
The Gamble

by Pamela Redcliff



2025
THIRD PLACE

I sat alone at my kitchen table on Christmas morning reading the *Silverton Standard*. An advertisement sprang from the page:

BID A FOND FAREWELL TO THE OLD 18s!

RING IN THE LUCKY 19s!

A Gentlemen's Masquerade Ball at The Silver Chance

December 31, 1899

8 p.m.—'til we shoot out the lights!

(Dancing, Gaming & Other Entertainments)

In one week, my best friend would host a New Year's Eve gala unlike the town of Silverton had ever seen, and I'd have a front-row seat at my faro table to witness it. The Spanish Rose, as she was known, ruled Blair Street, commanding more respect than any of the other dozen madams in town combined. She faced her share of court dates for minor infractions like disturbing the peace or violating liquor laws, but she always paid her fines and her taxes. She also paid me a fair wage as her faro dealer, enough to support my two sons. They'd be awake soon, ready to open their presents. I dreaded the faint melody of sadness that would play beneath the surface of our day.

While I'd done my best creating a settled life for my boys, a piece was missing. My husband, with his dimpled smile and heavy German accent, had been gone from our lives for one month shy of five years. I'd resigned myself to living without a man, for no one could hold my heart like Albert did. But my boys needed a father to teach them things, like how to throw a ball, swing a bat, repair a screen door, plus a myriad of other skills I lacked. If only I could meet someone. Not much chance of it happening at my faro table, and the boys always kept me too busy to prowl—admittedly, not something I'd do anyway.

"Morning, Ma. Can we open our presents?" Nine-year-

old Lukas stood in the kitchen doorway as five-year-old Albert Jr. peeked around him, rubbing his eyes. Little Albert was my posthumous child, born six months after an avalanche tumbled down from the mountain and swept away his father. I set aside the newspaper and tamped down my worries. "You bet, boys. Merry Christmas!"

I followed them into the living room, breathing in the pine scent of the fresh-cut *Tannenbaum* decorated in my husband's honor. Three packages were tucked beneath it. The boys scrambled for their gifts and opened them—a yo-yo for Lukas, a toy truck for Albert Jr. After I spritzed my wrists with the lilac perfume they'd bought me with their chore money, we went outside and built snowmen.

"Ma's should be the pretty one," my youngest said after putting the final touches on his own.

"Let's use apple slices for her red lips and green buttons for her beautiful eyes," Lukas suggested.

I pulled them to me. "You're such sweet, kind boys. Your father would be proud." I fought back a catch in my throat.

"Are you sad, Ma?" Lukas asked.

"I'm never sad when I'm with you two." I'd never admit it, anyway.

"His name is my name." Little Albert grinned beneath his wool winter cap.

"Yes, it is." I chuckled. "Do you want to know how your father and I met?"

They both nodded eagerly, so I explained how I'd been caught in a snowball fight among some rowdy young prospectors in Cripple Creek on Christmas Eve eleven years ago. "Your father hit me in the face with a snowball by mistake."

"In the face? Did it hurt?" Lukas sounded skeptical.

"Sure did. He gave me a black eye, too." I began forming two snowballs. "After that I became a snowball fight champion. Shall I show you?"

Before they answered, I fired my snowballs at them. Surprised by the sneak attack, they scooped up snow and began bombarding me. I ducked behind my snowman and reloaded. The battle continued for several minutes until I dropped to the ground defeated, and they pounced on me. Before we went back inside to warm up with hot chocolate, we made snow angels.

That night, while the boys slept, I sat in front of the barren Christmas tree, relieved I'd endured another holiday without Albert. My boys and I had made the best of the day, after all.

On New Year's Eve morning, I arrived at The Silver Chance to help Rose prepare for the masquerade ball. As she bustled about clucking orders, I paused at the back of the saloon marveling at how much our lives had changed since we'd met in Cripple Creek. I was seventeen, an orphaned farm girl from Tennessee. She was a soiled dove, who took me under her wing and protected me from the madam of The Blue Garter who'd hired me as a housekeeper but schemed to make me a prostitute. Rose was all business now that she was boss.

