

ROCKY MOUNTAINS, COLORADO TERRITORY
APRIL 15, 1875

Elizabeth Garrett Westbrook stepped closer to the cliff's edge, not the least intimidated by the chasm's vast plunge. Every moment of her life had been preparing her for this. That knowledge was as certain within her as the thrumming inside her chest. At thirty-two, she still wasn't the woman she wanted to be, which was partially why she'd traveled nineteen hundred miles west to Timber Ridge, Colorado Territory. To leave behind a life she'd settled for, in exchange for the pursuit of a dream, for however long she had left.

A chill fingered its way past her woolen coat, into her shirtwaist, and through the cotton chemise that lay beneath. She pulled the coat closer about her chest and viewed the seamless river and valley carved far below, the mountains heaved up and ragged, draped in brilliant dawn to the limits of sight. She peered down to where the earth ended abruptly at the tips of her boots and the canyon plunged to breathtaking depths.

The *Chronicle* offices in Washington, D.C., were housed in a four-story building, and she estimated that at least ten of those buildings could be stacked one atop the other and still not reach the height of the cliff where she stood. She'd never before experienced such a sense of possibility. Standing here, she felt so small in comparison to all of this, yet in awe that the same Creator who had orchestrated such grandeur was also orchestrating the dissonant fragments of her life.

The competition had been rigorous, but she'd made it—one of three final candidates being considered for the position of staff photographer and journalist at the *Washington Daily Chronicle*. The other two candidates were men—men she'd met, liked and respected, and who knew how to frame the world through a lens as well as they did with words—which meant she would have to work extra hard to prove herself.

A breeze stirred, and she brushed back a curl. She inhaled the crisp, cold air, held it captive in her lungs, and then gave it gradual release, as the doctors had instructed. Hailed for its purity and ability to heal, the mountain air was even thinner than she had expected, and more invigorating.

Refocusing on her task, she strapped on her shoulder pack and checked the knotted rope encircling her waist for a second time, then untied her boots and placed one stockinged foot onto the felled tree.

She tested her weight on the natural bridge and judged it would more than hold her. Even though the tree looked solid, she'd learned the hard way that things were not always as they appeared. She trailed her gaze along the length of the gnarled trunk to where it met with the opposite ledge some twenty feet away. Heights had never bothered her, but once she started across, she purposed to never look down. Better to keep your focus on the goal rather than on the obstacles.

She adjusted the weight of her pack, concentrating, focusing, and took that crucial first step.

“Don’t you go fallin’ there, Miz Westbrook!”

Startled by the interruption, Elizabeth stepped back to safety and turned to look behind her. Josiah stood on the winding mountain trail, gripping the other end of the rope that was secured to a tree behind him.

Uncertainty layered his mahogany features. “I’s just offerin’ one last warnin’, ma’am. ’Fore you set out.”

Heart in her throat, she tried to sound kind. “I assure you, I’m fine, Josiah. I’ve done this countless times.” Though, granted, never over so great a height. But be it eight feet or eight hundred, the ability to traverse a chasm successfully lay in focus and balance. At least that’s what she kept telling herself. “But it *would* help me if you would stop your screaming.”

His soft laughter was as deep as the canyon and gentle as the breeze. “I ain’t screamin’, ma’am. Womenfolk, now, they scream. Us men, we yells.”

She threw him a reproofing look. “Then, please . . . stop your *man-like* yelling.”

He tugged at the rim of his worn slouch hat. “I won’t be havin’ to yell if you’d start actin’ like a normal-headed woman. Instead of some . . . hoople-head traipsin’ herself across a log for some picture of a bird’s nest.”

The felled tree was large, nearly fifty inches in circumference, hardly the *log* Josiah referred to, and crossing it to the opposite ledge would provide a better vantage point of the eagle’s nest. The aerie was built on a precipice jutting from the side of the mountain, slightly below the level of the cliff and some thirty feet beyond. The photograph of the nest with the chasm below and the mountains in the backdrop would be breathtaking—if she didn’t fall and break her neck first.

She’d crossed wider drop-offs on much narrower tree bridges than this. Doing such things always made her feel a little like a girl

again, and took her back to a time when she hadn't yet been told that certain things were impossible.

"May I remind you that I'm paying you, very well"—she raised a brow, appreciating the ease of banter they'd shared since the outset of their association—"to carry my equipment and assist me in my work, not to offer opinions on my decisions."

