

Sulfur Springs

By Lucinda Stein



LETTIE MAE LEANED in the doorway of the cabin and watched Thomas trudge down the dirt road that led to the Lucky Spur silver mine. A hillside of ponderosa pine blurred in the morning haze, and the jagged peaks of the San Juan Mountains were shrouded in smoldering clouds.

Thomas reached the curve in the road and vanished into the woods. She grabbed her shawl and headed in the opposite direction.

She shivered in the spring breeze, tied the shawl at her thick waist, and walked half a mile to the cabin of her friend, Darla Robbins. A

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narrow plume of smoke rose from the stone chimney. Darla's husband, George, had returned last week from working the Virginium Mine high above timberline.

Lettie Mae picked up a pitchfork propped against the corral and dug the iron tines into a loose stack of hay. The feed tossed over the railing summoned six hungry burros. George had agreed to keep her newly acquired livestock a secret. She pitched hay until sweat broke out on her forehead. Strands of auburn hair escaped the tortoiseshell comb fastened at the back of Lettie Mae's head. At thirty-one, she should have been feeding children, not long-eared donkeys.

"Mornin', Lettie Mae." Darla stood barefoot at the open door, her white nightgown brushing her ankles.

Lettie Mae waved.

A brawny arm reached around Darla's waist and pulled her into the cabin. Her friend's muffled laughter rippled from behind the door. Lettie Mae smiled and turned toward home. Wild onions grew between furrows carved in the earth by wagon wheels. In the brush, a mule deer raised its head and hopped off on nimble legs. Smoke drifted on the air, sharp with

the smell of pine pitch, and a thin pillar of smoke appeared above the trees. There the small squat cabin that Thomas had built

wedged between trunks of pine.

She reached into her pocket for a handkerchief and felt five coins left from trading at the general store. Inside the cabin, she pulled a burlap sack of coffee from the cupboard and dug into the beans. Lettie Mae deposited the coins at the bottom where the metal clinked against previous deposits. Across the room, a camelback trunk lay at the foot of the bed. She lifted the lid and felt below the linens embroidered by her late mother. Crisp paper bills slid between her fingertips. She smoothed the folded quilt on top, closed the lid, and made a pot of coffee.

Boiled meat and onions permeated the cabin after sunset. Lettie Mae kept the stew simmering over the open fireplace hours after she'd eaten. She stepped out onto the

porch. Between shadows that crossed the road like dark fingers, the full moon glinted off pebbles and rocks. Silence hung on the edge of the woods. The wind had abated. Something snapped in the trees, and she hurried inside.

She lay fully clothed on the feather-tick mattress, heart racing until sweat soaked her body. At the snap of logs in the fireplace, she jolted up. The rocker in the corner offered little comfort at night. Lettie Mae grabbed a walking stick and marched out of the cabin. She'd check on her burros. That's what she'd tell George Robbins if she startled him in the dark, but that was unlikely—he kept no dogs. The moon lit the road, but shadows coiled around tree trunks and crouched beneath branches heavy with needles. Wildlife roamed the country: coyote, black bear, and cougar. A mountain man once claimed that wild animals could sense weak prey. Her stout legs tramped on, her arms swinging like pendulums until she reached the Robbins's place.

Moonlight glazed the length of the corral and buffed the rails into gold links on a chain. The burros huddled in the corner. She offered strands of hay to the soft noses that nudged closer. The high moon cast the burros' long shadows across the corral. Lettie Mae crossed her arms for warmth. The scrutiny of lunar light left her alone and vulnerable. She left.

Back home, the cabin was veiled in darkness. The lantern was out. She tiptoed up

the porch and cracked the door. The low fire in the stove crackled at intervals. The cabin reeked of sweat and alcohol. About to slip off her boots, she spotted the red glow of a lit cigar.

“Good for nothin’ woman!” Thomas lunged.

She dodged, but he grabbed her arm. Lettie Mae aimed the toe of her boot, but before she could deliver the blow, she fell backward.

“Damn it.” Thomas stumbled on the floor. In the faint light of embers, he struggled to his feet.

She scrambled backward like a spider. He laughed. The heel of her unlaced boot slammed against his shin, and he crashed to the floor.

He roared. “You’re a dead woman.”

Lettie Mae raced for the door. She flew down the steps with the drum of heavy boots in pursuit. His loud huffing grew closer. She frantically scanned the moonlit landscape for a game trail. She darted to the left, when darkness plunged over the earth. Clouds had covered the moon.

