

October 1850
California gold fields

They were going to starve to death, if they didn't freeze to death first. Sure, they had beans for dinner, but Eli had had to trade her spare shirt for them—the one she'd been wearing beneath her everyday shirt to keep the early-October frost from biting her skin. She shivered beside the fire. Not much left to trade for supper, but then, there wasn't another miner in these diggings that had grub to spare even if she had something worth trading.

She studied each bean, careful not to burn a one. Her hollow stomach cramped as the sweet smell of the simmering meal mixed with the scent of wood smoke filling the air.

A pinch of rosemary would have added flavor. Would Mama have been disappointed Eli'd traded the last of their herbs for Pa's new coat? She shook her head. If Eli couldn't coax Pa from the creek, the least she could do was keep his shoulders warm. Mama would have understood.

A shift in the cold wind blew soot into Eli's eyes as she lifted the pan from the fire. Brushing a grimy strand of hair from her face and blinking away the sting, she turned her back to the smoke and stirred the beans.

Time to get Pa.

She walked to where he squatted in the icy mountain creek.

He wouldn't be happy she'd traded the spare shirt. He'd wanted it to hide her blossoming womanhood. Of course, he'd have to notice the shirt was gone first.

Standing beside the babbling water, she toed off her boots before yanking her tattered socks off. After stuffing them into a boot, she pulled up her trousers and, with a bracing breath, waded into the chilling water.

"Here, Pa."

She held the spoon out handle first, but he shrugged her away. Afternoon sunlight bounced off his thin, greasy hair—brown like hers, but darkened by muck. His dirt-encrusted brown eyes continued squinting into the swirling pan of water. The gentle rotation of his wrists never ceased.

"Come on, Pa. You gotta eat."

He cleared his throat and spat to the side opposite where she stood, never taking his eyes from the water. "I'm fine. You eat."

Eli lifted the spoon higher. "But, Pa—"

"I'll eat later." He shifted in the calf-deep water so that her worried stare landed squarely between his broad shoulder blades.

Her fingers tightened around the spoon as she planted her fist on her hip. The rocks shifted beneath her feet. "That's what you said this morning."

"I'm busy, Eli. Now hush and leave me be."

She stood there a moment longer, taking in the sight of him. That tall, too-thin frame draped in the now too-large, threadbare shirt. She'd mended that thing more times than she could count. The trousers he kept up with a rope at his waist needed mending in the right knee, but she doubted the fabric could endure another stitching. She peered down at her own trousers. The worn threads of the cuffs drifted and tugged with the current.

She frowned at the beans cooling in the pan. A body shouldn't have to choose between clothes and food. But miners upstream caught any fish in the creek, and hunting around here was

pointless. All the digging, rattling, and mining commotion scared the game away.

She'd tried to coax Pa to leave their claim long enough to hunt elsewhere to no avail.

Mama could've convinced him.

Mama isn't here. Eli straightened her shoulders. "Pa, this is the last—"

"Hey, Eli!" The familiar voice cut her off.

She turned in time to see a small rock sail toward her head and managed to duck it, but the move upset her balance. She tipped backward.

The beans!

Contorting herself to right her balance without spilling their dinner, she wobbled back and forth as stones rocked beneath her. She shifted her footing, but the sloped face of a large, moss-covered rock hastened her descent. Holding the pan aloft as she fell backward, her body tilted sideways and she overcorrected—

Sending the beans spilling down her shirt and into the creek.

For a moment she sat still, the chill of the icy mountain runoff failing to cool her blood as gales of boyish laughter drifted toward her from the bank. She erupted from the creek, wielding her now-empty pan above her head. "Morgan Channing, I'm gonna have your hide for this!"

She sloshed three full steps to the edge of the creek before she froze.

The eleven-year-old had stopped laughing and was staring at her, mouth hanging open, eyes wide. "Y-you...! Y-you're a...a..."

Eli followed his gaze to her chest, where a few beans still clung to her drenched, oversized shirt. She dropped the pan and covered herself. Oh, how brainless of her! Would Pa send her away?