"Ain't no extra charge for them, ma'am. They's free."

She shook her head at his broad smile. For the past week Josiah Birch had followed her instructions to the letter, as well he should. When properly motivated, the *Washington Daily Chronicle* had deep pockets.

Two other men had applied for the job as her assistant. They'd both seemed capable, but there was something about Josiah Birch that she innately trusted. He wasn't an educated man, but he knew how to read and write, and he'd learned to handle and mix the chemical solutions for her trade as fast as she had. And that he weighed twice what she did and held the excess in lean hard muscle and in an honest, open gaze had only bolstered his nonexistent résumé.

Focusing again, Elizabeth placed her right foot on the tree. Arms outstretched like a tightrope walker's, she compensated for the heavier-than-usual shoulder pack and took a carefully plotted first step.

Then a second step. And a third . . .

Approximately twelve feet below, a rock ledge protruded from the mountainside. It would break her fall should the rope fail for any reason, but the ledge only extended out halfway beneath the natural bridge. From there, it was a sheer drop down to the canyon floor. Not easily intimidated by heights, she kept her focus on her footing and occasionally glanced to the other side.

Inch by inch, the ledge disappeared from view. She resisted the temptation to look down at the river winding like a snake in the valley below. A gust of wind came from behind and pitched her forward. Loose curls blew into her eyes. She flailed for footing . . .

and found it. But the rope around her waist suddenly went taut and pulled her back.

“No, Josiah!”

Every muscle in her body tensed. Her back spasmed. She struggled to stay upright. The weight strapped to her shoulders tempted her to lean forward, but leaning too far could prove disastrous. Then she did what she knew not to do—

The snaking river below blurred in her sight.

She quickly pulled her gaze back to the ledge and, as taught from the age of six, imagined a ramrod extending from heaven’s gate straight down through her spine and into the tree trunk beneath her. Slowly she felt her chin lift. As did her shoulders. Her legs trembled, but she regained her equilibrium and continued on across, one foot in front of the other.

With a rush of exhilaration she stepped from the tree onto solid rock again. *Terra firma*. She brushed back her hair and, masking her relief, looked at Josiah standing on the opposite ridge. “There, you see? I told you not to worry.”

His dark eyes were wide, his knuckles a noticeably lighter shade as he gripped the rope. “You done scared ten years off’a me, ma’am. And they’s years I coulda used.” As if an invisible weight had been removed, his broad shoulders lifted.

Elizabeth set down her pack and opened it, excitement still coursing through her. A bit more excitement than she’d bargained for, but having made it across only sweetened the success. “I’m sorry, Josiah. That wasn’t my intent. But I’ve been doing this since I was a little girl. I used to outrun and outclimb every boy I knew.” She eyed the eagle’s nest a good twenty feet away. “I could outride them too.”

“Bet them boys liked playin’ with you, all right.”

“Actually . . . no. They didn’t like it because I never let them win. Not when I could help it anyway.” She unpacked her equipment, mindful of the rope still tied about her waist, and a particular memory came to mind. A memory of an afternoon at the riding stables, years

ago. She'd felt similar exhilaration then as she did now—until her father discovered what had transpired. A bully of a boy had challenged her to a horse race. And she'd beaten him squarely. At the time she hadn't known that he was the son of her father's superior officer, and had not considered the possibility that her father and his fellow officers would catch her riding straddle-legged and wearing breeches beneath her skirt.

She'd long ago given up trying to forget the embarrassment that had darkened his face. And little had she known then what a defining moment that would be in her life.

Made of sticks and larger twigs, the aerie appeared to be at least seven feet wide and nearly that deep, and was built onto a ledge in the side of the mountain. Masterful. Even at this distance, she could distinguish feathers and tufts of grayish white down protruding from the sides. The nest was empty, for now. If only its occupant were nearby so she could capture a photograph of it too. Not that an eagle would remain stationary long enough for her to take its picture. That's what made taking pictures of animals—and fidgety people—such a challenge. If the subject moved, even the slightest bit, the image appeared ghosted once she developed it.

Since seeing the photographs of a place called Yosemite two years earlier, she'd dreamed of coming to the western territories, of taking photographs of the frontier—a place so far removed from the nation's capital and Maryland, her birthplace.