“Git back here.”

The brilliant orb resurfaced. Thirty feet into the trees, she froze.

He hollered again. Lettie Mae dug her fingertips into bark and peered around the trunk. Thomas staggered along the road.

The moon disappeared again, and he cursed.

Her chest heaved. Could he hear her gasping breath?

His footsteps slowly receded.

The rustler’s moon slid through wispy clouds and revealed the road to town. She rose from her nest of pine needles. A quarter mile down the road, she veered down a worn path. The trail came out into a clearing where bitter sulfur hung on the air. At the edge of a pond, dark water pooled at her feet. Lettie Mae slipped off her woolen shawl. Moonlight washed over her pale shoulders and bathed her skin in amber. Steam rose from the hot springs, spinning over the water like an apparition.

In the distance, a dog yelped. She knelt and swirled the water like she’d stir a kettle. Under the light of the moon, bruises formed on her arm. She touched her tender skin and winced. Lettie Mae was sure that Thomas lay, six-foot-one, two hundred and fifty pounds with boots still on, uncon-

scious on the bed back at the cabin. Like many nights before, alcohol would leach from the pores of his soiled skin and fill the cabin with its stench. The foul odor must be combustible. If she struck a match, would he perish in a hell-blazing burst of fire? She shook off the dark thought. God would deal with the scoundrel.

She untied her boots and lifted her dress overhead. Undergarments fell to the ground. Immersed in the pool, she raked her fingers through the water while the warm springs curled around her neck. Her marriage had crumbled.

Her husband dropped in at the local saloons at the end of the day and drank with miners, most of them bachelors. Thomas was an unpredictable drunk. At first, he flung cruel words. Then it was chairs overturned, boots hurled in her direction and, once, a pine log pitched at her head.

Lettie Mae recalled the last time Thomas had staggered to the cabin, rank with the smell of whiskey. He grabbed her and threw her on the bed. Her head slammed against the bedpost with a loud crack.

She cried out and touched the back of her head. Warm wet hair plastered her scalp.

“Shut up.” He slapped her. “Or you’ll get more than a headache to complain about.”

She turned her face, afraid to hold the stare of the wild predator her husband had become. Her jaw ached. Her head throbbled. In the dark, she cried silently.

In the morning, she woke to the sight of Thomas’s face covered in blood. Dark crimson stains splayed over the pillows. He snored and rolled over. It was her blood.

Lettie Mae tried her best to avoid his whiskey-induced detonations, but tonight she made the mistake of returning to the cabin before he passed out. A few feet away warm water trickled over stones on its tranquil journey to the creek. She reluctantly left the soothing comfort of the mineral water, dressed, and returned to the dirt road lined with mute, unlit houses. The wild town was peaceful. The moon lit a silver path, the road broken by occasional blossoms of shadow. Her footsteps pattered in the eerie calm.

She dreamed of fleeing the growing darkness in her husband’s eyes, but dreams weren’t enough. It was time to act.

She dreamed of fleeing the growing darkness in her husband’s eyes, but dreams weren’t enough. It was time to act. Lettie Mae removed her boots at the side of the road. She crept onto the porch, avoiding the middle step that creaked, and heard the loud snore and snap of Thomas’s drunken slumber. Whiskey hung on the air. Like a thief, she slid to the cupboard and retrieved the bag of coffee. She tiptoed to the chest at the foot of the bed and pushed aside an empty bottle. Moonlight draped the bulky form sprawled over the bed. His snoring ceased. Light from the window illumined her face.

He sputtered and snored. Lettie Mae lifted the lid of the trunk and felt for the hidden bills. She retrieved the money enveloped in her mother’s linens. Before their wedding, she wrestled whether to divulge the savings from her late husband. Her secret remained.

Thomas rolled over. “Hit him, Buster.”

Lettie Mae sank below the mattress. A cloud passed over the moon, and a ripple of snores ruptured the quiet. She crept outside and hurried to locate her boots. Moonlight revealed one boot in the tall grass. Hot tears sprang up as she sat on the ground and laced her boots.

She slogged to the Robbins’s cabin and rapped three times—their prearranged signal. Lettie Mae raised her hand to knock again when the door slid open. Darla slipped out barefoot, her eyes wide.

“I’m afraid it’s time to leave.” Lettie Mae hugged her friend.

