

It all started with a gunshot that changed Cody Whitefeather's world.

He remembered the crisp blue morning sky of that morning in 1856, the raw horror etched on his father's face as he cradled his dying wife in his arms, and the sadness when his eyes met his five-year-old son's confused expression.

That day haunted Cody's dreams.

That day carved the path of his life toward a future where survival cost more than blood, and vengeance burned hotter than mercy.

Chapter One

Colleen O'Keefe stood by the slightly ajar door of the mercantile and listened to the old biddies gossiping about her.

“Her temper is as hot as the red roots of her hair. Too brazen for her own good and has a tongue as sharp as those knives she uses.”

Despite her impulse to barge in and give them a tongue lashing, she held back, curious about their next words.

“If you know what’s good for you, I would stay clear of that woman.”

Not wanting to be seen, Colleen stepped away from the door and sat on the bench beside the open window. Sun rays beat through the cracks in the overhang above her, and beads of perspiration gathered at her hairline. Had she her druthers, she’d shed the uncomfortable corset cutting into her ribcage, roll up her sleeves, kick off her shoes, and give the townies something to talk about, but that would never do. Such behavior would jeopardize her reason for being in this small town on the outskirts of Indian Territory.

The people here claimed land they believed was unassigned. The frontier army had tried to stop the

settlers, known as Boomers, from building, but after repeated attempts, they'd eventually looked the other way. She'd researched the meaning of the name *Boomer*: people who made noise and raised hell for their claims. That was the type of people she was up against.

Children, all talking at once, pulled her from her thoughts. She glanced at them as laughter echoed across the walkway. A harried schoolmarm, cheeks flushed and bun askew, darted back and forth, her voice rising in vain as she tried to corral the unruly class. The boys at the back ignored her entirely, whispering and shoving, while the girls up front skipped ahead, arms linked, their ribbons fluttering like little flags of rebellion. The scene tugged a faint smile from Colleen's lips—chaos wrapped in innocence.

Compared to New York City, where elevated train tracks wound their way through brownstone-housed neighborhoods, and where marble and limestone mansions along 5th Ave could occupy an entire block, this town, with its wooden, irregular structures butting up against one another at different angles,

lacked all the finer qualities. No library. No opera or music hall, except for the tinny sound of a pianoforte pumping loud music out of the saloon. No museum, like the Metropolitan. She spent hours in that museum studying all the amazing artifacts collected from all over the world. The shops in New York had the most magnificent clothing, jewelry, and perfumes. Colleen glanced down at the plain cotton long-sleeved blue dress she wore. Sometimes, she missed dressing in the finest of silks and satins. Most of all, she missed the dances.

She sighed.

A horse-drawn wagon rumbled past, its heavy load of farming tools jostling with every jolt of the wheels. The wooden axles groaned, and the street came alive with the clatter of metal, shovels, rakes, scythes, and hoes clanging in a restless chorus. Dust curled into the air behind it, rising in swirls that shimmered in the afternoon light, turning the rough dirt road into a haze of grit.

Colleen pressed a lace handkerchief to her nose to block the dust, then leaned in toward the glass panes, angling her ear

toward the voices drifting through the window. Her gaze shifted, sharp with intent, and after a heartbeat of hesitation, she peered inside.

“Is it true she cuts up dead bodies?” The slight, unassuming woman whose clothes hung loosely on her thin frame glanced around the shop as though the dead would pop out from behind the high wooden countertop.

“You heard right. Took over old Henry’s position as undertaker after he died.” The robust, buxom woman made the sign of the cross over her chest. “I find the thought of a woman in a man’s occupation quite distressing and downright improper.”

Galled by their ignorance, her Irish up, Colleen stood.

Closed-minded women, like those old birds, ruined it for all women. One would think, given their determination to disregard President Hayes’ proclamation forbidding unlawful entry into Indian Territory, the people here would be a little more open-minded. Their gossip and wrong assessment of her character jeopardized her task. It was 1880. Didn’t they read? Didn’t they

know women were doctors and editors of newspapers? The Pinkerton Agency hired women who were doing an outstanding job as detectives. She should know. She was one of them.

“Mister Jennings was downright distraught when she came waltzing into town, taking over like she was one of us. He had his sights on that trade.”

Oh, posh. Colleen made her way toward the entrance. When her job here was finished, Jennings would get what he wanted, only she couldn't tell him that.

“Tsk. Tsk.” The thin woman shook her head, a grimace twisting her lips, her disgust palpable.

Colleen took a deep breath. Getting riled wouldn't do. She needed to get cozy with the townies and learn everything she could about the people who lived in this Oklahoma territory.

