

THE PITS

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Chapter 1: Finding Royal

July 1879

Royal was a person and a problem, and that's about where all useful description of my eldest sibling ended. I'd been attempting to track them down for over a week now and in that time I'd learned three things: one, according to the wanted posters, Royal had about a dozen colorful pseudonyms including "The Coyote of the Cliffs" and "The Black Pit Bandit." Two, no matter their other crimes, whatever town they'd last been in tended to also have a stray report of books going missing. Three, any sort of physical description got me nowhere when I questioned people. Royal was too good at shifting their appearance for that, just as likely to be described as a lanky man in dirty black clothes as they were a demure young woman in a lovely dress. There were, in fact, at least three wanted posters I suspected to be Royal, though it was hard to say what was a resemblance and what was a quirk of the artist responsible for the portrait.

What seemed to be working better was tracking crimes that sounded like the sort of things Royal would get into, then seeing if any books were reported stolen in the same area around the same time. Outlaw or not, Royal was predictable, at least to me. I just had to hope this would be enough to allow me to catch up before it was too late.

I let my reins drop, trusting Shelly to wander in more or less the right direction for now, and to not fall into anything. Sun beat down on my shoulders through my light brown blouse, cooking my legs under the gingham skirt I wore and sending sweat rolling into my eyes.

“Should have taken the train,” I muttered.

Problem was, the train only hit a handful of towns in the area, while I needed to hit all of them. Rumor had it Royal was still in the area. Somewhere.

Pulling out the penny map I’d purchased back home in Alton, I spread it out on my lap to examine. I knew the swirling lines indicated elevation, somehow, but what good was that when everything as far as the eye could see was flat? If I had been trying to navigate the Pits there would have been landmarks aplenty, even if they were just mountain sized holes in the ground. The closest thing I’d seen to a landmark out here in the last hour was a broken down old conestoga wagon that looked like it had been there for years, rotting away with every summer storm.

I was relatively sure I wasn’t lost; I knew the train tracks were to the east, on my left side, and the Pits were to the west. Somewhere to the south of me was Quartzville, the town I was aiming for. I’d either hit the town or miss it and hit Empire Station, which marked the start of the only safe pass through the central span of the Pits. Either way, I’d end up somewhere with people. It would have helped a lot if I had the faintest idea how to mark distance out here, though.

Probably, I should’ve tried Grand Island first after exploring the growing mining camp of Tyner—if Royal was anywhere, Grand Island was a likely spot—but I had chickened out at the

last minute, unsure I could find the way. Nor was I sure I wanted to go anywhere near there even if I could find the place. It was rumored the roads had been designed to trick and trap and confuse those who didn't already know the route. It was also rumored to be the most degenerate town on the whole front range of the Pits, which was saying quite a lot.

Huffing in frustration, I folded the map up and stuck it in my pocket. Tyner and Quartzville were about eight hours' ride apart from one another, and I'd been riding for six, so it shouldn't be much longer. It wasn't like I *could* miss it, honestly. Anything taller than sage or a stray buffalo would be visible for miles.

"You better be in Quartzville, Royal."

When I finally spotted Quartzville I wasn't sure I had the right place. It seemed even smaller than Tyner, but it was supposed to be an actual town. The gate marking the entrance to the town—three skinny wooden poles in a lopsided arch over two wagon wheel ruts that passed for a road—looked one good gust of wind from blowing over. It creaked ominously as Shelly and I trotted up to it. On the top beam was burned the name of the town, proving I had in fact reached the right place, but beneath that hung a crude, hand-painted sign that said "Whiskey Hole."

"Charming." It certainly smelled like a whiskey hole.

Shelly seemed just as unsure of the arch and its strange noises, pinning her ears and shying away from it, so I led us around the side.

Based on my map, I'd known Quartzville was a tiny spit of a town but, looking around, it seemed like the map had oversold it. A rough main street housed less than a dozen buildings,

only two being more than a wooden facade with a large tent behind it. The closest real building was a ramshackle structure, gaps between the wall boards and a lopsided cross crudely nailed to the point of the roof. I found it somewhat sad to look at. Churches were meant to be beautiful centers of the community, not this.

At least the town would be easy to search, though I didn't like the idea of staying for the night. Shelly needed to rest, though, so I would find somewhere.