Darla disappeared. Rummaging sounds came from the kitchen, and she reappeared with a key to the outbuilding. “God be with you.”

“I’ll write,” Lettie Mae whispered. She rose on the balls of her feet and kissed her friend’s cheek. It was unlikely they’d see each other again. In the shed out back, Lettie Mae dressed in a pair of men’s trousers, a wool shirt, and a long canvas coat. The weight of leather packs strained her arms on the way to the corral.

The sky blanched thin and clear fifteen minutes before dawn. Lettie Mae packed her burros—Faith, Hope, Charity, Abraham, Moses, and Ezekiel—up the worn trail that led deep into the mountains. A breeze stirred and shadows danced across the trail. Hooves thudded over the earth.

The tranquility of nature was comforting after months of shouts and curses. She drew a long breath and prayed for a safe journey.

At dawn the town was out of sight, and the burros plodded deeper into the hills. The ruddy face of the sun trailed behind its light, the high peaks delaying its arrival. An hour later the sun rose. With stiff fingers, Lettie Mae unfolded a wrinkled paper from her leather pack. Inscribed in black India ink, a trail wound through Imogene Pass to Telluride and mapped out her escape.

The early hours of daylight enabled her to put miles between the cabin and her little pack train. The sun fell below the peaks that evening, and still she traveled beneath the waning light. At dark, she made camp in a meadow below timberline. Deadfall provided wood for a fire. The cry of coyotes rang out, and her scalp prickled. Back at the cabin, their muffled cry was pleasant but here the sound erupted, loud and feral. In need of more firewood, she entered the dark woods. Another round of yipping echoed through the hills. Coyotes ran in packs.

Alone in the wilderness, she was a far cry from the farmer's wife she'd once been. Five months after her first husband's funeral in the Dakota Territory, she penned a letter in response to an ad seeking a frontier wife. A reply arrived in the mail on her thirtieth birthday. It was a Tuesday, and the sun shone in a huckleberry-blue sky.

A month later, she arrived at the train station in Denver under an overcast sky. Boardwalks perched above mud in front of crude storefronts. She set her luggage down. A door swung open and a tall man sauntered out of the depot, wearing a dark brimmed hat. He scanned the platform before he leaned against a post that overlooked the rails. He reached into his coat pocket and took out a cigar. His cheeks sunk in upon lighting the tobacco. Smoke drifted over and she choked.

Across the platform another man paced, his eyes shifting to the horizon and back again. His belly protruded from dirty clothes, face coated with grime above his beard. He removed his hat and shook the dust from it. The sun reflected off the man's eggshell scalp. She glanced at the other fellow. Eyes intent on watching the empty tracks, he appeared to be waiting for another train. Lettie Mae looked back and saw the filthy man glaring in her direction.

The description in Thomas's letter spoke of an able-bodied man with thick hair. How easy for a man to deceive a woman through correspondence! She slumped, arms limp at her sides.

She determined to purchase a ticket back home. Halfway to the ticket window, a sound came from behind her. "Ahem." Lettie Mae cringed.

The tall man with the dark hat marched up, smelling of cloves and spice. "I'm Thomas Little." Face solemn, he stared down at his prospective wife. He inspected her from the gold plume in her hat down to the toes of her buttoned boots.

She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Lettie Mae Schaaf."

He thrust out a calloused hand and shook hers like a pump handle. Without another word, he picked up her satchels and walked away.

She glanced back at the ragged town and the leer of unkempt men from across the street before she hurried to catch up with the somber man.

They married that afternoon. The gaunt preacher's wife was the sole witness, dissecting Lettie Mae with sharp gray eyes. After the brief ceremony, Thomas whisked her off to the hotel. The next morning she looked in the dresser mirror. What had she done?

At the end of the week, they headed west across the Colorado Territory in an overloaded wagon toward a mining settlement called Ouray. Her spine jarred with each depression in the road, and her head reeled with the collision of rocks beneath wagon wheels.

"The mountains are full of silver and gold." Thomas looked over the oiled harnesses of the matching Morgans. "Mineral deposits run like mountain streams." He flung his hand, the other clutching the leather reins.

She smiled politely at the wild tales.

The little mountain town legitimized Thomas's claims of abundant silver ore, but grueling work in the mine took its toll. Thomas fell asleep after eating her big country dinners of potatoes, roast venison, and fresh bread. The light in his eyes dimmed. They had rarely talked.

