

# The Lawman's Lessons

By

Patty Devlin

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## Chapter One

He hadn't looked at any of his deputies in quite a spell. The heavy thud of their horses' hooves against the hard-packed, still half-frozen clay and the occasional whinny were the only sounds heard in hours and hours of riding. They had followed him out to search for the outlaw Wilson brothers whom they knew were in the area. Jackson was sure his men had only come for the chance to give him hell. He should be happy they'd finally stopped making fun of him about his ... situation.

Jackson had always been a problem solver. He could find people who didn't want to be found, settle disputes between neighbors, and his quick wit in emergencies had saved many lives. But this, this "situation," would take much more than his meager capabilities.

How had it even happened? He'd never wanted to be married! Marshals did not make good husbands, and he happened to be a bad choice beyond being a lawman. His own father couldn't stand him. He'd never planned to marry and pass his disgrace on to children, and what of the shame his wife would suffer? So, how had he, the authority figure in the great town, the county of Denver, let it get so out of hand that he'd agreed to marry that spitfire schoolmarm? That cunning little sprite with all her highfalutin' ways should already be on an eastbound train headed back to wherever she called home. An instant and fleeting thread of guilt, over the fact he didn't even take the time to talk to her or get to know anything about her before he'd found a reason to leave, crossed his mind.

"Hey, Jackson, you goin' over High Ridge Falls?" his brother-in-law Byron asked, his voice so tight it almost cracked. Without looking back, Jackson knew a smile split the other man's face ear to ear and that he was trying hard not to laugh outright.

His face hotter than a tin plate on a cook stove, Jackson muttered, "I thought we could look in that old cavern up there. Give it one last shot before we give in and go home." He refused to give up and admit that even though he'd been staring at the trail, the ridge line and the leftover late March piles of melting ice, he'd been distracted and missed the turn off. He didn't give any thought to the fact they'd lost the trail of the outlaw gang the day before either. Jackson never lost his way; he was the best tracker in the county!

"Iffen we go up there, we won't make it to town 'til after night fall for sure." This came from old Solomon. "Some of us want to go home to our brides."

Ignoring the guffaws that surrounded him, Jackson turned his horse around and headed toward a lower part of the fast-flowing Colorado River where they could cross safely. There was no sense in denying what they all knew—as important as it was to catch the band of outlaws who had been plaguing the county, there hadn't been any recent news or activity. Jackson had merely decided to set off on the day after his wedding to try to find them. His loyal deputies would not let him down; they insisted they were going with him.

And if they had not been with him, he'd have stayed away much longer. But in the end, good sense weighed out. He couldn't stay gone forever; he was going to have to go home and deal with his wife. He had to accept it. To be honest, it wasn't her—there was nothing distinctly wrong with her. He had to admit her pint-sized package had fit nicely over his lap.

Wait! Where had that thought come from? Perhaps from the fact that he thought it every

time they were near each other for more than two minutes. For some reason, they seemed to get right under each other's skin. Oh heavens, that put another picture in his head. He'd like to be under her in a different position—damn it, his breeches were starting to feel way too snug!

Celia acted and responded completely different than any of the women he'd grown up around, not that there were many, but she had these ideas about things and got this determined look in her eyes. Then, if it was you she'd set her sights on, she'd lock those blue eyes on you and fire away. It proved quite obvious she needed a protector.

In the fast growing city of Denver, men outnumbered women grossly, so a lot of the men behaved like animals. Celia, with her act-first-think-later behavior, would have the riff-raff lining up for a chance to have at her, not to mention in the classroom, with students who had run the last teacher right out of town in the middle of the school year (even if there might have been good cause for his dismissal).

Celia's and Jackson's first meeting had been reason enough for her to need some looking after, and if she had been his wife then, she'd have received a whipping sure to instill some safety measures in her.

His mother ran the boarding house where the superintendent had arranged for the new school teacher to stay. When Jackson had come home, he'd found his mother in quite a state because Celia had been gone most of the afternoon, the sun had set by then, and still she hadn't come back.

The city's streets were no place for a lady after nightfall, no matter her age or position. So their worry was not ill-placed, and Jackson had gone out looking for the young miss right away. Even his sister Susanna wouldn't walk home after dark if Byron or Jackson weren't there to escort her. Jackson and the deputies did their best to keep the criminals off the streets, but it was a huge undertaking in a city of that size, with the number of saloons and brothels and then with all of the miners and ranchers, too.