While landscapes such as the one before her were breathtaking, pictures of wildlife were what Wendell Goldberg, her employer at the *Chronicle*, truly wanted. *Spectacular photographs of wildlife* he'd written in a telegram days earlier—as if she needed the reminder. Along with those photographs, he wanted real-life adventures from people who lived in the West. Stories that championed the human spirit and that would entice would-be travelers and game hunters to venture west to the Colorado Territory—patronizing a travel company

that was conveniently owned by the *Chronicle's* largest shareholder, Adam Chilton.

The travel company was only a small portion of Chilton Enterprises. The bulk of the company's fortune lay in hotel properties, specifically resort spas. Word had spread back east about the therapeutic hot springs in this region. Their curative powers were the topic of conversation at extravagant cotillions and women's teas, and their attributes were lauded in the plush leather surroundings of gentlemen's clubs and smoking rooms. Chilton Enterprises requested that she take photographs of property in the area that they were considering for their next endeavor. And in exchange, their company would advertise exclusively in the *Chronicle*.

Wendell Goldberg was forever capitalizing on business opportunities such as these, and she considered it an honor to be personally mentored by the man—even if she didn't always agree with his tactics or his opinions.

"You best back away a mite, Miz Westbrook." Josiah's voice held gentle entreat. "Gonna be hard to help you from all the way over here. You liable to go slammin' into the mountain 'fore I can get you up."

She took a small conciliatory step back from the edge. "Satisfied?"

His cheeks puffed. "Ain't 'bout me bein' satisfied, ma'am. 'Bout you hirin' me to see you safe up these mountains and on back down again. I ain't been knowin' you but for a week, but you hangin' off the side of some mountain . . ." He scoffed. "I don't mean no disrespect, but that don't bode well for your soundness of mind."

Elizabeth laughed. "I appreciate your concern, but I assure you, my state of mind is quite sound. From now on, understanding that we'll be traveling together"—she attempted a somber tone—"I'd prefer it if you wouldn't sugarcoat your opinions, Mr. Birch. Speak your mind plainly, if you would. Without fear of offending me."

He mumbled something she couldn't make out, but could well imagine, and then took a cross-armed stance that reminded her of

a famous Negro orator she'd once heard. "I just tryin' to do my job, ma'am. Like you hired me to do. That and keep the truth as plain-spoken as I can."

Plain-spoken truth . . . How refreshing that was. And she preferred that too, however abrasive or uncompromising, to the sting of having one thing spoken to her face and another behind her back—an occurrence she hoped she'd left behind her back east. "I think you and I will make a good pair, Josiah." However an unlikely one.

"I'm inclined to think that way too, Miz Westbrook. Long as you don't go do somethin' foolish and end up at the bottom of some mountain."

Choosing to ignore that last comment, she lifted the nine-pound camera from the bottom of the burlap bag and situated it as close to the edge as she dared so that it encompassed both the view of the eagle's nest and that of the valley below with the mountain range in the distance. She looked around for small rocks and placed them beneath the camera to balance it on the uneven ground.

Since she couldn't carry over all of her supplies, she had prepared the camera's wet glass plate beforehand and already had it inserted into its light-protective holder. Which meant only a short time remained for her to take the photograph, return to the other side, and develop the glass plate before the light-sensitive chemicals dried on the surface. It was a tedious process when she was in a darkroom, but was even more so in the field. If the glass plate dried out, or got the slightest crack, it became useless.

She lay flat on the cliff, arranging her skirt over her legs, and worked to get the image focused in the glass viewer.

When Josiah had met her with the horses outside the boarding-house this morning, darkness had ruled the predawn skies. They'd tethered the mounts at the base of the mountain an hour ago, and with the aid of lanterns, they'd started their trek. Then the eastern horizon had begun to stir, showing its intent, until finally dawn rose to reveal

the before-hidden crevices and canyons, and the mountain peaks rising so high they disappeared into the pinkish-purple clouds.

“I’m bettin’ you done real good in your schoolin’, ma’am.”

She smiled at his phrasing. “I did well enough, I guess.” She lined up the viewer, making sure the North Maroon Bell showed clearly off to the right. The varying distances of objects would give the frame its needed depth. *Splendid*. “But one of my teachers, a Mr. Ainsworth . . . he shared the same opinion as the boys I was telling you about. He didn’t encourage my athletic prowess.”

“I take that to mean he didn’t like your ridin’ and climbin’?”