Passing the church—Royal would hardly be there—I headed for the saloon at the other end of town. It was the only other real building here and, unlike the church, it seemed well made. Wellish. Rising two stories, it had real glass in the windows (most of them, anyway) and recently painted glossy green trim shining against the whitewashed walls. A sign protruding from the front wall and swinging in the wind marked it for what it was, a whiskey bottle painted on it and nothing else.

To one side of the building was a small paddock with a water trough and a sign that horses drank free with the purchase of a whiskey by their owners. It also said violators would be shot and their horses sold to the local Ute. A series of crude pictographs along the bottom echoed the message for those who couldn't read. Another sign next to it said magic was banned on the premises.

I dismounted, patting Shelly's flank and rolling my eyes at the sign about magic. My legs ached from riding normally, rather than my usual sidesaddle. That saddle had a broken cinch, however, so I'd been forced to take my regular one instead.

"I'll buy whiskey this one time, just for you," I told Shelly. "Though, if they really believe in Pits Magic here I'm sure I could just lie about it and they wouldn't know the difference."

Shelly chuffed, heading straight for the trough. Securing the gate, I turned to eye the saloon. There was still plenty of daylight keeping away the raucous crowds, if any such thing existed here. A raised wooden porch ran the length of the front of the building, the steps up to it creaking under my calfskin boots. The outer set of full doors were propped open, leading to a little vestibule and then a set of batwing doors. Peeking between the gap in the batwing doors, I tried to gauge what the inside was like. A pungent mix of spilled liquors and what was likely vomit greeted my nose, accompanied by the noise of someone plinking lethargically at an out-of-tune piano. As suspected, the crowd inside wasn't a large one, made up of what appeared to be out of work bums and cattle herders draped over stools. All the sort of people with nothing better to do than eavesdrop and gossip, which was what I was after.

The man behind the bar was older, hair gone wispy and white, skin carved by years of living under the beating sun. He had a jovial smile, letting out a few notes of whistled tune here and there as he wiped down glasses. A grandfatherly sort of man. I could work with grandfatherly.

Patting my chestnut hair, I tried to assess how wild it had gotten from the intermittent wind during my ride. It felt frizzy at best, lots of strands loosened from the simple, twisted up style I'd put it in that morning. Without a better option, I attempted to pat down the flyaway bits and arrange them in a way that would come across as charming rather than disheveled. Sliding my hands down my sides, I pushed my periwinkle riding skirts lower to hide my ankles somewhat. That was as good as it was going to get.

Shoulders curled in slightly, I pushed one door open and peeked in around it before taking a few careful steps inside. Several people glanced up, including the bartender. I locked eyes with him and nibbled my lip, clasping my hands behind my back.

“Excuse me, Sir? I was hoping you could help me with a spot of trouble I have found myself in?” I asked.

All the patrons were eying me now, a few of them sliding their eyes up and down my body. It made my skin crawl, but I ignored them.

“This ain’t the best place for a young lady such as yourself, dear,” the bartender said.

“I know, I know,” I replied, taking another step closer. “But, you see, I’m trying to find something that was stolen from me. Well, from my father. A thief accosted him and stole a very expensive broach. It is a family heirloom and very precious.”

The bartender stared, face flat with skepticism, still wiping away at glasses. Fishing in my pocket, I pulled out a rough sketch of the broach and offered it to the man. It was an ornate, gaudy thing. My actual father would have called it “the poor taste of new money.” But it had been stolen from a man in Silver Dale three days earlier, and the town librarian had come into work the morning after to find an entire shelf of her books missing.

“This is it, sir,” I said. “My father and I are prepared to provide a *large* finder's fee to whomever helps us locate it.”

He continued to stare, eyes going to my breasts instead of the paper. “Ain’t right, a father sendin’ his daughter out to dangerous places after thieves. Should be doin’ such things himself.”

Okay, sure. I could work with this too.

Putting my feet on the bar rail, I hoisted myself up and crossed my arms on the unsettlingly sticky bartop, leaning forward over them to make my chest more prominent. This close I could smell the tobacco on his breath, and his rotting teeth, could see the yellow in his scleras.