"The champagne must be chilled by eleven p.m.," she told the bartender. To the girls gathered at one of the poker tables drinking coffee, she instructed, "Make sure your costumes are pressed to perfection, every bow and belt in place."

She glanced my direction and waved. The cluster of silver bracelets she wore on each wrist jingled merrily. "Maggie, I'm glad you're here. Come help me sort these."

She led me to several tables covered with masks she'd ordered from Italy.

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I smirked. "I guess anything's possible." While I'd fended off many eager punters since working at The Silver Chance, I'd yet to meet one who qualified as a companion and confidante, let alone a man I could trust to love my sons like a father.

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"Aren't these Pantalone disguises interesting?" She handed me a half-mask with a beak-like nose and slanted eyes.

"Not my style. Of course, to each his own."

"*Si, chica.* They match the variety of gentlemen attending this evening." She pointed to an assortment resembling tigers, wolves, and bears. "What do you think of these?"

The wolf mask was hideous, with a long muzzle and yellow fangs. "They look real, maybe a little too real."

From the table, she lifted a smiling, full-faced mask with belled tassels on top, much more appropriate for a party than the wolf mask. "These Arlecchino masks are made to look like jesters. They're for the judge and his mystery guest."

"I'm sure they'll be your fools for the evening," I teased.

"Ooh, you're feisty today." She laughed and pointed at two half masks. "I've saved the best for last—Colombina masks for us. Mine matches my Flamenco costume." She held up a white mask painted with red roses.

"Everyone will know you're the Spanish Rose."

"Exactly," she replied as she offered me the other one. "Don't the diamond eyebrows add spice to yours?"

The stones on the red mask flickered in the light. "Diamonds?" I traced a finger over each one. "It's beautiful, Rose. Although I doubt Little Red Riding Hood wore diamonds."

"Maybe you'll attract an admirer."

I smirked. "I guess anything's possible." While I'd fended off many eager punters since working at The Silver Chance, I'd yet to meet one who qualified as a companion and confidante, let alone a man I could trust to love my sons like a father.

"We'll make this New Year's Eve a *gran fiesta*. I'm so pleased to share it with you."

"We've come a long way since our days in Cripple Creek."

"Si, Maggie, you and Albert headed into the mountains, seeking your riches. I came here and opened The Silver Chance. We followed our dreams... at least for a time." She sighed. "My poor, Roberto. If only he'd stayed at The Blue Garter dealing faro, instead of following me here."

"Our men were stolen from us, weren't they, Rose? The mountain took mine. A gunfighter's bullet, yours."

She shook her head slowly. Then she lifted her chin and smiled. "But you and I teamed up again, eh *chica*?"

I pressed my hand to my chest. "And for that I'm grateful. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't given me a job."

"Luckily, you were a quick learner."

"I had no choice. I had a family to support."

"Ah, we've both traveled steep roads to get here, yet our friendship remains."

"It always will."

We shared a brief hug then donned our masks and peered into the mirrored glass behind the bar. Tilting our heads back and forth, we admired how distinctive we looked. *Perhaps tonight, I'll be someone different than Maggie Bonner, lonely mother of two boys.*

That evening, the raucous party inside The Silver Chance threatened to plunge into sinful ruin well before the stroke of midnight. Music and giddy laughter crowded the air, along with cigar smoke, perfume, and ale hops. The spectacle amused me. Young lusters, mid-life cockspurs, and decrepit old goats clung to their costumed soiled doves. Cleopatra, Aphrodite, along with an assortment of milk maids and princesses eagerly gave the desperate men the attention they craved.

Rose held court at the bar with her two guests in jester masks. Her black Flamenco dress, its red polka dots and gold-trimmed ruffles cascading from her hips, floated about her as she gestured. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, held fast with a pearl comb.

My costume was nearly as impressive, with a cape as vibrant as the stripe on a red-winged blackbird, my dark hair tumbling off my shoulders. Except why had I chosen an outfit so bulky—and itchy, too? I could've been a milk maid with my hair pulled up, blouse off my shoulders, cleavage overflowing. I'd look like a soiled dove for sure, but I'd be more comfortable.

