

Treasure Creek, Alaska
August, 1898

Her heart pounded. Her lungs strained for air. Viola ignored their screaming need, held the hem of her long skirt out of the way of her feet and ran on. Impervious to bumps and shouts, she dashed around and through the press of prospectors and townspeople on the boardwalkway, driven forward by the horror of the note crushed in her hand. *The baby— Goldie's father had trusted her to care for his baby and now— Almighty God, please let Goldie be all right! Please keep her safe until I—* "Oh!"

She crashed into a solid, lean body, bounced off and staggered back trying to get her balance. Strong hands clamped around her upper arms, steadied her. Viola wrenched her shoulders, pushed against a hard chest. "Let me go!"

"Steady, Miss Goddard."

Miss Goddard. Who— She looked up. The handsome man staring down at her frowned, tightened his grip on her upper arms.

"Are you all right, Miss Goddard. You seem distressed." His green eyes darkened. "Is it the baby? Has her health taken a turn for the worse?"

Goldie's health? A memory flashed. Thomas Stone. Yes, that was his name. He was the missionary who had brought the injured stamperder into the clinic earlier when she took Goldie in to be examined.

"You're trembling, Miss Goddard. Please, tell me what's wrong. Perhaps I can help."

The concern in his voice squeezed at her throat. "It's Goldie—" Fear choked off her words.

"Goldie?"

She took a gulp of air, nodded. "The baby. She— She's been kidnapped!"

"What?"

People near them on the street stopped, stared. A low murmur started, hummed against her ears.

Confusion leapt into the green eyes looking down at her. "I found this in her cradle." She bit her lip to stop a rush of tears and shoved the ransom note at him. "Do you know where Mack Tanner is? He's not in his store and I have to find him. He has—" His hand slid down her

arm, tugged. Her heart sped. "What are you *doing*?"

"Taking you to the sheriff."

The murmur grew louder.

"Let me *go*!" Viola dug in her heels and pulled at his strong hand gripping her elbow as he ushered her down the street. Her resistance was no match for his strength.

A roar of laughter went up from a group of prospectors who split to allow them passage on the walkway. "You show the little lady who's boss, Mister!"

Viola caught her breath. *I can't have you running away, Viola. You will give my other girls ideas. I warned you. Now, my men will have to show you Richard Dengler is boss.* She shuddered, yanked against Thomas Stone's grasp.

He shot her a look and tightened his hold. "I am trying to help you, Miss Goddard. This is a dangerous situation for both you and the baby. You need the Sheriff, not Mack Tanner, even if he is the mayor of Treasure Creek." He opened the door of the new log building that served as the sheriff's office and jail and tugged at her elbow, urging her to step inside.

She shook off the memory, grabbed the door frame and tried once more to resist. "I do need Mack! He has the *gold*."

"Gold?" The sheriff's growl stopped her struggle. "What's going on, Viola? Is this about Goldie again?"

She looked at the giant man, leaning back in his chair with his booted feet propped up on a desk he made look much too small, and the last of her strength deserted her. She stepped inside. "Yes, she—"

"Don't people ever give up!" Ed Parker shook his head, motioned her closer. "Who's been trying to claim the baby and get their hands on those gold nuggets this time?"

"No one. She—" Her throat closed on the words.

"The baby has been kidnapped, Ed."

Hearing Thomas Stone say the words made it worse...more real. She sagged, felt him grip her elbow again, support her.

"Kidnapped!" Ed Parker's feet hit the floor with a thud. "Close that door."

There was a click behind her. Her knees wobbled as the missionary led her to the only chair in the place. She sank onto the hard wood seat and fought for composure as he laid the crumpled paper on the sheriff's desk.

"That's the note the kidnapper left her."

Ed Parker smoothed out the paper and read it, his broad face darkening into a scowl. "Where'd you get this note? What happened?" He fastened his gaze on her. "Start at the beginning and tell me everything."

Viola tightened the grip of her folded hands in her lap, digging her fingernails into her palms to keep from crying. "Goldie has been fussy, and I have been up day and night with her. She developed a fever today so I took her to Dr. Calloway's clinic this afternoon. I was afraid she had come down with the cholera that spread through the Indian village. Teena Crow examined her and told me Goldie is-is teething and her gums are inflamed. She gave me an herbal balm to-to take away the pain." *She would be in pain. Oh, Goldie baby, I'm so sorry!*

She swallowed hard, squared her shoulders. "The balm worked. Goldie calmed and fell asleep. Hattie insisted I go to her room and catch up on my sleep while she watched over Goldie, and—" *And it's all my fault! I should have stayed with her.* She took a deep breath and pushed her fingernails in deeper. "When I woke, I went to my bedroom to check on Goldie. Hattie was asleep in the rocker and—and the cradle was—was empty, except for that note. I ran to Tanner's store to find Mack Tanner and get the gold nuggets he is keeping safe for Goldie, but he wasn't there. I was running to his home, when I collided with Mr. Stone—" she shot him a look that let him know how little she appreciated his interference "—showed him the note and he brought me here."

She rose, bracing herself, lest the missionary try to push her back down on the chair. "Sheriff Parker, please...I will answer all of your questions later. Right now, I have to find Mack Tanner and—"

"I'm here."

Viola whirled toward the door. Mack Tanner stepped into the small office, pulled the door closed and fastened his gaze on her. "Harold Goodge came to the schoolhouse to get me. Said he was on the street and overheard you tell Thomas you were looking for me because Goldie has been kidnapped. Said he saw Thomas bringing you here." A frown creased his forehead, his gaze shifted to the missionary, then returned to her. "Is it true about Goldie being kidnapped?"