Well, Jackson was more than relieved to find the little dove safe and sound and covered in enough dust to make an elephant sneeze. Her sleeves had been rolled up past her elbows and her dress, which he assumed had been a pristine white at one time, looked as though she'd lain right down in the middle of the road and a whole team of stage coach horses had made their way over her—twice. The teacher's desk on top of which she stood had been moved, perhaps so she could reach the wall, and she was cleaning the cobwebs or some such out of the corner. His presence must've startled her because when he called out to her, she nearly jumped right out of her dress. But she composed herself quickly, he'd give her that.

She spun around and hopped to the floor, as nimble as a cat, brushing at her skirt and sending plumes of dust into the air as she spoke. "Excuse me, I'm not fit to meet anyone yet. I got caught up in cleaning and I didn't hear you come in. My name is Miss Celia Whitman; I'm the new teacher." Her pink tongue darted out to wet her heart-shaped lips, which curved into a soft smile right before she covered her mouth and gave in to a dry cough.

"I know who you are. I've been sent to find you; I'm the marshal, Jackson Owens." He'd taken his worn leather hat off when he'd come in, and he used it then to gesture toward the boarding house. "Mother and Susanna were quite worried. I don't know where you come from exactly, but out here it isn't safe for a young lady to be out on the streets after dark."

Her shoulders rose quickly, along with the color in her pinkening cheeks, right before she snapped, "Excuse me, Mr. Marshal. I didn't intend to stay this long, but I'm certainly glad I did. This schoolhouse is in deplorable condition. I don't know how the poor children are expected to sit in here all day. It's filthy. They'll be coughing and sneezing the whole day long. Why, I do

believe that is a fungus I've read about growing along the floor in the corner there." She'd turned her back on him and wandered over to point out the area of concern. "I came here to look at the books and get some lessons in order, but this—oh, these poor children." She spun around again and glared at him. "You know, I appreciate Mrs. Owens's concern, but your high-handed and ill-founded assumption that I can't take care of myself is unnecessary. I have traveled—"

It was hard to take her seriously with the loose strands of whiskey-colored hair hanging haphazardly around her oval-shaped face and the smudge of dirt on her left cheek. But she was prepared to dress him down fully before Jackson finally called it to a halt.

"Little dove, it is quite clear that you think you can take care of yourself. I assume you traveled here without a companion, but I'm sure you know nothing of the dangers that young women face here. As a marshal, I've seen horrors. It's my job now to keep you safe and I will, no matter what I have to do to do it. I also won't put up with your carelessness, worrying my mama. Now get your stuff. This can wait until after your meeting with the school board tomorrow. I'm sure they are going to be surprised to meet you." He slapped his hat back on his head and ambled to the door. He was sure she didn't move—not a step, not a breath—for a full minute at least.

"You'll be waiting for a while if that is your intention; I'm not through here," she hissed.

He didn't turn around right away. It took all of his good sense and years of patience not to stalk back to her, drag her to the desk, press her down over it and lift her skirt. He knew exactly how to tame a willful girl's temper; a few well-placed swats to her backside would probably be effective.

Jackson turned slowly back toward her, his boots making a lonely echo on the old wood floor as he closed the distance between them. Her board-stiff back while she grabbed the broom and pretended to sweep told him she was not as unaffected by his presence as she let on. He didn't want her to be afraid of him, but a great deal of respect was born out of fear.

He gently removed the broom from her hands, and she didn't put up as much of a fight as he thought she might. She stood frozen in her spot with her back to him while he leaned the broom against the wall again.

"Miss Whitman, if there is anything you'd like to take with you, I recommend you kindly fetch it so we can be on our way. Every minute you waste here now is another minute my mama is worrying about you. If I have to wrestle you out of here, I will. But I won't hesitate to warm your seat first, something you've obviously been lacking." He braced himself as she spun around. He expected her to take a swing at him. She surprised him by stomping past him and almost out the door of the school house, but she stopped just inside.

"I'm not a dove, little or otherwise, and if you think I will allow you to place one of your huge hands on my person you are delusional. If you're an example of the good men in this town, then I'm sure I'd much prefer an escort of drunken gamblers. You are a barbarian, an unlearned, ungentlemanly barbarian!" With a flash of her white skirts and the turn of her boot heel, she rushed out the door and down the steps into the street.