“You’re right, Sir, of course, of course. But my father was injured by the thief.” I took a deep, slow breath, holding the air at the top of my chest. “A cut across his cheek, and it has become badly infected. I just want to get the broach back to him before—”

A vice-like grip clamped around my left arm and a familiar voice hissed in my ear; “And the family calls me manipulative.”

I glanced sideways to see Royal’s familiar blue eyes—a mirror of my own and the only trait the two of us shared—glaring at me from under a silver-rimmed cowboy hat with only the right side of the brim folded up.

“Well, maybe if you kept an address so I could write to you I wouldn’t have to resort to tracking you down in this manner!” I snapped. Now that I’d found them, there was room to be mad for a moment that they’d made this so hard.

“You can’t just come into a back-alley saloon and start waving yourself around without being prepared for consequences, Clarabella,” Royal growled.

I arched an eyebrow and stepped off the rail. Reaching down to fish around under my skirts, I came back up with the six-inch long blade that had been in my boot. I held it up between us without comment.

Royal eyed it, looking deeply unimpressed. “That’s too big for someone as tiny and inexperienced as you to use effectively. And it took you far too long to get to.”

I huffed, not bothering to resist when Royal took the knife away.

A click interrupted us, drawing our attention back to the bartender who now had a tiny pistol in hand.

“Calm down,” Royal said. Shoving a hand into a pocket of their duster, they pulled a couple little gold nuggets out and sent them clattering across the surface of the bar towards the old man. “No problems here, agreed?”

The bartender snatched the nuggets, eyes shifting to all his other patrons to see if any had noticed his prize. Satisfied that they’d all gone back to their business long before the appearance of the precious bits of metal, he gave a curt nod.

“You just carry gold in your pockets?” I asked incredulously.

Royal didn’t respond, instead pulling me away from the bar. Without letting go they took me to a back corner I hadn’t noticed; an alcove tucked behind the stairs leading to the rentable rooms above. It was lit with several gas lamps and there was a small group of people there—six in total—draped across several tattered couches and tables. There were even a couple women in the group, or at least a couple who appeared to be women, though they were dressed much like those who appeared to be men. Glasses and bottles were scattered everywhere, and a card game lay abandoned on a low central table. Everyone watched Royal and I’s interaction as if the group expected me to be a danger to Royal. I wasn’t sure what to make of this. I’d never known Royal to have friends.

“What are you doing here, Clarabella?” Royal asked, depositing me in the middle of the group and blocking the exit.

Putting my hands on my hips, I took a moment to give Royal a once over. This was the first time I'd seen them in the three years since our parents kicked them out for robbing the mayor. They'd always looked somewhat wild, never really paid any mind to impressing anyone, but now they looked every bit the Pits outlaw. Heavy canvas duster—black that was fading to patchy dark gray in spots and stained with mud, thick and flexible cowboy style boots with climbing spikes strapped to the toes, toughened canvas pants, ratty dark blue silk bandanna around their neck, a brace of long-barreled pistols, and a well filled belt of bullets. There was even a silver and turquoise ring on their left pinky, despite Royal's constant claims to hate jewelry. Their deep brown, near black, hair—several significant shades darker than my own—was longer than I remembered. Almost enough to be contained in a ponytail but not quite, stray strands falling around Royal's sharp, lightly freckled cheekbones.

"Is something wrong at home?" Royal prompted, looking annoyed. Royal's friends shifted, clearly coming to attention at the tone of Royal's voice. Not just casual acquaintances, but actual allies. Interesting.

"Home is fine," I replied. "Mother and Father still pretend you never existed, Eliza's in trouble with Mother for knitting lewd messages into the socks she makes for the church to give to veterans, Daniel broke his leg last month messing around in the creek but the doctor says he'll be just fine, and little Josephine now knows three new words and all of them are terrible ones she picked up from grumpy old Miss Wilton next door."

A flash of amusement went across Royal's face but was quickly tamped down. "Sounds exactly like normal, then. *So what are you doing here?*"

I pointedly glanced around at Royal's friends, then back at Royal. "You're running with a crew now, I see."

Royal rolled their eyes and threw their hands up. "Can you please just answer my question you petulant little brat? I don't appreciate reminders of the family that gave up on me showing up and shouting about my exploits. That is the sort of thing that draws far too much attention."