She chuckled. “No, he didn’t like it one bit. He said I was . . . boyish and that my assertiveness was unsuitable and unattractive. Not qualities becoming of a young lady.” Funny how she remembered Ainsworth’s exact wording and could still hear his irritating nasally tone. The audacity of that pompous, overconfident—

“Don’t sound like somethin’ wise for a teacher to be sayin’ to a young girl. ’Specially to one who prob’ly coulda whupped his hide.” Josiah gave a high-pitched hoot, and his laughter echoed against the canyon walls.

Laughing with him, Elizabeth slid the protective holder into the camera slot and removed the exposure panel. She then uncapped the brass cover from the lens and let science work its wonder.

Her stockinged foot kept rhythm on the cliff as she silently recited the oft-remembered words from a speech given at an event her father had insisted she attend years prior. “*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that . . .*”

It was a speech considered a disappointment by most in attendance that day, but not by her. Twenty years old at the time, standing hushed beside Tillie, her Negro nanny—whose full name of Aunt Matilda had been cast aside somewhere during childhood—she remembered every detail of that solemn gathering on the battlefield at Gettysburg, and would as long as she lived.

“The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here . . .”

The wind caught the feathers in the nest, and she wished she could capture this moment in a truer sense of time, so people would actually see those feathers moving and could hear the wind as it whistled low over the mountain and dove deep into the canyon below. An idea came for an article to accompany this photograph when she mailed it to Wendell Goldberg at the end of the week, and she tucked the thought away, hoping to remember.

When enough time had lapsed, she carefully replaced the lens cap and hurriedly repacked her camera. Now to get the exposed plate into the dark tent Josiah had set up across the ridge. She arranged the pack on her shoulders, checked the rope again, and shot him a quick glance before taking the first step.

The deep furrows lining his forehead stayed foremost in her mind as she made her way back across. The stocking on her right foot caught on a piece of bark, but a quick backward tug freed it. She stepped onto the opposite ridge and felt another sense of triumph. So much for Mr. Ainsworth and his assessment of her *boyish* skills!

She worked quickly in the tent—her makeshift darkroom—pouring a developing solution of iron sulfate and acetic acid over the photographic plate. The procedure turned the light-sensitive grains into a metallic silver that glistened in the half glow of the stubby, wax-skirted candle.

Witnessing this part of the process never lost its allure, and the image was stunning. She gave the glass plate a final water rinsing, which rendered it safe to the light again, and she reemerged from the tent.

As Josiah set to packing the equipment and loading it on the mule, she pulled out her notebook and recorded the date, hour, minute, location, and lighting of the picture she’d taken, along with a description. Keeping this information aided her understanding of how the various conditions influenced the success of her photographs.

She put her notebook away and bent to help Josiah pack, when her breath caught in her throat. Not much of a catch—just enough to gain her attention. She straightened and slowly inhaled, testing her lungs.

The doctors had made no claim there was a cure for her ailment, but they had encouraged that this territory's dry climate and mountain air should lessen the stress to her lungs. Their foremost recommendation—soaking in the region's hot springs—was a practice she looked forward to experiencing. In the past, she'd sought deliverance through physician-prescribed arsenic and chloroform remedies, and pungent mustard poultices. All hideous regimens that had brought no healing. On the contrary, they only seemed to have weakened her constitution and worsened her condition.

She breathed in and out again, beginning to think she'd overreacted. How she hated this weakness. Her health was excellent but for her lung ailment. She wanted to push on but didn't want that desire to blind her to her body's limits. Perhaps she should try and take the photographs she needed from the current vantage point.

"Are you certain, Josiah, that the view ahead holds more promise than this?"

He tied the last bundle onto the mule and pulled the strap taut. "This here's pretty, ma'am, but it ain't nothing compared to what's up ahead."

She nodded and, when he resumed the climb, fell in step behind him, trusting her own body's stubborn resolve as well as Josiah's judgment. So far he'd been right about everything—not that she would remind him of that.

Navigating the steep ribbon of switchback trail, she was grateful he'd insisted they travel this portion of the journey afoot. Shale dotted the path and made the ascent more difficult.

The weighted pack on her back grew more pronounced, and she paused for a few seconds to stretch and readjust the load.

"No need for you to tote that, ma'am. I can strap it on Moonshine,

or I can tote it for you myself, if'n you let me. Like I said before, I be gentle with it.”

