

BLOOD AND DUST

Chapter One

June 1882

Blood spattered the blacksmith's shop, dotted the goldsmith's bench and smeared the pointed tools of the trades.

My blood. Smithery's like that.

Someone else's blood, thick and slippery, spewing over my dining room table and spilling in an arterial waterfall onto the floor . . . I had not signed up for that.

The table provided the cleanest surface on the property, the one place I could fathom slicing the leg open. Amputation presented itself as the only option; the gunshot had shattered the shinbone, exploded veins and ground the meat into hamburger. No doctor, me, but even I could see the limb was done for. So was my patient if it did not come off soon.

"Hold on to him, Bert," I said. "Hard."

"Where?" Stone blind, Bert needed me to navigate.

"Right here." I took his hands and placed them on the man's thigh. "Don't move."

The patient's name, as far as I could determine, was Alexander. Drunk as six sailors and in more pain than I could imagine, he babbled it out as if cotton wool lined his mouth. He had probably puked a few times, from whisky and agony. Dry as dust, that tongue; I would guarantee it.

Just as well he was pissed up. Maybe his blood alcohol level, along with the few drops of laudanum I had scavenged from the dead doctor's clinic, would keep him compliant long enough for me to remove that leg from the knee down.

I placed a piece of wood between his teeth and told him to bite down, but he moaned and gasped. Screamed, occasionally. The wood, of course, would fall out.

"Alex, for fuck's sake, grind on this," I said for the tenth time, replacing the stick. "You don't want to bite off your tongue too."

Finally, I got a slight nod. Okay. Progress.

I had also stolen a scalpel. What the hell, right? Doc Arlington would never use it again. Stropping it on my thumb, and shocked to feel how dull it was, I took it to the shop for a serious honing before heating it in the forge. A good slosh of moonshine made it as sanitary as I could possibly get it.

All of that preparation had taken longer than I had hoped, so the poor bugger on the table had been writhing and bleeding like hell for a good half-hour, all told. Time to get on with it.

"Okay, Bert, here we go."

"Ready, James. I'm holding on."

Truth to tell, I had taken a swig of moonshine myself. I had good hands, steady and sure. I could make a perfect horseshoe, or a knife that sliced paper, or the most delicate golden wedding ring a girl could want. This leg problem stretched my expertise, so I needed liquid courage. Steadied me a bit .

Who else would do it? No one within forty-five miles. By horse and cart. It would take two or three days, maybe more, and Alexander would be dead by then.

The leg had to come off at the knee, to avoid muscle removal or sawing bones. I sliced the skin six inches below it into three strips and folded them back. That did not go over well with my patient. He thrashed and yelled, his eyes rolling in his head despite the laudanum; but Bert held on like grim death. I loved that man. Best partner ever, eyesight problem notwithstanding.

Blood flew like spit and flowed like syrup. I tied him up tight with a tourniquet, but it did not do the whole trick. Shit. After all this, would he just up and die from blood loss? How much could he stand to lose? Like I said. Not a doctor.

The other big problem was the real threat of slipping on the dark red sea now covering my dining room floor. I snapped a towel off the stack of linens I had put on the table and threw it under my feet. Maybe it would help keep me upright.

Carefully, quickly, I severed the tendons that held the tibia and fibula in place. That went well, considering. I poked around a bit and figured out where all the blood poured from, then sutured up the ends of the veins and arteries. I had stolen the medical needle and thread, too. Finally, the skin flaps: I pulled them down and over Alex's new stump, sewing them up snugly.

Civil war surgeons could pull off a relatively simple amputation in two minutes. I had read about it in a newspaper somewhere while still down east, a couple of years back. I was not quite so fast, it being my first real surgical procedure, but I had done my best.

By now, Alexander, whoever the hell he was, lay there twitching in complete shock. What do you do for shock? I wondered. Newspapers and book learning were not helping me with that issue.

"Don't you fucking die on me now," I told him, leaning up to speak right in his ear. "Not after all this . Don't you dare fucking die. I'll make you a nice leg if you just won't die."

He did not say anything, of course.

"Are you done, James?"

"Oh, sorry, yes. You can let go now, Bert. Be careful as you step away. The floor's slippery."

"Someone's coming," he said.

I could not hear anything, but I knew better than to question him. I saw, he listened.

Sure enough. Ten seconds later, the door flew open.

Standing there were two blazing eyes, blue as the summer sky, snapping with fury and fear. And a wobbling gun, trained right directly on my torso.

The sun glowed behind this apparition, and let's face it, I did not expect someone to walk in just then. Plus, the firearm had my full attention.

Therefore, it took a few seconds before I could appreciate that the eyes and gun belonged to a woman. The rest of her shook with emotion under a flowered calico dress thin as butterfly wings and the palest lavender from too much laundering. I noticed this, even in my confusion, because the body underneath was slim and round and soft and quivering.

She spoke first.

"If he dies," she said, "you die."