She caught her breath, nodded.

"I suppose, like all the other greedy louts who have tried to

claim her for their child, they are demanding the gold nuggets Goldie's father left for her care?"

"Yes."

"It's always about gold!" Mack's face tightened. "On the way here I heard a couple of men talking about the Tlingits being behind the kidnapping. Any truth to that?"

"The Tlingits?" Ed Parker scowled. "You didn't tell me that, Viola."

"I cannot tell you something I do not know, Sheriff. The kidnapper did not sign the note." She took a breath, smoothed the asperity from her voice and held out her hand in entreaty. "Could we please stop talking and—"

"The kidnapper left a note?"

The sheriff nodded at Mack Tanner and snatched up the paper on his desk. "Got it right here. It says... 'Leave the gold at midnight at the creek side entrance to the fenced in cemetery. If you do, you'll find the baby soon thereafter. If you don't, the baby dies.'" He rubbed his big hand over his long chin, looked back over at Mack. "Nothing there makes it sound like the Indians."

"No, but some people believe the baby is Indian because of her dark hair and those moccasin booties." Mack scowled. "I knew those booties were going to be a problem the day Viola brought the baby to me and told me how she'd been left on her doorstep. And, of course, it's common knowledge that the Tlingits are angry because Teena Crow is working at the clinic with Dr. Calloway. And with the cholera having hit their village so hard and the town being spared..." Mack turned toward the missionary. "Your work is with the Tlingits, Thomas. What do you think? Would they—"

"What does it *matter* what he thinks?" Viola shoved the words out of her constricted throat. She was beyond caring if Mack Tanner was the founder and mayor of Treasure Creek and the keeper of Goldie's gold nuggets. He was wasting time. "Goldie is in danger. We cannot simply stand here *talking* about it! The note says—"

"Calm down, Viola." Ed Parker's voice was kind, but firm. "There is time to meet the kidnapper's demands. And we can do that best if we know what we're up against." He looked beyond her. "What do you think about the Tlingits being involved, Stone"

She might as well be invisible! Viola glanced up at the missionary, found his gaze on her. She was not invisible to Mr. Stone.

A shiver slipped along her spine. He looked calm and decisive. And strong. She lifted her hand and rubbed the spot where he had gripped her elbow as he propelled her along the street. *All those forceful men at Dengler's had-* He glanced down at her hand. She froze and he looked back at the sheriff.

"I think the rumor is ridiculous, Ed. The Tlingits are honest traders. Kidnapping a baby for gold or revenge is not their way. And no Tlingit would use the wording in that note. But Teena Crow would know for certain. Why not ask her about this?"

Yes. Decisive and strong was the perfect description of Thomas Stone. But not calm, as he appeared. There was a little muscle jumping along his jaw. A sure sign a man was angry. She knew all the signs. She turned, using the movement to create more space between them. "Sheriff Parker, I don't care who the kidnappers are. It doesn't matter if they are white men or Tlingits. I only want to get Goldie back!" She whirled and took a step toward Mack Tanner. "Could we please go get the gold nuggets now? I have to take--"

"Not you, Viola."

She whipped back around to face the sheriff. "But I *must!* I--"

"Nope. It's too dangerous. The note just says 'leave the gold', it doesn't say who should take it there."

"But--"

"No arguing. You go on home and let us men handle this." Ed Parker pulled a gun belt from a drawer, strapped it on and came around the desk. "I think Stone's got the right idea. Let's go talk to Teena Crow, Mack. You come too, Stone. We'll see if she agrees--"

"I am not going home."

The men stopped at the door, turned their heads and frowned at her. Viola drew her shoulders back, lifted her chin and faced their displeasure. "Goldie was left on *my* doorstep along with a note from her father asking me to care for her until he returns from the gold fields. *I* am responsible for her, Sheriff Parker. And I am going with you."

"Now see here, Viol--"

"Her point is a valid one, Ed. And there is no danger to Miss Goddard at the clinic." The missionary's quiet words interrupted the sheriff's growl.

Ed parker scowled, but said no more, simply snatched his hat off

a hook on the wall, slapped it on his head and opened the door.

A group of men clustered on the walkway looked up. "What's goin' on, Sheriff? We heard—"

"You men go on about your business now. There's nothing here concern's you. If I need help, I'll come find you." The sheriff stepped outside, using his giant size to force the men to move. Mack Tanner followed.

Thomas Stone took a step back. "After you, Miss Goddard."

Viola stared at the missionary. Why had he argued in her defense? Why had he insinuated himself into this situation in the first place? She had not asked for his help. A shudder traveled through her. In her experience, men always had some nefarious motive for their actions. And it was usually costly for a woman. But she hadn't time to concern herself with that now. Saving Goldie was what mattered.

She stiffened her spine and swept by the man out onto the plank walkway and hurried to catch the sheriff and Mack Tanner. If Thomas Stone did have a base motive— If he thought he could collect some personal 'favor' for helping her, he was very much mistaken. Richard Dengler and his thugs were back in Seattle. She had escaped his grasp and was through with a life of prostitution forever. And no man...*no man* would ever touch her again. Not even to save Goldie. She would listen to their plans, and then she would find another way. One that kept her at a distance from Thomas Stone. She did not like the hint of admiration she saw in his eyes, though, at the moment, she was grateful for his tall, muscular presence beside her, blocking her from the crowd forming in their wake as they walked toward the clinic at the other end of town.