

Promise Me

Chapter One

“Seems like an awful lot of stewing over one widow woman.”

Samuel Calhoun flicked his gaze across the ample bosom of the saloon girl who set his whiskey on the table. He briefly considered bedding her, then returned his concentration to his cards.

“She ain’t just a widder woman. She’s the wife of Arthur Wainwright, and the sole owner of the Silver Slipper Mine, now that he’s dead. And I hear tell she got every penny of his money. Now she’s comin’ up with these crazy schemes, gettin’ the miners together for some kinda association, she calls it.” Henry Sanders hurled his wad of chewing tobacco into the spittoon. He missed. “And if she succeeds, well, it’s gonna hurt all of us.”

Zachariah Dent tossed two cards on the table and raised an eyebrow at Sam. “Easy for you to say, Calhoun. If the rumors are to be believed, she’s gonna make you a rich man.” He shook his head at his poker partners. “That fella she sent to town, calls himself her agent, he’s tellin’ folks they’re gonna build houses for the miners.”

Zachariah picked up the cards Sam had dealt him and swore before throwing his hand down in disgust. “Luck seems to be with you tonight, Calhoun.”

Sam gave the men a lazy grin. “It appears so, gentlemen. But lady luck is as fickle as any woman can be, and she can change her mind in a heartbeat.” He threw more chips to the center of the table before dealing himself a card from the deck he held in one hand. Glancing at it, he kept his eyes cast down, never hinting at the fortuitous draw he’d just made.

“I don’t like what I hear about this Miners’ Benevolent Association. What the hell does any woman want with that kinda nonsense? Why don’t she stay up in Helena where she belongs?” Zachariah gulped down the rest of his whiskey and signaled a saloon girl for another drink.

Jack Pruitt studied his cards, his dark, granite-hard eyes giving no hint of his thoughts. He withdrew several chips from his dwindling pile and tossed them to the center of the table.

“Raise you twenty, and call.”

Sam gave a slight nod, tossed his own chips into the pile, and spread his cards before him, face up.

“Full boat, queens high.” His gaze never wavered from the face of his opponent.

Jack stared at the cards, shaking his head as he folded his own hand. “The ladies do seem to favor you, Calhoun.”

The other men at the table laughed as Sam gathered his winnings to add to his growing pile. He’d done well tonight. He always anticipated a game with this group of mine owners. They could afford to lose, and they enjoyed the challenge of playing against him. Of course, he hoped they were learning to trust him. In fact, he was counting on the poker games to give him that advantage. He watched the men drink, knowing when they felt the effect of the liquor, they’d talk more. Sam could wait to make his inquiries.

He leaned back in his chair, sipped his whiskey, and studied the group. These were tough men. It would take more than rumors of a lady hell bent on good works to scare them. He wondered how he could use the situation to his advantage.

"What exactly is the good Widow Wainwright up to?" he asked, as Henry dealt another hand. Sam never looked at his cards until all five were in front of him.

"Hell bent on destroying us, that's what the bitch is up to." The venom in Jack Pruitt's voice startled Sam.

Pruitt was a cold, quiet man, not given to emotional outbursts. Sam had once seen him face down an angry miner and plunge a knife into the man's heart with hardly a flicker of concern. Jack clearly considered this woman a serious threat, and Sam knew, in his line of work, there was always a way to benefit when men felt threatened. Especially since he'd learned to always remain calm and unemotional.

"Excuse me for saying so, gentlemen, but a benevolent association hardly seems to be a dangerous proposition. It sounds, very—" He paused to cough discreetly. "Christian."

He picked up his cards, arranged them, and considered his next move. He put two cards face down on the table. "Give me two aces, Henry." The other men laughed as they each accepted cards of their own. Sam noted that Jack Pruitt took only one.

He folded early, knowing his two fours wouldn't beat Pruitt, who had a tick in his left eye when he held a good hand. Sam had learned to read people, and in more than one instance that skill had saved his life. Tonight it would at least save him some money.

"Christian is right, damn do-gooder women folk." Henry folded his cards and grabbed his beer. He slopped some on his silk vest.

"Let me buy you another beer," Sam said. Henry wouldn't be as careful about what he said if he were drunk.

"Damn kind of ya, Calhoun."

"I'll buy a round for the table, if it's acceptable to you gentlemen," Sam said, as Pruitt laid down a pair of aces, gathered his winnings with one meaty fist, and nodded.