The night spent on the mountaintop stretched long and restless. Halfway through the night, Lettie Mae woke to the

shrill scream of a mountain lion. The fire had burned down to coals. She hated cats. Last fall a trapper stretched his cougar hide over a tying post outside the general store. The body of the big tom was long and powerful. The trapper exposed the fangs. "Pumas are blood-thirsty," he said. Something rustled in the grass, and the tethered burros shuffled and snorted. She threw logs on the fire. A twig snapped. She kept the fire blazing until morning.

Lettie Mae trekked into Telluride under a sky heavy with clouds. Wagons rumbled down Main Street, carving deep ruts in the mud. Rotting dung mixed with the smell of livestock. She prodded her burros down the middle of the road as thunder rolled in the distance. Dark clouds hung on the saw-edged peaks that overlooked the town as she tied her burros to cottonwoods along the stream.

She stopped in the general store to purchase supplies. With two loaves of bread in the crook of her arm, she filled a bag with jerky from a glass jar. The thud of heavy boots beat over wooden planks, and three men strode through the door. She tied the bag.

"Stock up, boys." Clad in leather, a man brushed rain from his coat sleeves.

"Right, boss."

Lettie Mae stiffened at the familiar voice. Thomas. She spied a door at the back of the building. Thomas wandered to the opposite side of the store, and she rushed to the clerk at the counter.

"Good morning, ma'am."

"I'm in a bit of a rush, sir." She tucked her hair beneath her hat.

"Ain't we all?" The man looked at her through lids hanging half-mast and counted the pieces of jerky. He slowly rang up the price of dried beef on the chrome-plated cash register.

She glanced back. Thomas flailed his arms in telling some wild story. "I'll pay you to hurry."

The clerk raised an eyebrow and jammed the bread in the canvas bag. With a smirk, he held out his hand. The coins jingled in his palm, and she rushed to the back door.

"Miss, that door's reserved for —"

Thomas shouted. "Clerk, we need assistance."

She slipped out the door. Mud sucked at her boots as she slogged through the black

muck in the alley. Her ears pricked at every sound—the clatter of loading freight, shouts from a foreman, and the jangle of a wagon being unhitched. She looked back. Once free of the mud, she ran toward the cottonwoods.

Lettie Mae lifted a pack and secured it to the first burro. She worked nonstop, sweating profusely. Mounted on Ezekiel, she herded the burros up Black Bear Road.

Hooves clobbered behind her. A horse and rider galloped up, the man flapping his hat and hollering. The burros scattered. Before she could respond, another rider spun past. “Git off the road,” he yelled.

Her back shot straight up in the saddle. She was about to shout when a burro strayed to the creek. She cut to her left. Another man rode up, leading a pack horse.

“Move those asses.” She froze upon hearing Thomas’s voice behind her, the pistol at her side useless—her hand refused to budge. He’d shoot her in the back. Thomas lashed his horse and caught up with the other riders. The pounding of hooves faded. She thumbed up the brim of her hat. At the crest of the hill, the riders left the road and disappeared. Only a band of dust hovered on the air.

She settled at the foot of the La Plata Mountains and found work packing supplies to mines. Her burros returned laden with ore, but the lady packer drew strange looks from the townspeople. At the livery stable one morning, Lettie Mae overheard two men.

“Crazy crone.”

She dropped a length of leather.

“I heard she strangled a mountain lion with her bare hands.”

“Probably wrestles with rattlers.” The man guffawed.

“That woman’s crazy as burro milk.”

She angled toward them. With hands at her hips, she stood with legs in a wide stance. “You’re mistaken, gentlemen. I strangled a black bear.”

“That woman’s crazy as burro milk.” She angled toward them. With hands at her hips, she stood with legs in a wide stance. “You’re mistaken, gentlemen. I strangled a black bear.”

The man in the bowler hat stared open-mouthed. His partner’s eyes bulged like hardboiled eggs. She walked away.

Lettie Mae loved packing burros. Nature brought comfort with the scent of pine that lifted in the morning dew and the who-who-hoo of the Great Horned Owl that carried over the night air. She had no husband to rough her up. No man to order her around. She was nobody’s fool.

Returning from a mine that spring, Lettie Mae came across a crusty-looking sourdough. The prospector was astride a mule. Gray hair brushed his lean shoulders, and a scraggly beard trickled down his elk-hide coat. He tipped his hat. She fingered the cold pistol deep in her pocket.