The little bell above the door chimed as she walked into the mercantile. All eyes focused on her.

“Good day to you, ladies. If you’re going to talk about me, get the color of me hair right. It be more auburn than fiery red,” she said sweetly, her Irish brogue heavy on her tongue.

Shock flickered beneath the brims of their bonnets. Their eyes briefly met hers before glancing away. They grabbed their parcels and hurried toward the door in a flurry of rustling skirts and hushed gasps. They gave her a wide berth, as if her presence might taint them, then fled the walkway in quick, deliberate steps as though their lives depended on their escape.

Colleen scowled. “May the devil make a ladder of your backbones while picking apples in the garden of hell,” she muttered softly as she watched them scurry across the street.

The shopkeeper who had remained silent during the confrontation stepped behind the counter, distancing herself. “Mistress Mackenzie, is there anything you may be a needing?”

Her undercover name drew her attention. Colleen turned to the gray-haired woman whose worried eyes and tight lips

betrayed her anxiety. As she neared the counter, the shopkeeper's sweet, heady rose-scented perfume drifted through the air, reminiscent of her mother's rose garden back home.

Why did women think that, just because she worked on the dead, bad karma would jump out and attack them? She held her annoyance. "I'm not here to drag you to me quarters. I'm here for supplies."

"I—I..." The shopkeeper rubbed her hands together as her gaze flew to the door, then back. "I knows that."

"Then why you be a looking like you want to follow them?" Colleen knew she should stop probing the poor woman, who looked like she was sorry to see her. It was the same reaction every time, and Colleen was getting tired, tired of women looking at her with disgust and men thinking she should be some man's wife with a string of children tied to her apron. She knew her undercover role as an undertaker would not be easy.

Did the Pinkertons, as shrewd as they were, choose that role on purpose, a test for her first assignment? Failure was not an

option. She'd failed once before. Not this time. Not this task, and she'd best remember that when anger and frustration colored her vision.

She relaxed her stance and smiled once more, hoping to ease the older woman's angst. "I'll be needing a pound of coffee, a bag of rice, flour, dried beans, oatmeal, and..." she lifted the glass cover off the candy jar, reached inside, and pulled out four long sticks of hard candy, "and these. I have a sweet tooth."

Missus Burr, the wife of the owner, studied her as though she'd just spoken Latin.

"Just put it all on me tab. I'll pay you at the end of the week."

As the woman nodded, turned, and collected the items, Colleen glanced around the shop. Despite the one window, shaded by an outdoor overhang in the shop's front, the room was gloomy. A savory aroma of cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg hung heavy in the air, emanating from open barrels of various colored spices. Every wall held floor-to-ceiling shelves crowded with merchandise, ranging from fabrics of all colors to metal tins

marked cornmeal, beans, and sugar. Hats hung from hooks. Shoes and jeans covered a table. Barrels, boxes, and large crates crammed the corners and most of the wooden floor. The front counter's display case showcased the smaller items: jewelry, perfume, men's watches, buttons, ribbons, and suspenders.

Colleen's gaze settled on the apothecary section, which was well represented with a large variety of medicines, remedies, and elixirs. Her gaze lifted as she continued her assessment, mentally cataloging everything, the way she'd been trained. Rifles. Pistols. Lamps. Rope. Ammunition. Pots and pans. Even the rusty coffee grinder, ground beans scattered in muddy tracks across the worn floor. No detail was insignificant; any one of them could be the catalyst that finally solved the case.

"Will you be needing anything else?"

Her attention back on Missus Burr, Colleen smiled. "Can you please tell me the name of the rather opinionated woman who left in such a hurry? I really must apologize if I frightened her and her friend." She needed to befriend the gossiping biddy. A woman like

that knew everyone and everything that went on in town. She would be useful in learning about Sarah, the woman she'd been sent to find and question.

A look of discomfort, hinting at unspoken concerns, appeared on the shopkeeper's face, etching itself into the lines around her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, focusing intently on something in the distance. "Missus Thornfield and her friend Missus Hock."

Well, that was a fitting name for the old sourpuss. "Thank you, kindly."

The woman nodded.

As Colleen gathered her supplies, heavy footsteps pounded the wooden walkway outside.

"You the undertaker?" a commanding voice questioned.

She turned toward the door.

Colleen's gaze locked on the copper-toned man pointing at her. Booted feet spread wide and posture ramrod straight, he radiated a dangerous, unapologetic strength, a man whose

imposing presence warned he was not to be reckoned with or challenged lightly.