Jackson hurried to put out the lantern and follow along. He hadn't exaggerated about the streets; he didn't want her out there, alone in the dark. Heck, he didn't want her out there alone during the day.

The schoolhouse was on the outer edge of town on Lakeside Avenue, but there was a distance where there were no buildings at all. The full moon lit up the sky, but it was still a dark stretch of road through there. He hardly had time to think about the words she'd spit at him by the time he caught up with her. If they had known each other for years, she couldn't possibly have said something more hurtful to him. It must be true if a stranger could pick it out.

"Hey, Marshal, who's your girl?" The question came from one of a group of ranch hands riding by on their way out of town. While some of the men were unknown to Jackson, he recognized a couple from a ranch south of town. It was the youngest one who spoke to him, a kid Jackson knew liked to hang around one of the saloons.

"She's just visiting. You boys better get home and get to bed. You got quite a ride ahead of you yet, don't you?"

"It's Cora's birthday, promised her I'd be here." The kid sat up taller. "Took her flowers and a necklace I bought from one of the other hands. She was real happy 'bout it." He ignored the snickering of the other hands. It would have taken a lot to knock the pride from his young face.

"I'm sure she was, Jimmy." Jackson agreed, lengthening his step so he was walking next to Celia.

The cowhands were hardly out of earshot when his ward cleared her throat. He looked down at her at the same time she started to speak. "I'm not just visiting. I'm here to teach, to stay and teach. Why did you say I was visiting?"

She'd looked up at Jackson briefly, and her eyes glittered in the moonlight. His gut clenched hard; he was a sucker. Had she been crying or trying not to cry? Poor little dove. Now he felt like a rotten bas—jackal. He'd been rather harsh, hadn't he? "I'm pretty sure the superintendent thought you were a man. This city, the West in general, is not for unprotected women. It's a hard place—"

"I'm just as good as you are! You think I can't take care of myself. I'm twenty years old, and I'm every bit as competent as you are. You are outdated out in this miner town. It's a good thing I came." She brushed by him again and sped up.

It was cute, her small boots crunching the gravel at her angry pace. His legs were much longer than hers and he could easily overtake her, but he let her go on and sucked in a groan as he imagined the milky white thighs and long, slender calves hidden up under her skirts. Dang, he'd been way too long without a woman... He might have to go on down to The Lucky Lady and visit Cora's sister.

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Celia couldn't believe the way that Jackson and his family responded to each other. It was obvious—the affection they shared. Laughter and lightheartedness seemed to be a constant around Mrs. Owens's table. Anyone nearby was included and made to feel like family, too. She'd stormed up the stairs to her room last night, but this morning she had breakfast with the family and the other three boarders.

Mrs. Owens was a large woman, one of the largest Celia had ever known, not around the girth, but her shoulders and height. She was tall and thick like a tree or perhaps like a Viking princess. Celia had read mythical literature about the Vikings with their brave flaxen-haired warriors. And Mrs. Owens hardly looked old enough to have children as old as Jackson and Susanna—or even a grandson like Frankie.

Jackson was even larger than his mother, and if she had to admit it, he was rather stunning to look at, with his light hair and pale green eyes. Hmm, but he had a rugged rancher look, too. Celia's private observation came to a halt when Mrs. Owens came to her side.

"Susanna," Jackson's mother said to her daughter while she served fresh biscuits and hot gravy to Celia. "You are going to have to check Mr. Ormsby's bedding."

"Oh?" Susanna called back, while refilling Mr. Ormsby's coffee cup. His head popped up

from the paper he read to look at Mrs. Owens in question.

"Yes, he was up before the rooster this morning. I'm afraid he may have wet the bed." She clucked disparagingly and shook her head. Gales of laughter went up around the table.

"No, you'll find the sheets clean and dry. If you want to know the truth of it—" Mr. Ormsby cupped a hand over his mouth as if to shield the man next to him from hearing. "The walls are so thin, I woke up in the dark and for a moment thought I was in a bear cave. Mr. Edward's snoring frightened me so." He put his hand down and lifted his fresh cup of coffee, giving the little boy, Frankie, a wink. "Mrs. Owens, you might think of charging him an extra nickel each night he disrupts the guests."

