

1

*Calico, 1883*

“Fire! The mine is on fire!”

Abigail bolted upright in her bed, the blankets clutched to her chest. Pounding feet and strangled cries mingled with the wispy fingers of her dreams. Outside her window, an eerie orange glow illuminated the night sky.

Papa was in the mine.

Thrusting back the covers, she jumped from the bed, her legs chafed by the straw that poked out from the ticking, and ran to the door. Her father’s repeated warnings rang in her head, but she ignored them and wrested the heavy oak beam from its hooks. It fell to the floor with a thud, just missing her bare toes. She shoved it out of the way and flung open the door.

“What’s happening?” she shouted. It was no use. Snagged by the brisk wind whipping down from the mountains, her words carried to no one in particular.

Their tiny home lay on the furthest edge of town, next to the livery. Perhaps Nathan Hawk, the livery’s new owner, knew something. Sucking in a lungful of sharp air, Abigail

yanked her shawl from its peg next to the door and threw it around her shoulders. Scant protection, but at least her nightgown was covered. Her red boots rested in the corner, but pausing to slip them on would waste precious seconds and Papa needed her *now*.

She whirled and hurried into the cool air, wincing as the stone-crusted ground bit into her feet.

Raucous laughter spilled from one of Calico's many saloons. The drunkards inside cared nothing for the smoke billowing from the mine. They were too wrapped in their whiskey to notice the shouts and panicked neighing of the horses. Perhaps they'd be too preoccupied to notice one witless girl scurrying through the night, helpless to run or defend herself if one of them attacked.

"What are you doing out here by yourself?"

The harsh demand sent a jolt through her heart. She whirled toward the livery, peering through the gloom for a glimpse of the owner's face.

"Don't you know it's not safe?"

A gun barrel glinted in the pale moonlight cascading down from the mountains. Abigail clutched the shawl tighter to her shoulders. "M-Mr. Hawk?"

"Miss Watts?" He sounded as incredulous as Abigail felt. "Land sakes, woman, hasn't your father ever warned you—"

"Papa's in the mine. It's on fire." Speaking the words birthed fresh panic. "I was hoping you could help. . ."

She couldn't finish. Desperation boiled in her chest. "Oh, please!"

After a moment, Nathan's strong hands grasped her shoulders. Without a word, he drew her into the livery. A match struck. The dim glow of a lantern drove away the shadows, but it did

nothing for the darkness crowding her heart.

“You say your father is in the mine?”

Now that she could see his face, Abigail read genuine concern in Nathan’s features. His brows were drawn, the muscles along his jaw, bunched. She nodded. “Yes, but I didn’t dare go there alone—”

“Absolutely not.” His gray gaze sharpened. When she flinched, his tone softened. “You’d only be endangering your own life. Anson wouldn’t want that.”

Her father’s name rolled easily from Nathan’s lips. The two had become good friends over the last couple of months, after her father took the newly arrived livery owner under his wing.

Nathan gestured toward one of the stalls. “Come. Sit with Lizzie while I see what I can find out.”

Abigail looked in the direction he pointed. She needed Nathan’s help, and Lizzie couldn’t be left alone, but the idea of waiting helplessly while he went to the mine filled her with frustration.

“Miss Watts?”

She shook the shackles of indecision from her limbs and picked her way across the dirt floor. A tangle of arms and legs, Nathan’s five-year-old daughter slept soundly amongst the sweet-smelling hay. Abigail had taken an instant liking to the spunky little girl, and she to Abigail, often following her around town while she delivered mended clothing. She sank to her knees alongside the sleeping child and peered up at Nathan.

“You will hurry?”

He nodded. By the light of the lantern, his grim face appeared even more somber than

usual. “You should be safe in here but. . .do not leave Lizzie’s side for any reason. Is that clear?”

Warning sharpened his tone, but Abigail managed to bob her head. Nathan was a big man, rough-hewn and hard, but with a sadness in his eyes that said he was neither cruel nor unfeeling. Once she’d given her promise, he hooked the lantern to a nail above his head then strode out the door, his rifle gripped in his hands.

Outside, the shouts grew louder. Abigail kept her gaze fastened to the cracks in the splintered door, every moment hoping Nathan would return, her father in tow. At the same time, she feared another figure with a more sinister intent might materialize.

She crouched closer to Lizzie. Would she ever feel safe in Calico? In the daylight, when the sun sparkled on the mountainside and wildflowers bloomed in abundance, Abigail talked easily with the prospectors. She laughed at their antics and enjoyed when they gathered with their families for a meal on the church grounds. But at night. . .she breathed a silent prayer, wishing the confidence she felt singing the hymns on Sunday was more tangible now.