A buckskin vest hugged his broad chest, the supple leather molded to muscle and movement, whispering of wild freedom. Matching pants rode low on his hips, a long, fringed coat draped over them, carrying the scent of wood smoke and wind. Beadwork in the leather caught the light, glinting with a quiet, undeniable power.

She swallowed hard, pulse skipping. Something in her stirred. Primal. Breathless. His eyes didn't need to touch her to feel like they had. He looked like trouble, the kind she'd been warned about.

A sheathed knife and a dangerous-looking tomahawk hung from his belt. Most men carried a Colt .45 Peacemaker attached to their hip, and she wondered on his choice of weapons. A black-rimmed hat covered his eyes, adding to the dangerous persona he wanted everyone to see. His wavy brown

hair, the color of dark earth, tumbled down and rested upon his broad shoulders.

He was a half-breed. She had never seen an Indian before. What tribe did he belong to? "Who is asking?"

"You're wanted near the reservation."

Reservation? No one cared if an Indian died, and she certainly wouldn't be called in. They had their own way of burying the dead. If she recalled, some tribes placed the body high in tree branches, so animals did not walk over their spirit. Other tribes buried their loved ones in the ground. Either way, there was no need for a coffin or embalming.

Colleen quickly placed her store-bought items on the counter. "I shall return for these," then hurried toward the door. "Why? The people there do not need me services."

"They don't." He turned and headed outside.

Of all the rude...Colleen hurried after him. "I should get the wagon." Presumably, she was about to collect a body.

"No Need. You ride?"

A sharp, better-than-you retort tipped her tongue. “You have a spare horse?”

He pointed to a large chestnut-colored horse with a long red mane that matched the color of her hair.

Colleen placed her foot in the stirrup, and before she could swing her leg over, powerful hands gripped her waist and hoisted her upwards. She landed hard in the saddle, her skirt billowing and her breath catching in her chest.

“Jesus, Mary, Joseph,” she mumbled under her breath in annoyance. How dare he take such liberties as laying his hands on her? She needed no man’s help, especially from some ill-bred stranger. Horses, other than reading about medical studies, were her passion. She’d spent many days losing herself on her favorite horse, riding through the fields near the family ranch.

Before she could give him a piece of her mind, he flung himself up onto the big stallion, reined his horse around, and took off at a fast pace.

Did he think to lose her? Think she couldn't keep up?

Colleen kneed her horse and trotted after him. It crossed her mind to race ahead, just to prove her skills, but she did not know where she was going, so she fell in beside him. "Who died?"

"A boy," he answered without so much as a glance in her direction. He sat upon his white and gray spotted stallion with a noble bearing that would make his people proud.

"You realize I am new in town? A little more information would be helpful."

"Jeremy." He turned; his gaze fixed on her. Dark eyes radiated a fierce annoyance that came dangerously close to pushing a button she was trying to keep at bay, sending a chill down her spine.

"Why do your people need me? And why would a white boy be on the reservation?" she snapped, frustrated by his indifferent attitude and two-word conversation.

“They are not my people.” With a flick of his reins and a firm nudge of his heels, the stallion leapt into a canter, clumps of grass and dirt flinging behind them.

Annoyed by his harsh tone, Colleen reined in her horse and watched him ride away, the gap between them growing with every stride. She meant no disrespect, and unlike many whose hatred of the natives colored their views, she felt sorry for the men, women, and children on the reservation. Though she’d never set foot on their land, she knew from several articles she’d read that they were a people imprisoned and at the mercy of those who ruled over them.

He was unmistakably Indian, his features carved in sharp, noble lines: a proud nose, high-cut cheekbones, golden-bronzed skin kissed by sun and wind. And those eyes...black as obsidian, seemingly without pupils, intense. There was impertinence in his gaze, yes, but also something else. Strength. Stillness. A quiet challenge.

Her breath hitched, and she blamed it on his rude behavior. Yet something deeper stirred, a curiosity, unwelcome and inconvenient. She shook her head, as if doing so could rattle the uncomfortable feeling away. She had no business being drawn to a man who looked at her like that...as if he saw straight through her with that unblinking stare, as though he read all her secrets.

Colleen clicked her tongue and, with a gentle nudge to her horse, urged her horse forward into a swift gallop, passing him by. The vast expanse of land stretched before her, unfamiliar and wild. Uncertainty prickled the back of her neck. The wind whipped through her hair as the rhythmic pounding of hooves filled the air, growing louder, and louder...closer.

His presence loomed behind, gaining speed. Was he concerned for her well-being, or irritated that she couldn't keep up? Though she wanted to maintain her speed, she eased her horse to a steady gait as he rode up beside her, his horse's muscles rippling as it kept up effortlessly with hers.