She waved him on ahead. “It’s not a bother, really. I just need to pace myself.”

“Pace yourself . . . ? Sounds like you back there pacin’ yourself right straight to death.”

She laughed, despite the truth in his statement. “You haven’t told me . . . why did you name that stubborn animal Moonshine?”

Josiah rubbed the bridge of his mule’s nose. “I named him after somethin’ my mama used to tell us kids when we was young. She used to say to us . . . that if ever we was to get parted from the other, we was to look up at the moon come night, and that no matter where she was, or where any of us was, we’d be together. Cuz we be lookin’ at the same moon God hung in His heavens.”

Elizabeth envied him that memory. What stories might her own mother have shared if she’d lived long enough to have the chance?

Josiah continued the uphill hike, and it took her three generous steps to equal his every two, her heeled boots and long skirt hindering her efforts. Her split skirt was in a trunk of clothing that still hadn’t arrived from Washington, but she looked forward to the freedom and practicality it would allow.

Walking behind Josiah, she again noted the broadness of his shoulders, and the raised welts on the back of his neck. Once deep wounds, now long healed by the looks of them, the scars extended above his coat collar and blended into his hairline, giving insight into his past. Josiah Birch’s physical strength was impressive, and he was proving himself an able assistant on these mountain treks. And quite entertaining.

But no matter how capable an assistant he might be, she always shouldered her own pack. Especially when it contained something so valuable. She’d saved for months to buy her camera, and it held the key to her achieving her dreams.

“Townsfolk don’t much use this path.” His deep voice carried to

her over the plod of the mule's progress. "Too narrow and steep for 'em. Mostly the Ute who pass this way."

"The Ute . . . I'd like to meet—" Cold air prickled her windpipe as it fed down and filtered into her lungs. The higher they climbed, the thinner the air became and the more difficult to breathe. Studying the effects of higher altitude back east and now actually experiencing them were turning out to be two very different things. "I'd like to meet some of the Ute. If"—a painful stitch in her left side staccatoed her breath—"you could . . . arrange that."

"Only one man I know has any contact with the Ute, Miz Westbrook, and he ain't easy to find. I ain't seen him in a while, and he only makes hisself known when he has cause to. Which don't happen too frequent."

Massaging a pain in her side, Elizabeth skirted a larger rock in the path, aware of the loose shale close to the edge and of how unaffected Josiah seemed by the altitude. "This man . . . he sounds peculiar. Like . . . some sort of hermit."

"No, ma'am, he ain't no hermit. Just keeps to hisself. Likes it best that way is how I figure it."

A spasm started in her upper chest, forcing Elizabeth to slow her pace. It was a small one this time, and she managed to coax some breaths past the tangle at the base of her throat. She fixed her gaze to the trail and continued to climb. "How do I . . . contact this gentleman?"

"You don't. More like he finds you, if he has a mind to. Which he most often won't."

"And . . ." She breathed slowly, in and out, as physicians had instructed since her youth—advice more easily followed when one wasn't hiking up a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain. "Why is that?"

When he failed to answer, she looked up to find him halted on the trail, his arm raised, his rifle drawn.

She went absolutely still, grateful for the chance to gain her breath

but with senses at alert. Crackling noises sounded from deep within the wooded ridge. Then the breaking of twigs, the faint rustle of branches. Wind whistled through the low-bowered pines and stalwart spruce, masking sounds that might otherwise have been detected.

She slipped a hand into her pocket as she scanned the wooded rise to their left—unsure whether her shortness of breath stemmed from her ailment or from whatever was out there . . . or perhaps both. Gripping the curve-handled derringer, an indulgent purchase she'd made before departing New York City, a measure of courage rose within her. Its .41 caliber ball would hardly deter a large animal, but it was better than facing one completely defenseless.

Josiah cocked his head to one side as though listening for something.

The first time he'd done this on the trail three days ago, she'd questioned him. After spotting the mountain lion, she'd swiftly learned to keep her silence. He'd shot at the animal and missed—by a wide margin if the splintered bark held truth—but his actions had apparently convinced the lion that they were unworthy prey.

It was unrealistic, she knew, but one photograph of that sleek, muscular predator would have all but guaranteed her the much sought-after position at the *Chronicle*. But in the flick of a second hand, the cougar had disappeared, taking her opportunity with it. And they'd spotted no wildlife since, other than the occasional bird and furry marmot—hardly prey capable of enticing travelers and game hunters west.