“Ezekiel James Ferguson. Call me Zeke.”

Lettie Mae looked down at her burro with the same name, but stifled a laugh. “Any flooding downstream?” she asked. Three days of downpour in the high country had her concerned about rising creeks.

He surveyed the loaded burros. “Might need to delay your crossing for a day.” He offered her a string of jerky. “Is packing profitable?”

“Gets me by.” She slipped her hand from her pocket and accepted the jerky.

“The good Lord watch over you.” He touched the brim of his hat before riding up the trail on his long-legged mule.

Over the next year they often crossed paths, she packing, he prospecting for gold. They shared camp one night and swapped stories around the fire. Once she came across him on a trail that meandered through a grove of aspen, but she failed to recognize him.

“Fleas.” He rubbed his bare chin between his fingers. “Fleas from a dang coyote I shot.” Red nicks peppered his face.

He was younger than she’d thought. The tall prospector was as slim as Lettie Mae was stout.

On the bony edge of summer when the breeze whispered of moldering leaves and dry grass, they arrived in town on the same day. Zeke’s coarse beard had grown back, and he was in need of a bath.

“I’m celebrating a run of good luck.” He scratched his beard. “Dinner’s on me. Meet me at the hotel at six.” A handful of gold nuggets had him feeling like a millionaire.

Lettie Mae booked a room for the night and enjoyed the luxury of a hot bath. In a store-bought shirt and trousers, she waited in the hotel lobby. New arrivals milled about waiting for a room or a table.

“Don’t ya recognize me?” Freshly shaven, Zeke smelled of soap and fresh laundry.

She felt dowdy.

“Don’t like what you see?” He frowned.

Lettie Mae studied her trousers. “I’m not attired for hotel dining. Maybe we should go somewhere else to eat.”

“I’m buying you a dress for dinner.” His blue eyes paled against his dark skin. “We’re dining in style tonight.”

“What would I do with a dress?”

He shrugged. “Humor a poor guy that ain’t been to town in months.”

She gave in to his lopsided grin.

Pipe tobacco drifted across the room. Over a linen-draped table and a Porterhouse steak, Zeke studied her. “You’re right pretty.”

She glanced at her blue calico dress and glowered. Was he making fun of her, or did he presume dinner entitled him to a romp in bed later?

He reached across the table for her hand. “Somethin’ wrong?” His hand shook, and the brown skin between his eyebrows puckered.

“Are you mocking me?”

“Lettie Mae, you’re beautiful and a gal with more gumption than most.” Accordion wrinkles punctuated his eyes. After dinner, he walked her to the lobby. “I make it to town ‘bout every couple months. Hope to see you again, Miss Lettie.”

She smiled, but said nothing.

In town, she surveyed every corner for a slim prospector with or without a beard. She scanned dining rooms for the cheerful sourdough and once stepped into a hotel lobby looking for him. It was proof she’d been alone too long. After weeks of being in the mountains, her desire for friendly conversation had turned to hunger.

She met up with Zeke two months later and joined him for dinner wearing the same dress. Music from the street dance flooded in from the open doorway. They stood on the boardwalk and listened to a medley of fiddle, banjo, and harmonica. Zeke led her into the crowd. He couldn’t dance, but his feet worked some wild gyrations.

Zeke’s friend, August, danced with a waitress from the Harrison Hotel. Despite his bulk, August proved graceful on his feet. The crowd pressed in, the dirt street filling with the spirited throng. Freshly scrubbed miners joined trappers fresh in

from the mountains, layers of soil and smoke casing their skin. A man at the end of the street whooped with delight. His eyes met hers, and the man's smile faded.

Lettie Mae's knees melted like candles tossed into a fire.

Zeke grabbed her arm. "Lettie Mae?"

Thomas shoved his way through the tangled crowd.

"Are you all right?" Zeke patted her hand.

Thomas had found her again, though he was more likely following the rumors of ore. "I'm fine, Zeke." Thomas was halfway through the crowd. She linked her elbow in Zeke's and whirled around him. She grabbed August's massive arm, and the large man spun her in a circle. With the arm of the skinny waitress, Emily, in hers, the foursome continued the dance. Twirling around, she confronted Thomas's scowling face.

"Mr. Little." She caught her breath. "Let me introduce my friends." The three dancers gawked at Thomas.

Thomas looked from one man to the other.