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I kept things businesslike at my table, though I complimented each punter on his costume. I dealt round after round for a variety of devils, clowns—even one gent dressed as a banker, wearing a tiger mask with his derby hat and pinstripe suit. He had a cleft chin and bushy mustache, though the mask covered the top half of his face, so I couldn't size him up properly. Every time I glanced his way, he was looking at me—not enough to make me uncomfortable but enough that I noticed.

At the end of the next round, won by a rotund man in a bear mask puffing on a thick cigar, I suggested we take a short break. I encouraged the punters to visit the bar or the dance floor, then rejoin me in half an hour.

"May I buy you a drink, miss?" the masked banker asked.

"Thank you, but I don't drink while I'm on the job."

He held out his hand. "Perhaps a dance?"

"I don't think so."

"Please do me the honor."

I wasn't sure if I should be annoyed or flattered by his persistence. "You know I only deal faro, right? I'm not one of the other girls."

"Of course. Merely a dance."

He spoke in such a courteous manner. How could I refuse? "Just one," I replied. Keeping Rose's customers satisfied was also part of my job, after all.

He led me to the dance floor as the band began a waltz. I hadn't danced since Albert and I stumbled our way through New Year's Eve, 1888. He'd jerked and bobbed, as unsteady as a newborn foal, but his effort endeared him to me. Tonight, my partner and I moved as smoothly as a pair of skilled ice skaters on a frozen pond. He held me so firmly I had no fear of falling to the ice.

"You remind me of someone," he said.

I had the sudden urge to flirt, so I replied, "Not your sister, I hope."

He laughed. "Hardly. By the way, what's your name?"

"Maggie Bonner."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Maggie. I'm Harry Longabaugh."

As I floated in his arms, a glimmer of possibility flickered inside me. *Is this banker fellow attracted to me as well?* We danced through several more songs. Much too quickly, my break was over.

"Before we return to your faro table," he said. "May I see the beauty beneath your mask?"

Goosebumps formed on my arms. "Hmm. I suppose... but only if you allow me to guess your profession first."

"Have a go." He stepped back.

"Banker is too obvious. So, I'll say... bank robber." I laughed at my own joke.

"I didn't even draw my Peacemaker to give myself away." He smiled and lifted his mask, revealing shiny eyes above baby-faced cheeks.

"You're quite the tease."

"Perhaps, but I'm also what you guessed."

"A bank robber?" I said too loudly then clapped my hand over my mouth, as if that would help. I didn't believe him, but bank robber wasn't a term used lightly in this town.

"In the flesh. Now, let me see you."

I lifted my mask. With his fingertip, he brushed aside a curl that drooped over my eye. "You're a looker, as I suspected."

I nearly melted into the dance floor.

A man, also in a tiger mask, approached us. "Pinkertons at the bar," he muttered.

Harry eased his mask back into place. "I hate to cut this lovely evening short, but I must go. Perhaps we'll meet again." He raised my hand to his lips. "Happy New Year."

As he disappeared through the side door, I tried to make sense of what had happened. With a ripple of passion I hadn't felt in nearly five years, I fought the urge to follow him. Perhaps there was hope for me after all.

A few minutes before midnight, as the guests filled the dance hall for the countdown to the new century, I stepped out the back door for a smoke, a habit I'd picked up at The Blue Garter. Outside, the night was quiet, the air still. No streetlight in the alley, only a sliver of a moon, I was alone in the dark. I pulled a pack of cigarettes and matches from the wicker basket that was part of my costume. After I lit one, I leaned against the doorway, thinking. Albert and I had been so young and awkward during our first date on New Year's Eve. Tonight, I'd floated across the dance floor

with a supposed outlaw. *Life takes strange turns.*

A few yards away, someone else lit a cigarette. The match illuminated a man in a wolf mask. Startled, I stepped back deeper into the shadows. He glanced my direction and cocked his head. The pale light of his cigarette silhouetted the jagged fangs of the mask.

"What's in your basket, Little Red?"