Zachariah lifted his lip and sneered. "You got mosta our money anyhow, Calhoun. By rights you oughta be buyin' fer the rest of the night."

Sam rearranged his chips and flashed a grin. "Well, I plan to retire after a few more hands. I do have a business to run, you know."

The other men made rude noises of objection, but Sam shook his head. "A working man has to pace himself. And if what you say about Mrs. Wainwright needing a substantial amount of lumber is true, I'd best make sure I have a decent stock available."

"Goddamn it, Calhoun, don't tell us you plan to help this woman with her schemes? Refuse to sell her the lumber, and maybe she'll go back where she came from." Henry lifted his glass. "Give her a hard time and send her packin', that's how we should get rid of her."

Jack Pruitt studied the whiskey glass sitting in front of him, but he didn't touch it. He wasn't much of a drinking man, and he nursed a whiskey for hours during a card game. It took real skill to beat Pruitt at poker, and Sam relished the challenge.

"I'm thinking we ought to do just the opposite." Jack tapped one pudgy finger on the deck of cards.

Pruitt's comment intrigued Sam. The man could be a cold, calculating bastard, which was sometimes necessary in a mining town as wild and unpredictable as Willow Creek, Montana.

Pruitt shuffled the cards. "I think we need somebody to court this widdler woman, crawl into her bed and then humiliate her in front of the whole entire town. That'd teach the bitch a good lesson— that she ought to be minding her *Christian*"—he spit the word out as if he were cussing— "concerns back in Helena instead of messing with men's business. We need to run her out of town with her tail between her legs."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "And just who could be cold-hearted enough to take advantage of a woman determined to do good for the less fortunate?" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Pruitt never looked away from Sam as he finished dealing the cards. "Why, I think you'd be the best candidate for the job, Calhoun. You got all that smooth charm that draws the ladies like bees to a rose garden. You got the looks, too, and you sure enough know your way around a petticoat."

The rest of the men joined Pruitt in laughter before he continued. "Seems you don't have no trouble getting into a woman's drawers, if the gossip can be believed."

Sam slowly sucked in a large gulp of air and then searched his pocket for a cheroot to hold his temper in check. Once, a long time ago, he would have shoved himself from the table and delivered a beating to any man who'd dared to insult his character. Those days were long gone and nearly forgotten. Life had taught Samuel Calhoun some hard and mean lessons; more than anything, he'd learned to survive and to make the most of every opportunity fate threw in his direction.

He lit the cigar and took a deep puff, relishing the rich, slightly bitter taste of the tobacco. He let the smoke circle above his head to form a halo.

Sam pasted the lazy grin back on his face as he took the measure of the man sitting across from him.

"I could seduce the lady. There'd be no real challenge to that, gentlemen. My question is, what's in it for me?" Sam balanced the cigar on the edge of the table, gathered his hand together, and sorted his cards. "After all, I aim to make a fortune in Montana territory. That's the reason I came here in the first place."

"Four thousand dollars." Pruitt said.

Sam spread his cards face down on the table and brought the cheroot to his lips again. "Six thousand. The lady might be a pasty-faced bluestocking."

The men placed their bets and Henry Sanders folded.

"Five thousand," Pruitt said.

Sam's mind raced with possibilities. Five thousand dollars to bed a woman. Hell, he'd been doing it for free since he was seventeen years old. It had never occurred to him that anyone would be willing to pay him for what he considered a Godgiven talent. With that kind of money he could buy the land in the San Fernando Valley and finally begin to build his ranch.

"Five thousand and five percent of the profits from each of your mines for the next year." Sam knew it was too much, but he loved to bargain.

Pruitt nodded at the other men. "What do you say to those terms?"

Henry belched and shook his head. "Seems to me that's a lotta money for gettin' a woman to do what she might wanna do anyhow. Mebbe I'll take a crack at her myself, and I'd do it fer free."

Pruitt shook his head, and his lips twisted as if he'd tasted something sour. "The only women you can entice into your bed, old man, are the ones you pay cash money for. We're talking about a lady here, and ain't none of us got the know how to court a lady." His voice dropped an octave and he leaned forward. "Most 'specially a Christian lady. I hear tell she's a papist too."

Sam patiently waited for their decision. Dealing with a Christian woman with righteous works on her mind was one thing. Trying to seduce a good Catholic lady was another.

