



## *Prologue*

*My dearest Miss Carmichael,*

*You have my deepest gratitude for agreeing to be my wife and the mother to my six-year-old daughter, Anna. As your husband, I pledge my protection and unbridled respect. Life in Wyoming Territory offers little in the way of amusements for a woman of your status but makes up for it in beauty. Anna and I look forward to meeting you and welcoming you into our lives.*

*Sincerely,  
Dr. Colton Lee*



## *Chapter One*

*Wyoming Territory*  
*Spring 1885*

Regan Carmichael was tired of riding in the stage-coach. The beauty of the Wyoming countryside with its trees and snow-topped mountains had been thrilling to view at first, but after traveling for three long days in a cramped coach that seemingly had no springs, she longed for the journey to Paradise, Wyoming, to end. Even her excitement at meeting the man she'd come to marry had been dulled by the lengthy trek, and she was certain her bottom would bear bruises for the rest of her days. Her mood was further challenged by having ridden the past day and a half alone. She did enjoy no longer being squashed between the other passengers who'd since departed, but missed the conversations

they'd shared. Up top, sat the driver, Mr. Denby, and the guard, Mr. Casey, who due to their duties had no time to lighten her boredom with conversation. The wheels hit another rut on the uneven road causing her to bounce, land hard on the thin leather seat, and her poor sore bottom wailed again.

That it might be months before she saw her family again temporarily took her mind off the uncomfortable ride. She began missing them the moment she boarded the train in Tucson. Her Aunt Eddy and Uncle Rhine. Her dear sister, Portia. The last time she'd been away from home for more than an extended period had been during her studies at Oberlin College, but unlike then Regan wouldn't be returning home. This would be the start of a new life in a place she knew little about other than it was mostly wild and untamed, the two largest cities were Laramie and Cheyenne, cattle raising reigned supreme, and women were given the right to vote in 1869; a national first.

Suddenly, the coach picked up speed. Mr. Denby could be heard hoarsely urging the horses to run faster. Concerned, she quickly pushed aside the leather window shade and looked out. Three men wearing bandanas over their faces were riding hard in their wake. Mr. Casey began firing his shotgun, and the riders, swiftly closing in on the coach, returned fire. Regan snatched up her own Winchester, tore down the shade, and added her weapon to the fray. Seconds later, she no longer heard the shotgun from above.

"Mr. Denby! Are you two okay?" she shouted.

"No! Keep shooting, miss!"

He didn't have to tell her twice.

The outlaws were nearly on them. Even though the careening pitch of the coach played havoc with her aim, she managed to hit the nearest rider, which made him drop the reins, grab his arm, and slump forward in pain. His partner rode past him and positioned himself adjacent to the coach. He took aim at the uncovered window but Regan was already squeezing the trigger on the rapid-fire rifle. The cartridges exploded in his chest and he tumbled backwards off his mount.

The coach thundered on.

The third hombre must have realized the odds weren't in his favor. A grim Regan watched him grab the reins of the riderless horse. He and the slumped man she'd shot in the arm rode back the way they'd come. Whether the one they left behind was dead, she didn't know.

Breathing harshly and shaking, she fell back against the seat. Only then did she acknowledge how terrified she'd been. Her roiling stomach made her think she might be sick, but she thanked her recently deceased neighbor, Mr. Blanchard, for his rifle lessons. Shoot first, puke later! he'd told the then eleven-year-old Regan and her older sister, Portia. The memory made her smile and she drew in a deep breath that calmed her frayed nerves.

The coach slowed, then stopped. When the door opened, an alarmed Regan grabbed the Winchester.

It was the driver, Mr. Denby. For a moment, he stared at her in awe.

"That was some mighty good shooting, miss. Wasn't expecting that—not with you all fancy dressed the way you are."

Regan silently acknowledged the compliment. "Are you and Mr. Casey all right?"

"No. Casey's heart gave out. He's dead."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry."

"I'd be dead, too, if it hadn't been for you. Do you mind riding up top with me so I can put his body in the coach?"

"Of course not."

With her help, Casey's body was placed on the seat. After handing Denby her rifle, she hiked up the skirt of her fancy blue traveling ensemble and climbed the large front wheel to the seat.

"You do that like you've been climbing wagons all your life."

"I have. I drove the mail back home in Arizona Territory."

He chuckled. "Really?"

She nodded.

"You here to visit family?"

"No. I'm a mail-order bride. The man's name is Dr. Colton Lee."

Denby began coughing.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a tickle in my throat. Let's get going. We should make it to Paradise before sunset."

He got the horses moving but Regan swore the

coughing fit must've meant something else because when she glanced his way, Denby was smiling.