“You ride well,” he said softly.

His compliment unexpected, she kept her tone casual.

“Thank you.” Many questions bombarded her, but she held silent, sensing he wished for no further conversation.

Thinking about working on her first death knotted her chest. Sure, she practiced doing an autopsy alongside the professional the Pinkertons provided for her. Cutting open a body didn't faze her. She'd worked on cadavers in medical school, but this was someone's loved one. Someone she would have to face and explain how their family member died. She knew how that felt, and thinking about her past was tearing her stomach apart.

Colleen's fingers curled tightly around her reins, and she drew in a deep breath. Relax. Breathe. Enjoy the scenery. July's strong rays burst through a gap in the leafy canopy above.

Unlike most Irish, her pale skin didn't burn quickly. The sun just brought out more freckles. She raised her face, enjoying the feel of heat on her forehead and cheeks.

Having arrived only days ago from Chicago, Illinois, where she met with Allan Pinkerton regarding her assignment, being in this part of the country brought back memories of home and family. Anxiety pinged her heart. Her family was gone. Her dreams were shattered, and her planned future had disappeared with one mistake. One mistake that found her sitting in front of the agency's director, a balding man with a demeanor of impatience and an inquisitive mind, despite the stroke he'd suffered that left the right side of his face weak and his speech slurred.

He inquired why she wanted to be an agent. She refrained from admitting she felt like a failure, instead fabricating a false narrative about her financial situation and employment needs, a statement that was far from the truth. Her father had left her a hefty endowment. Thinking about her father, a man who gave her

every opportunity to educate herself and who thought a woman should not be held back because of gender, brought a tear to her eye.

Colleen quickly swiped her cheek. She was on her own now. Had no one to rely on but herself. Best she remembered that and not let some ill-bred Native get under her skin.

As they continued their slow-paced ride, a flock of blackbirds soared high above the treetops, against a clear blue sky. Warm wind drifted through the timber, tousling her hair, carrying the scent of sunbaked earth, wildflowers, and thick summer growth.

Colleen felt a sense of peace here amid the majestic pines and brown and green hues of the forest floor. When she rode, the earthy smells and tranquility of her surroundings wrapped her in a blanket of comfort, and she savored the moment. The lulls of the bird-song among creaking branches, lit by bursts of sunlight, the sound of her horse's hooves against the hard soil, all the earth's melodies eased her taut shoulders until a hard-edged voice announced. "We're here."

In the clearing, Colleen watched the stranger jump off his horse, walk the animal to a tree branch, and tie the reins. He studied the ground, ignoring her.

She reined her mount over and wondered if he'd help her down or even turn, not that she needed his help. He could, at the very least, acknowledge her. What an inhospitable...unapproachable...

The sound of wheels rumbling over the uneven ground caught her attention. As she turned in her saddle, she saw two horses, their harnesses gleaming, pulling a wagon through the tall golden prairie grass, their hooves making a soft thudding sound against the thick vegetation.

"Whoa." The animals came to an abrupt stop. "Mistress Mackenzie. So good to finally meet you. My apologies for not greeting you when you arrived two days ago."

Sheriff Julian Masters got down from the wagon and strode toward her. Tall, she guessed, over six feet, stocky, with wide shoulders; no one in their right mind would want to have him

pinning them down. He oozed authority. Suspenders held a gray-striped plaid shirt over a stout chest. The worn metal tin badge pinned over his heart had seen better days, a testament to his time as a lawman. She had done her research on him. Age thirty-two, a year younger than herself, he kept the peace in this small town for over five years. Not married. No family to mention. After the slaughter of an entire tribe of Comanches, he resigned from the army and secured his current position. From what she'd read in his file, he appeared to be a fair man and took his job seriously. Even though he believed her real name was Katherine Mackenzie, he was the only one who knew she was undercover, besides Mister Trotman, who ran the telegraph office and had been sworn to secrecy.

Colleen swung her leg over and slid off her horse; she could practically hear her mother's scolding voice saying she was acting very unladylike. She lifted the hem of her dress and hurried over to the Sheriff, who clasped her hand, his smile wide, welcoming, unlike the stoic man behind her.

“Me pleasure to meet you.” She smiled, knowing he understood the real reason she was in town, which eased her worry about having to lie to everyone around her.

“Cody. Thanks for escorting Mistress Mackenzie here.”

Colleen turned her head as Cody gave a curt nod. The displeasure on his scowling face was hard to miss. She couldn't help but wonder why he was so angry.

“It's over here,” he called out.

She and Sheriff Masters followed him around a thick bush shaded by towering evergreens.

There, a small body lay face up in the grass.