Josiah gradually lowered his arm and murmured low, a sound she'd heard from him before. "Felt somethin' on the breeze." His focus remained on the shadows beyond the trees. "Don't no more."

Elizabeth tried to respond but couldn't. A familiar ache wedged itself inside her throat, lodging like a fist in her windpipe.

Josiah looked her direction. His eyes narrowed. "You all right, ma'am?"

Elizabeth shook her head and groped at the high collar of her

shirtwaist. The first two buttons slid free, but the effort earned her no relief. Each attempt to breathe ended in a pathetic wheeze, and her world took on that strange spiraling sensation she knew only too well.

She clenched her eyes tight—as if surrendering the ability to see might persuade her lungs to function. *Stay calm . . . steady breaths . . .*

“It be happenin’, miz?” The deep cauldron of a whisper sounded close beside her.

Frantic, she nodded, furious at her body’s betrayal. She’d warned him about this, just in case it happened while they were together. She hated being seen as weak; people treated her differently. She’d pushed too hard this morning. She’d known better.

Strength left her legs. . . .

Josiah eased her to the ground and pulled the pack from her shoulders. “Tell me what to do, ma’am! You got that medicine? One you told me ’bout?”

She shook her head, unable to answer. It was back in her room, and only a little remained. She’d been rationing it, waiting for a new shipment. No matter how many times she’d experienced this, it still terrified her.

He eased her onto the ground, her throat closing by the second. She stared into the sky, trusting God could see. She didn’t doubt that. She only wondered if He would intervene. He had every time before, but it didn’t mean He always would. She’d learned that early in life—when her mother died.

Her throat felt the size of a rye grass straw, and what little air she could inhale and expel hung in anemic wisps in front of her face. Elizabeth squeezed Josiah’s hand and felt his flesh give beneath her nails. Yet he never let go. The panic in his eyes mirrored hers, and her body jerked as she fought for breath.

A moment passed. Maybe less, maybe more. Elizabeth couldn't be sure. But it felt like an eternity. Then the thinnest, most precious ribbon of air slid through the knot in her throat, loosening its hold.

Second by second, the spasm lessened.

Gradually, her throat relaxed and the sweetest rush of cool air trickled down into her lungs. Like a field hand parched from thirst, she was tempted to gulp it in but knew better. She filled her lungs slowly, deliberately, still suspended in that dreamlike state somewhere between consciousness and having been pulled under.

Josiah gently patted her hand. "This one don't seem to have hung on like the others you told me 'bout."

She nodded, his voice sounding far away. She couldn't speak, but he was right. This episode had been bad, but not as severe as the ones she'd endured on the journey west, the travel exacerbated by soot and ashes from the train and swirling dust from the stagecoaches.

For several heartbeats, she simply delighted in her lungs' obedience. And, as always in these moments afterward, there lingered the uninvited question of whether she would suffer the same fate as her mother, and at nearly the same age. Pushing away the thought, she indicated she was ready to stand.

Josiah offered assistance and held her steady for a moment, then retrieved her canteen from the mule. “Didn’t I say you looked a mite peaked this mornin’, ma’am?”

She took a long draw of water, choosing to ignore him. The western territories were more uncivilized than she’d anticipated, but the water here . . . She’d never tasted anything so cold and clean. She smoothed her shirtwaist and took another drink, choosing to leave the top two buttons at her neckline unfastened.

She dabbed at the corners of her mouth. “How much farther before we reach the ridge?”

Josiah shook his head. “It be just round this bend, ma’am.”

He bent to lift her pack, but she motioned for him to leave it.

“You’s the stubbornest white woman I know, Miz Westbrook.”

She laughed. “So I still have some competition in that area, is that what you’re saying?”

He scoffed and turned, mule in tow. She retrieved her pack and followed him around the corner, and found her breath nearly stolen away again. But this time for an altogether different reason. He had been right. . . .

The Rocky Mountains’ renowned twin sisters, the Maroon Bells, rose like ethereal monuments against the pale azure sky. Capped in snowy brilliance, the north and south peaks splintered the morning light into a thousand sparkling prisms. Standing there, taking it in, she wished she could thank Wendell Goldberg again for giving her this opportunity, and for letting her choose this destination instead of sending her to California or to the Wyoming Territory, where the other two candidates for the position had been sent.