Before they'd gone another mile, she spied another group of men riding hard in their direction. This time there were no bandanas and their open dusters were flapping like birds of prey. She grabbed her rifle and took aim. "I think the man that got away has returned with friends. You keep driving, I'll try and hold them off."

He let out a curse and slapped the reins down on the horses' backs. The coach picked up speed, but she could tell by the rate they were moving that the poor beasts were tired. "How many men?" Denby yelled. He was unable to see the riders from his seat.

"Eight!" Regan knew there was no way she'd be able to hold her own against so many armed men. She was terrified, but as they got within range she steadied her aim and fired repeatedly. There were three men riding point. She hit one in the shoulder, but apparently, the bullet only grazed him because he slapped a hand over the injury and kept riding. They began returning fire but she realized they were firing in the air. They'd also halted their mounts. Curious, but not drawing down, she waited over her pounding heart.

"What's the matter?" Denby asked.

"They've stopped."

He pulled back on the reins to halt the coach and stood up cautiously. After assessing the riders, he waved his arms as if signaling them and asked her, "Did that rifle of yours hit anybody?"

"I caught the one in the black duster in the shoulder. Why? Do you know them?"

"Yep. It's the sheriff, Whit Lambert."

Her eyes widened. "I shot the sheriff?"

"No, ma'am. The man in the black duster is Doc Lee. You just plugged your soon-to-be husband." And by his chuckles, he apparently found that humorous.

Regan was mortified.

The sheriff and his men approached on mounts held to a walk. Regan couldn't take her eyes off the grim ebony face of the man she'd come to marry. He was tall and lean and sat his big bay stallion proudly. A mustache accented his tersely set mouth. A close-cropped beard dusted his jaw. She was pleased to finally put a face to the man she'd been corresponding with for the past few months, but her main concern was how he'd react upon learning who'd shot him. Regan also noted belatedly that the men who'd attacked the coach were also with the sheriff's posse. Their hands were cuffed and neither looked happy about being apprehended. She assumed the body lying across the back of a black horse was the one she'd shot in the chest.

"Sorry about the shooting, Sheriff," Denby called out. "We thought you were part of the gang that rode down on us earlier. She really didn't mean to shoot the doc."

The tall auburn-haired sheriff appeared as confused by Regan's presence as the men of the posse

seemed to be. "You were the one shooting at us, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"I'm Sheriff Whitman Lambert. And you are?"

Drawing in a nervous breath, she gave the doctor a hasty glance. "Regan Carmichael."

The doctor's dark gaze flew to hers. "I'm truly sorry," she replied guiltily.

The sheriff turned to the doctor and although his barely veiled amusement mirrored the reactions of the other posse members, the doctor's jaw was tight with displeasure.

She felt terrible.

"Where's Casey?" the sheriff asked Denby.

"Inside on the seat. He's dead. I think his heart gave out during the gun fight earlier."

The doctor dismounted, wincing a bit as he moved and entered the coach.

"Was it those two?" Lambert asked, pointing to the sullen, dirty-faced outlaws.

"Their faces were covered," Regan replied, "but I believe so. I hit one in the arm and another in the chest."

"That's him back there," he said, indicating the lifeless body. He viewed her with the same wonderment Mr. Denby had earlier.

Denby came to her defense. "You aren't going to charge her, are you? Had it not been for her, I'd probably be dead as Casey. The stage line will probably give her a reward for helping keep the gold I'm carrying safe."

Regan knew stage lines sometimes did such

things, but she didn't need rewarding for protecting herself. She was a woman. Had the outlaws taken the coach, she might have been prey to an unspeakable assault and they may have discovered the large amount of gold coins sewn into the hems of her gowns. She took no joy in having caused the man's death and if she was charged, she knew her Uncle Rhine would provide her the best lawyer his money could buy.

The doctor exited the coach. Ignoring her, he gave the sheriff a terse nod, as if verifying Mr. Casey's demise, before haltingly climbing back into the saddle. His stilted movements made her believe his injury was more serious than the simple graze she'd assumed earlier. Again, she felt awful.

The sheriff said, "You won't be charged, Miss Carmichael, but they will. They've been ambushing coaches up and down this trail for weeks. In fact, they took down a coach earlier today. The driver and guard were wounded and we were out looking for them when we came across them after you and Denby sent them skedaddling. Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome." She was relieved, but so far, Colton Lee had yet to speak to her directly. And as the sheriff and his men escorted the coach the remaining few miles to town, that didn't change.

"Stop laughing and take the damn bullet out," Colt snarled, removing his shirt. The last thing he needed was more of Whit's needling.

"Got yourself quite the delicate bride-to-be there, Dr. Lee. Hold still." Whit used the tip of his big bladed knife to expertly dig into Colt's shoulder, causing him to hiss out a curse in response to the sharp pain.