“Has anyone touched the boy?” Colleen knelt beside him and placed a finger on his neck.

“No,” Cody replied, his tone hard. “What are you doing?”

“Checking. He is—”

“Dead. Isn't it obvious by his bloody head?”

She gave him a piercing stab, then focused on Jeremy. “It appears blunt-force trauma by a sharp, irregular weapon of some kind, caused his death.”

“Look, lady. You’re not here to figure out what happened. That’s the Sheriff’s job.”

Colleen stood and slammed her hands on her hips. “Me job is to tell his family why their boy is lying dead in the dirt.”

“No.” Cody marched up to her. “Your job is to collect the body and get him ready for burial. Not to go stirring up trouble.”

“I’m certainly doing no such thing. The only one causing a scene is you.”

“You two. Enough squabbling.” Blue eyes as sharp as his tone, Sheriff Masters bent and reached for the boy. “Cody, help me put Jeremy in the wagon.”

“My pleasure.” Cody grabbed Jeremy’s legs.

While the men carried Jeremy, Colleen studied the ground, looking for anything that would help her determine what had happened. From the position of the body’s imprint in the

grass, and no apparent disturbance to the area, it didn't look like there was a struggle. Her first conclusion was correct. He never saw the attack coming. But the body's position was all wrong. A person hit from behind might stumble and then fall forward. She didn't see any sign of that in the grass.

A small object, partially hidden beneath some branches, caught her attention. She bent and picked up a black bead, then noticed two more close by.

Standing, she turned toward the wagon. "Sheriff, I believe I may have found something that belongs to our killer."

The last thing Cody needed was some nosy woman stirring up trouble. Folks didn't take too kindly to newcomers in town, especially an outspoken redhead who got tongues wagging the minute she'd stepped off that stage.

A man wasn't a man unless he learned by his mistakes, and a big one, with her head held high and a bounce to her step, was

walking toward the wagon. Why he'd agreed to fetch her was beyond his comprehension. Too late to fix a lapse in judgment now, but he'd be danged if her presence caused more strife at the reservation. That's where he should be. Putting out fires before they started. With a dead white boy this close to the boundary of the res, he could guarantee conflict between both the whites and the tribal members, never mind those who were ready to fight or kill for the slightest reason. He had all he could do to keep the peace daily.

She stopped beside the wagon, her fist tight.

"Show me what's in your hand," Cody demanded.

"Indian beads. Probably the killer's."

"Don't you go start talking about things you can't prove. Those beads could belong to someone who just walked by here days before Jeremy's death."

She shrugged. "Possibly. I will learn more when I conduct a thorough autopsy." She swiveled away from him.

"Look." He caught her arm.

She jerked her head over her shoulder toward him. “Unhand me.”

He let go. “You need to realize something. Your findings could start a war.”

“Me findings will be the truth. A truth that Jeremy’s family needs to hear. I canna be responsible for what they do with that certainty.”

“Then blood spilled will be on you.” Cody stomped toward his horse, untied the stallion, and jumped onto the saddle. “Julian, let’s get out of here.”

“Wait!” Colleen shouted. “I need to get onto the reservation.”

“What for?” Cody snapped.

“To find out what happened. Someone may have seen something.”

“I forbid it.” Didn’t the stubborn redhead hear a word he’d said? As Indian Agent, he had his hands full enough without her poking her nose where it didn’t belong.

“You forbid it?” Her pale cheeks flushed crimson with anger. “I don’t think so.” She turned to Julian. “What say you, Sheriff?”

Seated in the wagon, reins in hand, Julian shook his head, and Cody felt relief ease his shoulders. “On second thought, take her over there.”

“You can’t be serious.” He could see the smug triumph in Mackenzie’s eyes, adding to the tension creeping up the back of his neck. “You know what’s gonna happen.”

Julian took off his hat, ran his fingers through his short blond hair, then plopped the hat back on. “Rumors are already starting up in town. Best we kill this before it escalates. Go see what you can learn. Best it be you that learns what happened. If anything comes of it. I’m gonna go back and see what I can do to calm things down. You’d best get going before things get out of control on the res.”

Cody watched Mackenzie mount her ride with ease. Shapely ankles peeked out from under the long blue skirt. The woman knew how to ride. He’d give her that much. And she wasn’t bad

on the eyes. Golden streaks amid long red strains glistened under the sun. Her hair, tied back with a blue ribbon, fell to a narrow waist.

She turned her head toward him. "I'll follow you." She settled into the saddle and smoothed down her skirt.

He wished she'd follow his lead and go back to town. Cody kneed his mount and headed to the reservation.