"August, Zeke, Emily, this is the guy I told you about. You remember, the man who threw me around like a sack of flour?" All eyes darted at Lettie Mae's wild laughter.

Zeke made for the man, but August blocked his way. "You don't say."

Thomas looked up at the muscle-bound blacksmith who stood seven feet without boots. His Adam's apple shifted, and white ringed his eyes.

Zeke threw his shoulders back. "Ride out now."

August took a step forward. "We don't take kindly to that kind of behavior on this side of the mountain." He stood toe to toe with Thomas. "We hang men for less."

Color drained from Thomas's face. He squeezed through the crowd like a rabbit fleeing a pack of coyotes. Clear of the crowd, he raced across the street to the boarding house.

Zeke turned to comfort Lettie Mae. She was gone.

Lettie Mae struggled through the crowd. She stopped to talk to an older man then continued in the direction Thomas had

fled.

Near the end of the street, Thomas yanked the cinch on a big buckskin. The clamor of revelry masked the sound of Lettie Mae's boots as she ran toward her harried husband.

"Thomas, wait!"

He grimaced. "Haven't had enough?"

Lettie Mae huffed for air, her stomach threatening to spill. "We need to resolve something."

"How's that?"

"I want you to sign a declaration of divorce."

Thomas propped his hand at his gun belt. "And if I don't?"

With a swift lift of her dress, she whisked a pistol from a leather holster.

Thomas backed away. "Don't go and do somethin' foolish."

"I see you found him," Judge Harrington said.

Lettie Mae lowered the pistol into the folds of her dress.

"My office is across the street." The judge appraised Thomas. "If you care to accompany me, sir, this will only take a moment."

Lettie Mae returned to the dance. Clutched in her hand was a paper with a hastily penned signature, ink drops splattered at three points: Thomas A. Little. She found her friends huddled on the boardwalk with Zeke gesturing wildly.

"I've looked everywhere — Lettie Mae!"

She hooked arms with Emily. "Sarsaparillas for everyone."

Thirty days later, Lettie Mae was back in town. In front of the livery stable, she tightened a burro's pack.

Zeke swept his hat to his chest. "My fav-o-rite lady."

"Packin' to the Blue Jay mine," she announced. His smile faded. For a moment, she feared he'd keel over.

"Stay...for dinner. You can leave in the morning, gal."

The leather strap fell limp. Only one burro was packed. "Suppose one day won't matter."

The underdone steak and overdue conversation made a memorable meal. Over dessert, Zeke leaned across the table.

"Marry me, Lettie Mae."

Her fork dropped to her plate. The clatter drew the heads of nearby diners. "Why

would you say a fool thing like that?"

"At least, you didn't say no."

She wiped her fork with her napkin and gathered her wits. "You haven't told me about your trip." As expected, he rambled on, reveling in tales of gold nuggets, cougar attacks, and narrow escapes.

The next day she pushed her burros to the foothills. In the middle of the road, she came across Zeke mounted on his mule with a stiff-collared priest to his right.

"Will you marry me, Lettie Mae?"

Clouds scuttled across the sky, and the sun broke out again. A shiny saddle was strapped on the back of his mule. She shot a calculated diversion. "Fine new saddle, Zeke."

"It's your wedding present." He beamed.

The priest sat on a large buckskin mare, his hands crossed over the saddle horn.

She glared at Zeke. "Stuck in a cabin while you wander the world?"

"Not in a million years, Lettie Mae. I expect you'll be out packing."

She studied shadows rolling over the mountains. Lettie Mae, who'd never played cards or rolled dice, became a bona fide gambler that day. A smile rolled up her face. "You've got a deal."

"Lettie Mae, I declare."

Before the ceremony commenced, she whispered to Zeke. "I've saved a hundred dollars."

"I ain't marrying you for your money." He laughed. "Saved up fifteen hundred myself."

Astride his horse, the priest performed the ceremony. Zeke leaned over his mule and slipped a gold band over her finger. The priest pronounced them man and wife. Zeke kissed Lettie Mae for the first time.

The couple built a cabin at the foot of the mountains that autumn. Behind the rough-hewn logs, sunlight burnished a stand of aspen, their white columns turned to gold. Life moved on. Zeke prospected. Lettie Mae packed her burros. They acquired the habit of departing on their journeys at the same time. Lettie Mae rode alongside her husband until their paths diverged, the foothill winds switching direction and sweeping her on her way.

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