A lake, clear and smooth, filled the valley’s floor, acting as the mountains’ footstool and perfectly mirroring their splendor. If only her camera lens could capture the riot of nature’s colors instead of portraying them in dull shades of gray.

She busied herself with helping Josiah unload the equipment from the mule. Then heard something in the distance . . . a rushing

noise. It rose above the wind and their shuffling as they unpacked. She searched, and spotted it across the canyon—a waterfall cascading over boulders, some the size of a small house, down into a pool at least five hundred feet below. Gorgeous . . .

Wendell Goldberg's hunches were right. Easterners would pay an exorbitant amount of money to vacation here—if they could be afforded the same luxuries they enjoyed at home. Which, right now, was certainly not the case. But it soon would be once Chilton Enterprises constructed their new hotel.

“Why didn't you tell me there was a waterfall near here, Josiah?”

He dropped the folded canvas tent on the ground and looked at her as though she were daft. “Cuz you didn't ask me.”

She dismissed his response with a smile. She hadn't confided in him about her association with the *Chronicle* for the same reason she hadn't told anyone else in Timber Ridge. All he knew was that she wanted to take pictures of nature, and he'd already agreed to accompany her on her expedition south to the cliff dwellings.

“Well, from now on, if there's a waterfall or hot spring or . . . anything like that within view of where we're standing, would you please tell me about it?”

Again, that look. “Yes, ma'am. I can do that.” He went back to work. “'Course, I guess I'm wonderin' why you can't just see it for yourself with your own eyes. God gave you two good ones, and it makes sense to me that . . .”

Ignoring his muttering, Elizabeth knelt and untied the straps to her shoulder pack and withdrew her camera, followed by glass plates cocooned in fabric and an assortment of bottles, each wrapped separately to prevent breakage. A glance confirmed that Josiah would soon have her dark tent set up and her supplies arranged inside. As expected from his previous routine, he'd pitched the tent as far away from the edge of the mountainside as possible, and on the most level patch of ground.

She readied one of the camera plates for exposure, cleaning the

glass with a mixture of pumice and alcohol. She poured collodion onto the readied surface, tilted the plate at various angles until the entire area was coated with the transparent solution, drained the excess back into the container, and reached for a cloth.

Collodion stuck to nearly everything. She doubted whether she possessed a skirt, shirtwaist, or outer coat that didn't bear stains from the various chemicals used in her trade—a fact that irritated her father something fierce, fastidious as he'd once been with his blue woolen uniform and still was with his jacket and trousers for Senate meetings.

"It's all ready for you, Miz Westbrook."

Josiah lifted the front flap of the tent, and she crawled through the opening, wet camera plate in hand. A candle flickered burnished yellow in the darkness.

On her knees in the familiar half glow, Elizabeth dipped the plate, now tacky to the touch, into a light-sensitizing bath Josiah had prepared as she'd taught him. Twelve parts water to one part silver nitrate. Minutes later, once the surface of the glass was uniform and creamy white in color, she removed it from the bath, wiped the back of it with a clean cloth, and slid it into a lightproof wooden holder.

She emerged from the dark tent with the prepared plate, careful not to trip on the bulk of her skirt and coat.

Josiah had mounted the camera on its mahogany tripod. She rested the plate holder on a cloth on the ground and bent at the waist to view the upside-down scene through the glass viewer. No matter how many times she'd done this, capturing a slice of time on a piece of glass so that people far away could appreciate beauty they'd never seen always gave her a thrill.

She straightened and gestured to the tripod. "You chose the placement well, Josiah. Your efficiency at learning the camera's angle is commendable." She leveled her gaze, careful to keep her smile in check. "Even if your social skills leave something to be desired."

He laughed softly, the sound of it pure enjoyment to listen to.

“I thank you, ma’am, for that kind word. And I be doin’ my best to work on the other. No doubt, given time, you’ll teach me right.” He dipped his head, not meeting her eyes straight on.

In that split second, Elizabeth caught a fleeting glimpse of Josiah’s former station in life, or what she imagined it might have been like from the little he’d shared with her. He was more astute than any assistant she’d worked with back in Washington, and he possessed a subtlety of humor she admired. In her line of work, she often rubbed shoulders with such jesting from male colleagues, and whether Josiah knew it or not, his quick wit was serving to sharpen her own.