The nickname caught me off guard. "A Smith & Wesson," I answered, dropping my cigarette. I tamped it out with my Balmoral boot. *Who's this joker?*

As he tipped his head back and laughed, he resembled a wolf howling.

"You think I'm kidding?" Stepping from the doorway, I reached inside the basket. He flicked away his cigarette and walked toward me, hands raised.

"Whoa, shooting me won't be necessary." He smiled below the fangs, revealing teeth as straight and white as piano keys. "I apologize for alarming you, but I couldn't resist. You know... your costume, my mask." He extended his hand. "I saw you dealing faro. I'm John Ramon."

I could've pulled my revolver and made a point, but I didn't. I set down the basket and shook his hand. It was soft and smooth. He was no day laborer. "You should've joined us."

He smiled again, his cheekbones lifting the bottom edge of his mask, revealing a complexion the color of tanned leather. He was barrel-chested and an inch or two taller than me.

"I'm a poker player." He leaned in closer. "However, if all faro dealers were as exquisite as you, I'd join the ranks of your swooning punters in a single beat of my heart."

Oh my, you're a slick one.

"You enjoy games of chance, then?" I asked.

"Of course, I've even bet on love a time or two. How about you, Little Red?"

"I've only gambled once on love."

He opened his arms. "How can I persuade you to take a chance on this lone wolf?"

"You're not at all shy, are you?"

"Not when I know what I want."

While this game is entertaining, I know how to back you off.

"Do you want my two children, as well? We come as a package."

Without hesitation, he replied, "I love children."

The bell on Saint Patrick's Church began tolling; gunfire

and shouts filled the air. With a few seconds remaining before the final chime resounded, John Ramon pulled off his mask and tossed it aside. I had no time to react as he swept me toward him, folding himself around me. He kissed me slowly, as if this was our final moment on earth, and he was trying to make it last a lifetime. Lightning had struck me twice in one evening!

The following afternoon, I met Rose for tea at the Grand Imperial Hotel. It was the same hotel where a bullet fired by Bat Masterson remained lodged in one of the filigree decorations above the mahogany bar. The hotel's restaurant catered to out-of-towners, which meant Rose wouldn't likely encounter any of her customers' hostile wives.

"Can you believe we pulled it off, *chica*?" She clicked the table with her long fingernails. "What a success!"

"*Mucho grande*," I offered in my poor Spanish accent Rose had always found amusing. Since my nails weren't as impressive, I snapped my fingers. "And also a night full of romance."

“***You're exaggerating, Rose. He was certainly bold, sweeping me into his arms and kissing me, but I see nothing wrong with a man who knows what he wants.***”

She leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"Well, first, I danced with a charming gentleman named Harry Longbranch... or was it, Longman? I can't remember."

"Harry... Longabaugh?"

I pointed. "That was his name. Said he was a bank robber, ha. Men, they'll say anything."

"He is a bank robber. The Sundance Kid! Harry Longabaugh is his real name."

I studied her face. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. I swear."

"I danced with an outlaw?"

"Harry and I go way back. That explains why the Pinkerton detectives paid us a visit."

"Ah, now it makes sense. His friend came and warned him. They left in a hurry."

"I'm glad he got away." Rose took a sip of tea. "Although, the publicity would've been excellent for business."

"He was charming, a splendid dancer, too."

"Ha, my goody two-shoes danced with a bank robber."

I brushed the thought of Harry aside to tell her about my second encounter. "And then—"

She interrupted. "I met a charmer myself. My mystery guest was a Union Pacific Railroad executive. We're going to dinner the next time he's in town."

"Wonderful, Rose! You deserve a man who'll treat you right." I sprinkled sugar in my tea and swirled it around with my spoon before taking a sip.

"We'll see if he follows through. Regardless, what a way to begin a new century, eh Maggie? You also deserve a worthy man. As sweet as Harry is, I don't think he's the one."

"I suppose not, even though my sons would be thrilled. I did meet another man, however." My face flushed, remembering the kiss.

"Ah, he must be special. Don't leave me in suspense."

"He literally swept me off my feet at midnight. I'm still in shock."

"Ooh, *muy romántica*. Tell me more."

"I've never been kissed like that. Not even by—" I caught myself. "John Ramon is his name."