"But then I'd have to charge Frankie and Jackson the same thing, and they'd be living on the streets in no time," Mrs. Owens replied as she filled Celia's plate high with eggs. Celia raised her hands to stop the woman from piling so much food on it, but Mrs. Owens couldn't be moved from her goal, which she'd already declared previously to fatten the little bird up.

"I don't snore, Nana, it's just Uncle Jack!" the dark-haired boy called out.

"What? Why, don't you know it's good to snore, Frankie?" the marshal asked. Celia couldn't stop watching him. She'd been trying not to, but her eyes kept going back to him all morning. That was the way it had been the night before, too. She'd thought about him as she'd tossed and turned. His green eyes and that angular jawline, the cleft in his chin, the stubble all along his lower jaw. She couldn't get the man out of her head. She almost missed his response to the little boy even though she was staring right at the man. "You see, when you are out on the trail, sleeping on the ground out in the open, if you have a good healthy set of lungs and a loud snore, you won't have to worry about something coming up on you while you're sleeping because it will be afraid of your snore."

"So what day do you start teaching?" A little man with spectacles and a silk cravat sitting to the left of Celia caught her attention with his question. He had beady little eyes and no hair on the top of his head. Funny, but she couldn't remember his name and she normally remembered names quite well.

"Not until Monday, which is good because there is so much to do before we can start." She sighed, thinking of filth and grime in the closed-up school house. School should be a fun and happy environment, not dark, dirty, gloomy and depressing. There was no way she could go there every day and work with it in that condition. She had to do something about it.

"Well, I'm thrilled that you are not the expected *Mr. Whitman*. You are a delightful surprise indeed. I have to head off. I am with Wells Fargo if you have any banking needs, but aside from that I'd love to show you around town." If it were possible for his scrawny chest to puff up, she thought for sure it did. He seemed like a very nice man, but she was not interested in men, or marriage. She had seen many terrible attempts at marriage. No, she was not interested—unless maybe it was that lawman who made her heart thud like a horse galloping across the prairie. Wait, what was she thinking?

"Are you all right?" he asked. Mr. Spectacles... Wells Fargo, what was his name?

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. I apologize. Perhaps I can talk to you again about that over a meal sometime?" Her hand was shaking as she rested her fork against her plate. Had everyone else stopped talking, too? Why were they all staring at her?

Susanna saved her. "Sure you can, honey. Here, let me take that. You don't have to eat it all. Mama always does that to people, gives them way too much. You just go on and get ready for your meeting now. Jack said he's gonna take you down there in a bit."



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"You didn't have to escort me. I'm sure I could have found my way." Celia glanced up at the profile of the quiet marshal as they headed toward the meeting.

"Not while you're at my house. This is a rowdy city; I want to know you are safe. Besides, I'm on the school board, too." His voice was monotone. He neither looked at her or away. They walked side by side. He'd offered to hitch a wagon, but also had said it was a decent walk. If there was one thing Celia loved, it was to be outdoors, so she delighted in a nice stroll, in different circumstances.

"You want me gone, don't you?" She had a feeling he had come along to make sure the board knew she was a woman, just in case they couldn't tell. Then he would expedite her departure from the city or maybe the state if he had his way. She had come prepared for this; she knew they wanted a man. It was silly, though. Did they know how few male teachers there really were? And that was why she'd filled out the paperwork as C. G. Whitman. But, really, what could they do now that she was here? Would they actually send her home?

"Not you personally. A young unchaperoned lady is not ready for this city. There is just too much that could happen." He still didn't look her way. Old-fashioned. Outdated. These people needed to get with the times.

"You're an old stick in the mud, always thinking the worst," she muttered. She should just leave him alone; he wasn't worth the argument. The sky was huge and bright blue, not a cloud to be found. Celia took a deep breath. She wanted to stop right there, put her arms out to her sides and spin around and around. She would have to go for a walk later (on her own) and find a field with flowers and just soak up the feeling of the great wide open.

"And you are a beautiful little flower that's about to get crushed—unless I stop it." He stared right down at her now, his green eyes so clear, the intensity so sharp, it almost took her breath away. Whether or not his words were true, he believed them. He believed he had to protect her. She'd never met anyone like him.