She’d never had a brother, or a sister for that matter, but if she’d had siblings, she imagined her relationship with an older brother might have been somewhat like hers with Josiah Birch, even in the short time they’d known each other. She guessed him to be roughly ten years her senior, though it was hard to tell. Thick muscle, similar to that of a younger man, layered his body. But within his expression lay a depth of emotion that bespoke age and experience beyond his physical years. And if the weathered wrinkles and shadows were telling, she read that the whole of his life had not been kind.

She bent to study the camera’s perspective one last time. This was one view that never lied. It always mirrored exactly what was seen, albeit in reverse. And the upside-downness seemed to bring more clarity to the view. The trees stood taller against the swathe of azure blue. The mountains vaulted from the earth’s belly with more startling strength when seen in reverse of nature’s gravity.

She snuck a quick glance at Josiah and discovered him surveying the mountainside as well. The color of his skin was not a hindrance to their friendship in her eyes, just as she knew hers was not to him. But that was easier said out here, away from the confines of proper society and judging eyes. She wasn’t blind to the looks they drew in town. She simply chose not to let them bother her.

As she turned and retrieved the light-protected plate, she heard Josiah’s soft gasp behind her.

Straightening, she followed his line of vision, and in that moment she knew that, no matter her love of photography, her affinity for the English language, or her devotion to her career, words would fail to capture the majesty before her.

A bull elk—fully mature, judging by his massive size—had emerged from a clustered stand of Douglas fir. He held his head erect and his nose twitched, reading the wind as easily as she would a book. No doubt he smelled them. No doubt he *saw* them. Scarcely twenty feet separated them, a perfect distance to capture his image.

His enormous antlers extended skyward, and as she watched him, Elizabeth felt an overriding sense of awe. Already she could picture him filling the frame of her lens, as well as a frame in one of Washington's prestigious art galleries. The bull elk moved with deliberate grace. His rack—measuring, conservatively, five feet in height, twice that in span—punctuated the blue horizon at his back. He exuded an innate authority to rule and seemed almost conscious of his beauty.

This was the photograph she'd been praying for. The kind that would make Wendell Goldberg sit up in that fine leather chair of his and realize she was worth every penny he'd invested, and that *she* was the candidate who deserved to be the *Chronicle's* first female photographer and journalist.

The mule brayed, and the elk's hindquarters quivered. Elizabeth held her breath, praying he wouldn't leap back into the brush. But he scarcely moved. This was every bit *his* mountain, and all four of them knew it, the mule included. Now if she could only get the plate into the camera without frightening him away.

Slipping the protective holder into the wooden slot caused a scraping noise, followed by an overloud click. The familiar sounds seemed inordinately bold against the hushed backdrop of nature, but the animal seemed unaffected by it all.

Convinced that the Creator had handcrafted this opportunity, she removed the lens cap, exposed the prepared plate to the light,

and began silently reciting the speech she knew by heart. Things were going to work out for her—she just had that feeling.

All her life it seemed as though she'd been fighting an uphill battle. First with her health, and then in being excluded from opportunities due to her gender. Not that she wanted to be treated like a man. Not in the least. She simply wanted the same opportunities, to be allowed the chance to make the same mistakes. . . .

The morning sun broke through the clouds, spilling translucent sheets of silver onto the valley floor far below and reflecting off the rippled surface of the river.

Careful not to bump the camera or the tripod, she returned the lens cap to its place and admired the bull elk, which stood tall and proud, head erect. If this photograph exposed as well as she thought, it would rival any wildlife or nature scene captured in the western territories that she could recall. Even her mentor, Mathew Brady, would be envious.

Josiah raised a hopeful brow as she removed the plate from the camera. She nodded once and enjoyed the responding twinkle in his eyes. Now to get the plate developed. She tossed him a smile and hurried toward the tent, letting herself imagine in even greater detail the look on Wendell Goldberg's face when he saw the photograph of this bull elk set against the panorama of—

An explosion fragmented the silence.

Elizabeth turned to see the bull elk buckled forward, blood flowing from a wound directly behind his shoulder. The animal attempted a valiant stride and faltered, and Elizabeth had to stop herself from rushing toward him. Such beauty, such strength . . .

He keened low, a primal sound, a cry she knew she'd never forget. Then he crumpled forward—just as the glass plate slipped from her hand.