"It just might be, Calhoun, you'll have your work cut out for you. I'll give you the money, because it'll cost me a whole lot more if she starts making the miners think they ain't getting their due." Pruitt leaned across the table and offered his hand.

Sam had a momentary twinge of conscience, but he tamped it down. He wondered what kind of hellcat he'd be taking on in the form of the Widow Wainwright. It might not be as easy to seduce the woman as he imagined. Of course, he would achieve his objective. Women couldn't resist him.

The other men gave in and grudgingly agreed to his terms. Easy as taking candy from a baby, Sam thought. Lady luck was indeed with him tonight.

Each man added his chips to the pile and showed his cards. Finally, it was Sam's turn. He carefully flipped each card with a fluent twist of his wrist.

"Four kings and a queen," he said, as the other men stared at his hand in dead silence.

Sam gathered his chips, scraped them into his Stetson, and stood. "I expect I need my rest, gentlemen. Seducing a lady can be hard work." He shrugged into his black frock coat, adjusted his string tie, and smoothed out the wrinkles from his fancy waistcoat.

"I'll be in touch. I don't imagine it'll take long to accomplish the task of getting rid of Mrs. Wainwright."

"We're hoping you can be quick about this, Calhoun. The longer that woman stays in town, the more damage she'll be able to do. Don't lollygag around romancing her." Jack pounded the table.

Samuel Calhoun took offense at Jack's tone, and he turned back to face the poker players still seated at the oak table.

"What we are talking about, gentlemen, is a delicate matter. I take pride in my work, regardless of its nature." He touched the handle of his revolver. "I expect you to let me undertake this *courtship* in the manner I deem most appropriate."

Jack Pruitt stood, the sawdust on the saloon floor making small clouds as he stomped his foot.

"Just remember, Calhoun, we hired you to get rid of her. Don't go getting all soft and feeling sorry for the woman. Be careful you don't go fallin' in love with her."

Sam stood at the bar of the Dark Horse saloon and choked out a bitter laugh. He had learned a powerful lesson years ago. Love ended in disappointment and loss.

"I promise you, gentlemen, I'll make the Widow Wainwright sorry she ever came to town. As for me falling in love, well, there's a better chance of you buying ice from the devil."

Sam folded the money the barkeep handed him and stuffed it into the pocket of his vest. Taking one last draw from his cheroot, he tossed it into a polished brass spittoon and touched one finger to the tip of his hat. "Gentlemen, I'll be talking to you." His long legs carried him across the pine floor, and he pushed through the swinging doors. He stood outside on the wooden sidewalk and grinned when he heard Henry Sanders's voice.

"Damn arrogant son-of-a-bitch. I'm almost hopin' that widder woman keeps her legs shut tight just to teach him a lesson."

Sam brushed a speck of dust from his coat and kicked at the thick mud of the street shining in the moonlight. Truth be known, he wished the same, because resistance from a woman would make the seduction a challenge. Sam loved a challenge.

He wandered toward the parlor house for a moment, but turned back toward his sawmill. He'd avoid taking his pleasure for a few days. The abstinence would heighten the attraction of the widow, which might be necessary. Arthur Wainwright had been over sixty when he died. His widow might be near that age herself, which could work in Sam's favor. A more mature woman might be grateful for the attentions of a younger man.

He stood before the mill office and stared at the sign hanging above him. *Calhoun Lumber Company*. It was simple, and when he was on an assignment, he chose to keep things as simple as possible. His life was predicated upon simplicity and deceit. He constantly re-created himself—no past, no future. He existed for the duration of the job, then disappeared.

On this assignment, he'd discovered he was a good businessman, and several times he'd been tempted to resign from his position and settle down here. But too much was at stake. If he didn't discover more about the mine owners and their plan to turn the country to the silver standard, economic disaster would result.

That was his main reason for accepting the challenge to seduce the much-feared Widow Wainwright. If he could figure out a way to rid the mine owners of this inconvenient woman, there was a chance they'd finally accept him into their inner circle.

His assignment as a member of the United States Secret Service was too important to let an issue like one woman's ruined reputation interfere. He'd already spent months creating his false identity to discover the roots of a massive counterfeiting operation. He was close to gaining their trust, and the information he needed to expose their plot.

Jack's warning echoed in his mind. Sam shook his head. He could protect himself from falling in love while seducing the Widow Wainwright. He no longer possessed a heart to lose.

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