I didn't point out that tossing around gold nuggets like cheap sweets was also the sort of thing that would draw a lot of attention.

"Mother and Father disowned you because you stole the horse. I did not," I said simply. "I am here because I need a thief, and you are the best one I know."

This brought Royal up short, their hands hanging in the air in front of them, fingers and face shifting in confusion as they tried to come up with a response. "You...need a...thief? *You?* Little miss church-going, college attending, side-saddle riding, princess *needs a thief?*"

"Don't call me a princess, *Royal*," I snapped. "And yes, I need a thief."

Royal opened and closed their mouth a few times, hands still fluttering with movement, clearly at a loss for words.

"What, exactly, would we be thieving for you?" Said a deep, brogue voice from one of the couches.

I turned, matching the voice to a man that would probably be even taller than Royal when standing, which was impressive given that Royal was a lanky six feet. Not only did he appear to have some height on Royal, he was easily twice as wide, if not three times as wide in the shoulders. If the devil needed a face, he would've picked this man's. He had a wiry red

beard that came to a point several inches below his chin, a mustache that he'd twirled up at the ends, and curly copper hair hanging to his collarbones, gone wild with the wind. Under thick eyebrows deep-set brown eyes sat above a thick splash of freckles that faded out into the less sun-touched portions of his face. Something in the dim lighting of the alcove made the brown tones of his eyes seem almost red. A mischievous twist graced his thin lips, matching the curve of his mustache. It was the sort of face that knew you had things and knew how to get them from you without you ever noticing. He didn't look much older than Royal, who would've just turned twenty.

"Don't you dare encourage her, Shiloh," Royal snapped, familiarity rather than anger behind the words.

"I'll encourage anyone who can shut you up so quickly," Shiloh said. "Don't happen often. Might have to ask her for a lesson."

"Agreed," said a black woman at a table in the corner. She was nursing a nearly empty glass and looked deeply amused. Her hair was in dozens of dreadlocks, each capped at the end with what appeared to be brass. Her dark gray coat looked like it would reach the middle of her thighs when she stood, and had thick, folded up cuffs that went halfway to her elbows. A man who looked too well put together for a place like this in his nice vest and spectacles was sitting next to her, eyes dancing around between everyone and looking just as amused.

"I don't talk that much!" Royal spluttered.

This was met with a chorus of disagreement from the rest of the group, which resulted in more spluttering from Royal.

“So, are you going to tell us what you need stolen?” Shiloh asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. The suspenders over his shoulders looked like they were glad for the break from him sitting upright.

I surveyed the little group. They hadn’t factored into my plans, and I wasn’t certain what to do with that. It was one thing to ask my singular thief sibling to help pull this off, it was another to ask a whole group of people I didn’t know to help out. But it didn’t seem like Royal would be keen to leave them behind, nor that they would be keen to let Royal leave.

I was out of options and nearly, if not entirely, out of time.

“Have any of you heard of the American Princesses?” I asked the group at large.

Some of them shook their heads. A couple watched without acknowledging the question at all. The black woman in the corner went deadly still but said nothing.

Royal was the only one to speak. “Daughters of rich American men married off to poor European royalty. The rich men get to say they’ve got a royal in the family, a nice duchess or baroness, a princess if they’re determined enough and have the money to throw around, and the royals get a much needed influx of cash from the dowry.”

Something in the group shifted, all coming to attention at once. It was subtle, but everyone had straightened or leaned forward or narrowed their eyes. The black woman shared a knowing glance with Royal, something unspoken passing between them.

“That can’t be a thing,” Shiloh said, breaking the moment. “Well, I suppose it is well in line with how landed men in this country behave, but I had hoped we were moving beyond them selling their daughters.”

“It only started happening recently,” Royal said. “It was mentioned in a paper I got my hands on months ago. Just a few sentences. It wasn’t even about the daughters, it was about all that ‘precious, hard-won American money’ being sent out of the country.”

“Disgusting,” Shiloh said. Everyone else echoed him with either nods or words.

“Glad you agree,” I said. “I’m assuming that means you’ll be willing to help me kidnap back my girlfriend before her father ships her off to a Duke who currently lives in California, then?”