, the bartender swirled a white cloth along the bar's hardwood surface. He grinned at the new customers, but his expression changed fast enough when he noticed the cuffs on Peterson's wrists. His gaze shifted to Jared. "What'll it be?"

"Sarsaparilla. Two." He tossed coins onto the bar.

Peterson cast a look of disbelief in Jared's direction. "*Sarsaparilla?* How about a whiskey?"

Jared ignored him.

The woman sidled closer. "Haven't seen you in here before. Where you headed? Or are you new to town?"

He glanced at her. A generous dusting of powder and rouge had been applied to her angular face. Like her dress, she might have been attractive at one time, but life had left its mark around her eyes and in the cynical corners of her painted mouth.

When he didn't answer, she smirked. "Cat got your tongue?"

He would prefer to ignore her question the way he had Peterson's request for hard liquor, but he had a feeling she wouldn't leave him alone until he answered. "I'm taking my prisoner to Denver."

The bartender set the two glasses on the bar. Jared grabbed one and brought it to his lips, draining the drink in one long gulp.

"You a lawman?" the woman asked.

"Of a sort." He tossed another coin onto the bar. "I'll have another one."

"You look tired, mister. You should stay in town for the night." She leaned closer, smiling an invitation.

Jared caught a whiff of her cheap cologne and grimaced. "Sorry. We're in a hurry."

"I ain't in no hurry." Peterson grinned, as if were a friend instead of a common thief headed for jail. "I'd stay with the lady if she wants company."

With a shake of his head, Jared addressed the bartender again. "Where is everyone? The town looks deserted."

"Big wedding over at the church." The man poured Jared another sarsaparilla. "Our fair town's leading family's got a daughter getting hitched. Just about everybody's there."

"But none of you went." Jared tossed back this drink the same way he had the first.

The blonde at his elbow laughed. "Do we look like the type to get invited to a church weddin'?" She snorted.

Jared shrugged, then looked toward Peterson. "Let's go."

"Why don't we spend the night here, like the lady asked?" He grabbed the glass and downed his drink. "Ain't you tired?"

Jared took hold of Peterson's left arm and steered him out of the saloon. "Mount up. We've got a a lot of ground to cover before dark."

Too bad Twin Springs didn't have a sheriff—something he'd learned when he passed through the town the last time. It would suit Jared just fine not to have to ride into Denver to collect his reward. He'd like to be done with Peterson.

As they stepped toward the horses, Jared's hand still gripping Peterson's arm, he glanced in the opposite direction—and stopped dead in his tracks. A young woman raced toward him, a vision in white satin and pearls, her long lace train dragging on the dusty planks of the boardwalk. As he watched, she jerked the filmy veil from her head and sent her ebony hair cascading down her back, then tossed the headdress into the street.

Undoubtedly the daughter of the aforementioned leading family of Twin Springs. But a happy bride she was not. What had caused her to flee the church? A case of cold feet, perhaps. If so, they must be frigid indeed. Despite himself, an amused grin crept into the corners of his mouth.

At that moment, the fleeing bride seemed to become aware of the two men standing in the street beside their horses. She came to a stop on the boardwalk and her eyes lifted to meet Jared's. Silver-gray in a pretty face, they were awash with tears and filled with pain. His amusement vanished.

"We going or not, bounty?" Peterson demanded.

The woman's eyes widened a fraction before she continued past them in a flash of white, disappearing moments later around the next corner.

Jared was sorry she'd seen his grin. He regretted finding levity in her apparent sorrow—whatever the cause of it. "We're going." He gave Peterson a little push toward his mount.

The sooner they made Denver, the happier Jared would be.