Lizzie sighed, and Abigail thought she might awaken. Instead, the child rolled to her side, dislodging the thin blanket she’d been wrapped in. Grasping the edge, Abigail pulled it higher around the girl’s slender shoulders. The covering would do for now, while the last traces of summer sun heated the sands of the Mohave, but in the winter? Chilling storms and freezing temperatures were only weeks away. Perhaps by then, Nathan would have sufficient funds to finish the house he was erecting alongside the livery. If not—

The winters were harsh in this part of California, even more so for a child as young as Lizzie. Abigail reached down to stroke her flushed cheek, tears gathering in her eyes. She and Lizzie had both lost their mothers. What would Abigail do if she lost her father, too?

A sharp gust of wind ripped through the entrance and thrust the door open with a crash.

Abigail stared, heart pounding. With a muffled cry, she threw herself between the entrance and Lizzie.

Her worst fears were realized. Outlined against the fiery night sky was the hulking figure of a man.

[SB]

Nathan shoved through the crowd gathered at the entrance of the Silver King Mine, using his height and size to added advantage. Many of the faces were Oriental. Torchlight created eerie valleys over their eyes and in the hollows of their cheekbones, but there was no disguising their fear.

He jerked his head toward the gaping hole that formed the entrance to the mine. “Does anyone know what’s happening in there?”

His booming voice quieted the crowd and several people turned.

A stubby woman dressed in black stepped forward. “Gas pocket. We heard the explosion and come a runnin’.”

“Mrs. Bailey.” Nathan eyed her compassionately. She was still mourning the loss of her husband in the mine less than eight months ago. Of all the people he’d met, he liked her best, apart from Anson Watts and his family. The stout little widow seemed cut from the same ore they carved from the mountain. He glanced toward the mine. “Is Joseph—?”

“My Joseph is in there—” she jabbed her gnarled thumb toward the mine, “—helping with the rescue. He and a handful of others were the only ones as would see to it.”

At least her son hadn’t been caught in the blaze. Nathan strode toward the entrance. The billowing smoke had lessened some, which meant the miners had wrestled it under control, or else it had burned itself out. He squinted against the ash stinging his eyes and poked his head

inside. “Any idea who all might be down there?”

“Hui. Hui inside.” A slender Chinese woman gestured frantically. “Many odders. You help, please? You go?”

“A couple of them Orientals volunteered to go with Joseph,” Mrs. Bailey said, her brow lowered in a frown.

That explained Hui’s presence. He wouldn’t have been allowed inside otherwise. Another woman—Nathan vaguely remembered seeing her around town with Abigail—stepped forward to wrap the Chinese lady in hug. “It’ll be all right, Lin. They’ll find the miners and get out. We just have to be patient.”

“Everyone away from the mine. Move. All of you!”

Along with the rest, Nathan turned to see who issued the order. Gavin Nichols. Nathan grunted. The man thought too highly of himself, especially now that the Silver King had new ownership and Gavin had been elevated to the superintendent’s position.

Gavin stomped through the crowd toward Nathan. “What’s going on here? What happened?”

Thrusting out his chin, Nathan stared down at the smartly dressed man. “I figured you’d know, Nichols. Those are your miners trapped inside, aren’t they?”

Air popped from Gavin’s mouth in a flustered rush. “Why. . . I came as soon as I heard.”

Maybe. But after he’d taken the time to change his clothes. His embroidered vest probably cost more than Nathan made in a month, and his shoes were polished to a high gleam. The mine superintendent’s position must pay well, and Nichols wasn’t ashamed to let everyone know. Nathan turned away disgusted, just as a shout rose from the gloomy mine entrance, followed by a rumble from the cage that lowered the miners into the shaft.

“They’re coming!” Mrs. Bailey yelled.

Signaling the people around him, Nathan ushered them into a line. The first rescuer came into view, supporting an injured miner around the shoulders.

Daniel McAdams. Nathan winced at the burned condition of his hands and face. Daniel would be lucky to avoid infection.

Nathan rushed forward to help draw the injured man out. After that, a line of miners, their wounds varied, streamed from the hole in the mountain. Last to emerge was Joseph Bailey and Anson Watts. Between them, they carried a limp, charred body, the long, dark braid that dangled from the man’s topknot brushing the ground.

“Hui!” The Oriental woman ran forward, crying and screaming in Chinese. “My Hui!”