Rose banged her teacup hard against the saucer, spilling a good share of it onto the tablecloth. "I know him." She wiped up the mess with her napkin. "He's not your type."

Her sharp tone surprised me. "What do you mean?"

"I'll grant you he's a handsome son of a gun, but he's a gambler who has worked all the poker tables in Colorado, probably every soiled dove, too."

"You're exaggerating, Rose. He was certainly bold, sweeping me into his arms and kissing me, but I see nothing wrong with a man who knows what he wants."

"I'm sure he put on a show. You were stunning in your costume. No wonder the *muchachos* fell all over you." Rose tapped her finger against the side of her teacup. "I understand life has been difficult since you lost Albert, and you wish for your boys to have a father, but I once knew a man like John Ramon. He had a heart full of shadows."

"That's nonsense."

The air cooled between us. I folded my napkin and

considered leaving. In a hushed voice, she said, "I'm going to tell you something I've never told another soul. It's about my past—"

"How could that have anything to do with my love life?"

"—and the night my father killed my mother... and I killed him."

A clap of thunder or a crash of cymbals should have accompanied this revelation. Instead, it floated across the table as airy as the tone of her bracelets.

"What? How?" They were insufficient words, but the best I could offer.

"My father masqueraded as a charmer, but he was a wicked man. He made my mother many promises but kept none—and beat her when it suited him. One night, she and I escaped after he tried to strangle her in a drunken rage over burnt tortillas."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve." Rose stared into her teacup. "We fled to the outskirts of Santa Fe where *Mamá's* sister lived. A few nights later, my father barged in, waving a knife. My aunt pushed me out the back door and told me to hide. Behind her, metal flashed in the lamplight, and my mother screamed. I was halfway across the yard when my aunt cried out."

I gasped. "W-what did you do?"

"I hid in the chicken coop and prayed. A few minutes later, my father called from the back door, '*Maria Rosa*, where are you, *hija*?' He almost sounded sober."

As I pictured young Rose in the chicken coop, my heart thumped a jerky rhythm.

She continued, "I inched myself into the farthest corner of the coop and tucked my knees under my chin, making myself as small as possible. 'Come here, *hija*. Your *mamá* needs you.' I swallowed hard on those words. A few moments later, he approached the coop, and he no longer hid his anger. 'When I find you, we're going to meet *La Llorona*.'"

I had to ask. "Who's *La Llorona*?"

"She's every child's worst nightmare, the spirit of the weeping woman who roams the banks of the Santa Fe River searching for children to drown. That night, I was more terrified of the man at the chicken coop door."

"And then he found you?"

"The hens above me began stirring. '*Silencio*,' I whispered. They squawked, and the door banged open. 'The chickens have betrayed you, *Maria Rosa*.' He stopped

near my hiding spot, and I smelled the whiskey on him. His legs were unsteady, so I thought I had a chance. I crawled on my hands and knees toward the door and was nearly outside when he grabbed my arm. 'Found you! A man can only take so much. Now, *La Llorona* will punish you!'"

While Rose sat as calm as a hawk on a post telling her story, I gripped the armrests of my chair, trying not to tremble.

"As he dragged me out of the coop, he tripped and sent both of us tumbling down the hill. I got to my feet and half-limped, half-ran into the night. He crashed through the brush behind me, but I kept moving toward the river, thinking I'd rather drown than die by his hand. Just before I dove into the water, he appeared like a ghost. He knocked me down and held me. I strained against his grip, but it was like pushing against an adobe wall. As we struggled, my hand brushed against the sharp edge of a rock. I grabbed it, and, with all the strength I still had, swung around and smashed it against his head."

I'd been friends with Rose for twelve years without knowing she'd suffered so much. Anger swelled inside of me. "Parents are supposed to protect their children, not harm them. He was a monster. You were brave to fight back."

"I suppose." She shifted in her chair and stared out the window.

I took a breath. "What happened after you hit him?"

She looked back at me and lowered her voice. "He toppled onto the bank and lay motionless on his side—long enough for me to hope. Then... he took a shallow breath. I hesitated only a moment before I pushed him over, and his face went under the water. The river and *La Llorona* did the rest." She closed her eyes. "An unforgivable sin, murdering a person."

