

### **Excerpt One:**

*Lookout Pass*, she reminded herself as she neared the summit. Glancing north to the distant white tops of the Onaqui Mountains, she swallowed hard as she thought again of her papa and the fossil he'd fossicked for her from its rocky ledges.

The spotted pony broke into a lope over the crest of the hill and began the mile-long descent. Aleksandra's thoughts filled with memories, she was absentmindedly fingering the fossil inside the medicine bag hung about her neck when she felt the first arrow whizz past her head.

Her heart stopped in its tracks and she flung herself to the left side of the Palouse's neck in a Cossack hang, lying flat against his side.

'Yah! Yah! Let's go, Scout!' she shouted, throwing the reins at him.

He needed little urging to run full tilt down the steep and treacherously rocky trail as the yells of Indian warriors echoed through the narrow valley. The arrows came hard and fast from the southwest, screaming like a mad bunch of hornets.

*Smart.* Her lips curved in the hint of a wry grin.

The Indians had placed themselves between the trail and the setting sun, so Aleksandra couldn't see her attackers in the glimpses she stole, from beneath Scout's neck, of the world whizzing past. With the ground only three feet from her head, the scent of sage filled her nostrils when Scout crashed through a clump of brush. Briefly considering letting go of one of her death-grip holds onto the racing horse to pull a gun from her holster, something akin to suicide, she tightened her lip in a grimace and stayed put, trusting far more in the Palouse's speed and handiness to save them. Knowing her weight hanging off to one side had to put him off his best, she tried to stay out of his way, keeping as still as possible, tucked down on the side of the skidding and leaping beast. Praying the cinch would hold, she sent fervent thanks to the pony selectors for their choice of horses.

*How I'd love to have my bow and arrows, but I only need to get us through to Doc Faust at Rush—*

The Palouse interrupted her musings as he threw up his head and reared, angrily trumpeting and shaking his head for a moment, nearly dropping Aleksandra, then resumed his headlong rush down the hill. When he carried on, she heard whistling sounds with every breath and turned her face forward to see where the noise was coming from.

Then she saw the arrow.

### **Excerpt Two:**

The body held her fast, whispering roughly for her to keep quiet while she was hustled into a darkened gap a few feet away. Aleksandra heard a bolt slide home, then her heart froze in her chest at the sound of shouting men, swinging saloon doors and heavy boots at a run outside the door. As they slowly faded off into the distance, she took a deep breath and looked around her in the darkness.

The grate of a stove scraped open, showing a glowing bed of coals. Its light revealed her savior as the brunette from the saloon.

The woman set a twig atop the coals and lit the lamp. Its warm glow delineated the face of a woman not many years older than herself. Once she would have been a beauty, but already she showed the effects of too many years in her profession. From afar she was lovely, but close up, the pox marks couldn't be hidden by powder.

*It was just a matter of time.*

She shuddered, thinking of her impetuous dash toward the saloon upon her arrival in Camp Floyd, and of the man who stopped her.

'Are you alright?' The brown haired woman looked into Aleksandra's eyes, her brow furrowed.

'Yes, thanks to you, Madam,' she replied in her deepest voice, though it seemed to come from outside herself.

She chuckled under her breath. 'I am Desiree and you are certainly not a boy, but I won't let anyone in on our secret. Do you have a name?'

'Aleksandra.' She sighed and rubbed her stinging cheek.

'I'd imagine you have hair under that hat, no?'

'Mmmm... why did you help me?' Aleksandra hung her head, already pounding with pain from the blond's punches, despite the vodka fog.

'I saw you weren't what you seemed and knew you had reasons for your charade,' she said, then paused, considering. She dragged two chairs before the fire. 'Sit, please.'

Aleksandra wiped the blood off of her face with her sleeve, wincing when she touched her painful cheek.

Desiree took a deep breath and put a hand on Aleksandra's shoulder. 'When my family was taken by a fever on the trip west, I was raped and left for dead by an enemy of my brother. I survived and went on, masquerading as a boy, but when my girl's body was discovered beneath the boy's clothes, unfortunately I had not your skill with cut glass.' She raised an eyebrow and gave Aleksandra a wry grin. 'I was passed from hand to hand until I ended up here.' She sighed, elbows on knees, staring into the fire. 'Now I have enough to eat and God knows, a dry bed, though I rarely get to sleep in it,' she whispered, closing her eyes and shuddering. 'I didn't want the same to happen to you, so here we are.'