Nathan caught her by the shoulders before she could throw herself on the body. She was too thin in his opinion—the ridges along her spine poked through her ramie tunic. He held her carefully as she sobbed her grief against his chest. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” he murmured. “So very sorry.”

A hush fell over the stunned crowd, except for the Chinese, who had separated themselves into a tight circle. They took Hui’s body from Anson and Joseph, and with foreign prayers falling from their lips, carried him east toward their section of town.

The young woman who had comforted Lin before moved forward and grasped her forearms. “Come, Lin. Let me walk you home.” To Nathan, she said, “I’ll stay with her through the night. She’s going to need someone close by to help her with the baby.”

She had a kind face, this woman, and compassion shone from her eyes. Nathan released Lin to her care. “Thank you, Miss—?”

“Martin. Caroline Martin.”

The Martins were well-known in Calico. Lin would be in good hands, at least for tonight. He could only hope she had kin who would care for her after that.

Miss Martin and Lin followed the mourners, a small cloud of dust raised by their shuffling feet. Nathan sighed then turned to look for Anson. His friend leaned wearily against an ore car, ragged grief etched into the lines of his brow. As the crowd dispersed to care for their family members, Nathan made his way to him.

“It’s business as usual tomorrow!” Gavin shouted, rocking on his tiptoes. “I’m as sorry as anyone to see men injured, but we have a mine to run.”

Nathan froze then turned slowly on his heel. “Injured? A man died, Nichols. His wife is a widow tonight.”

The accusation in his tone froze the men and their wives. Their gaze bounced from him to Nichols while they waited for him to respond.

The insufferable dandy tugged on the tails of his string bowtie then gave a gruff shake of his head. “He wasn’t a miner. He was Chinese.”

“You think his wife cares about that?” Nathan looked around. Those who didn’t drop their gaze stared back, but no one broke the uneasy silence, even the handful he’d seen walking to church on Sunday mornings.

Grimacing in disgust, he whirled from the pious display and continued on toward Anson. Let them sort out for themselves the prejudice from their religion. He’d have none of either.

He clapped a hand to the older man’s shoulder. “You all right?”

Anson shrugged, the muscles in his back rippling against his sweat-dampened shirt. Given his gentle nature, Nathan suspected he would rather heft a book than a shovel, but the mountain had chiseled him, cleft the softness from his body. Had the harsh conditions in Calico

wrought the same effect on all people, or just the men? His thoughts winged to Lin.

“I’ll be all right,” Anson said. His gray eyes fastened on the retreating back of the mine’s newest widow. “It’s Mrs. Chen I’m worried about. Hui worked as a cook at the Calico Hotel. He was their only means of support, and they have a new baby at home.” He heaved a sigh that must have rattled his bones.

So that was what Miss Martin had meant by her comment. Nathan shook his head. “Why do they come? Why even risk it?”

“Same reason as us, I suppose. Dreams of a better life.” Anson rubbed his large palm across his face, smearing the streaks of dirt and mine dust. His voice dropped and his gaze darted to the miners. “Some dream, eh? The silver trickling out of this hole isn’t worth a man’s life.”

This was the second time in less than a week that Anson had mentioned the dwindling silver production. His concern rumbled from deep inside, like the explosions the miners set off to create new tunnels.

Nathan eased closer and lowered his voice. “Is it as bad as all that?”

Eyes somber, Anson studied him a moment, then sighed. “I have my suspicions, nothing more.”

“What does Nichols say?”

“What he always says—the silver will pick up once we dig deeper into the mountain.”

Anson grunted and crossed his arms. “I think he arranged to have that last wagonload of immigrants transported here just so he could prove to folks that Calico’s still booming.”

Bitterness tinged his laughter. “High price to pay just so’s one man can keep up appearances. I hate the way the Chinese are treated here, like so much cattle with no right to seek after the very thing that brought all of us, but what can I do? Prejudice is ingrained pretty deep.”

Concerned by the weariness in Anson's voice, Nathan straightened and gestured toward the livery. "We'd best get home. Abigail is waiting with Lizzie, and she's worried sick."

Anson looked startled for a moment, as though his daughter's concerns had not occurred to him, and then he shoved off the ore car and joined Nathan. "Of course. Poor Abigail. When she hears the cries of the Chinese, she'll probably think—" He shuddered.

Nathan knew exactly what she would think and how it would make her feel—dismay, despair, unbearable sorrow. He shook off a flood of memories. "Let's go."

Urgency quickened Nathan's steps. He didn't know Abigail as well as he did Anson, but he still couldn't wait to put her fears to rest.