"Got it." The bloody bullet went into a chipped porcelain basin on the desk. Whit sloshed whiskey over the oozing injury. Colton hissed again and immediately reached for the clean square of white cotton sheeting he'd taken from his medical bag and pressed it against the wound to ease the bleeding.

"Want me to ask her in to sew you up?"

Colton glared.

"Just asking. No need to get surly."

Colt knew Whit was having a good time. Were the shoe on the other foot, he'd be the one poking fun, but it was on his foot and it pinched like hell. What kind of woman shot her intended? Yes, it was an accident but his pride was as wounded as his shoulder.

Whit added, "If you're going to send her back let me know. The way she shoots, I might like to swear her in as a deputy." The two surviving outlaws were locked up in the small jail behind his office.

Colton ignored him, or as much as one could a six-foot-five-inch former cavalry soldier who on better days was called friend. Instead, his thoughts were on Regan Carmichael. What kind of woman had he asked to take the place of his late wife, Adele? What other nonladylike skills did she possess? Had she lied to him about being educated and

cultured? A part of him was half-ready to scrap the marriage agreement and send her packing. Colt's grandfather Ben would undoubtedly agree. Whit's humor notwithstanding, Colt found nothing funny about it, and neither did his gunshot shoulder.

Regan, who'd been told by the sheriff to wait outside while he patched up the doctor, paced the wooden walk in front of his office. How was she supposed to know the riders were a sheriff's posse? She'd been too busy protecting herself and Mr. Denby to stop firing and politely ask their identities. Colton Lee seemed furious, and on the ride to town hadn't once looked her way. She supposed he was allowed. After all, how many men met their prospective brides via a bullet from her Winchester? She couldn't blame him if he decided to send her packing, thus preventing her from trying to make things right—not that she knew how that might be accomplished.

Word must have gotten around about the shooting because a small group of men were on the other side of the street watching her from in front of the general store. One, sporting whiskers, long white hair, and wearing trousers and a shirt made from deerskin called out, "Did you really shoot the doc?"

Her cheeks burned. "It was an accident."

Another man shouted, "This called a shotgun wedding where you're from?"

They all laughed. She didn't respond.

The door opened and the sheriff stepped out.

"May I see him?" she asked anxiously.

"I think I should probably take you over to Minnie's. She takes in boarders. You'll stay there until the wedding. You can see him later."

That wasn't the answer Regan wanted, so she sailed past him and went inside. Her steps halted at the sight of Lee attempting to drag his union shirt up and over his bandaged left shoulder. Seeing her enter, he stopped and her first thought was that the tall slender Colton Lee was as handsome as an African god. The second thought: the riveting eyes were as foreboding as a gathering thunderstorm. All they lacked were lightning bolts. "I . . . want to apologize. I didn't know you and the others were a posse."

His gaze didn't waver, and again she expected lightning. Instead, he resumed his one-handed attempt to cover his bared left shoulder. She took a step forward to assist him but his silent rebuke froze her in place. Regan swallowed in a dry throat. She noticed him wince again as he finally got the shirt positioned. He used his right hand to do up the buttons, then picked up a blue denim shirt and slowly worked it on.

"Where'd you learn to shoot?" he finally asked quietly.

"A neighbor."

"What else he teach you?"

She took offense at both the question and his tone. Surely he wasn't intimating that Old Man

Blanchard had taught her anything unseemly. "To hunt, shoe a horse. Shingle a roof. Again, I'm sorry for wounding you."

His continued displeasure made her temper rise. In her mind, he was being terribly unfair. Even if he was still angry, he could at least acknowledge her apology.

"I'm not sure we'll mesh," he finally said.

"Neither am I. A grown man should be able to acknowledge a sincerely offered apology and converse in sentences consisting of more than five words. Good day, Dr. Lee."

She turned on her heel and stormed out.

Outside, she found Sheriff Lambert talking with Mr. Denby. All her trunks and valises were off the coach and waiting. "I'm ready to go to Minnie's," she declared hotly. "Wherever that may be."

"Got a temper, too, do you?" the sheriff asked, taking in her tight face.

She glared.

His thick mustache framed his smile. "You may be just the tonic Colt needs."

"The doctor needs a colonic. Not a wife."

Denby hooted.

The sheriff laughed, too, and after Mr. Denby left them, turned his attention to her trunks. "All these yours?"

"Yes."

"You going on safari?"

She gave him another glare, even though she did have a small mountain of belongings.

"Just pulling your leg. Give me a few minutes to get a wagon from the livery and we'll be on our way."

"Thank you."

While waiting for his return, she noticed a man on a bay stallion riding towards the outskirts of town. It was Lee and she wanted to yell after him, "Coward!" Instead she settled for fuming. This was not how she'd envisioned her journey as a mail-order bride would begin.