"No, you defended yourself. He would've killed you."

"Through the night I stayed with him, no longer afraid. When the sun came up, I watched the water flow around him. All the evil had washed away." Rose rested her hands on the table; her bracelets went silent. "The sheriff came looking for us after a neighbor found my mother and aunt. He stood over me as I sat among the red willows crying. He shook his head. In disgust, or pity? I never knew for sure, but no charges were filed."

I covered her hands with mine. "Oh, Rose. I had no idea..."

"I should be filled with remorse, but I'm now the Spanish Rose of The Silver Chance. I made something of my life. What happened that night is merely a wrinkle in my past."

"As it should be."

"I sleep soundly, too, except when I dream of my mother."

I bit my lip. If she wasn't going to cry, neither would I. We sat in silence and let the story fade. A few moments later, she cleared her throat. "Now, do you understand why I have concerns about John Ramon?"

I leaned back and folded my arms. "He's nothing like your father."

"He may not be a murderer, but he's a gambler with a dark side."

"I appreciate your concern, Rose. I shouldn't have reacted so harshly earlier. I have reservations, given how fast things happened. How he treats my boys will determine whether we continue whatever it is we began last night." I took a sip of tea. It had gone cold. "I'm not even thirty years old. I'm still young enough to try."

"You're right. You shouldn't remain a widow."

"And my boys need a man in their lives. I'm willing to give John a chance."

"Then, please be careful." She raised her hand like she was taking an oath. "I swear, if he hurts your sons or harms a hair on your head, he'll answer to me."

Through the winter, John treated my boys like they were his own. They roughhoused and played endless games of ring taw with Lukas's marbles. He took them ice skating and promised when spring came, he'd teach them to fish along the banks of the Animas River, which flowed beside our cottage on the edge of town. He treated me like I was a precious stone, polishing me with smooth talk until I shined. But he wasn't perfect. Rather than teaching Lukas and Albert Jr. useful skills as I'd hoped, he educated them about poker and swearing in Spanish. Still, I was happy, so were my boys.

Trouble started in late February with his losing streak at the poker table.

"The only way to beat it, Little Red, is to play through it," he told me.

He'd win a hand or two, then lose the next five or six. After he bet all the money he had, he used money I'd saved since Albert died. In his frustration, he drank whiskey—lots of it. At my faro table, I'd encountered my share of drinkers. Some became as lighthearted as schoolboys. Others turned into brooding, unpredictable brutes. John was the latter. By winter's end, the boys were terrified in

his presence, and he frequently knocked me around. Turns out, his hands weren't so soft after all. Ashamed for not believing Rose, I hid my bruises from her.

One night in April when I came home from work, the boys were crying in the kitchen. I dashed in and found them with John. He had Albert Jr.'s arm cocked at a horrible angle and held Lukas by the throat. He turned loose like a thief caught in the act when I screamed.

"Little Red," he slurred, "the boys misbehaved. They must be punished." He laughed, thumping his chest with his thumb. "Luckily, I'm the man for the job."

A black, heavy stone began forming in my chest. "You're no man at all." I spit out the words in a voice I didn't recognize as my own. "You're a wolf with a heart full of shadows."

He lifted his head and howled.

During the spring run-off, the Animas River flowed as rough and rowdy as The Silver Chance on a Saturday night. Loud enough to cover a gunshot from a Smith & Wesson revolver, swift enough to carry the body of a no-good gambler miles downstream. My best friend had made an oath, but that night, John Ramon answered to me.

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Pamela Redcliff lives in Ohio but was born and raised in Colorado. She began her career as a freelance writer/editor/graphic designer. Her most enjoyable professional experience was working with Lucasfilm and Scholastic Books as the editor of STAR WARS KIDS magazine. After a detour into visual art, beekeeping, and lavender growing (as the owner of Indian Summer Ranch, LLC), she returned to her first love: writing fiction with a Western bent. She was runner-up for the 2023 LAURA award and is currently working on her second novel.