

# *Blessing*

by Deborah Bedford

## *Chapter One*

*Gunnison County, Colorado-1882*

"I don't want this town to be called Virginia City anymore!" Alex Parent hollered, banging his cup on the podium. "Every town this side of the Mississippi is called Virginia City. The confounded postal service is dropping off mail from back home everywhere else but here."

All 103 people in the audience agreed with him at the top of their lungs.

"That's right!"

"Yep!"

"You're right, Parent," someone else bellowed. "There's a Virginia City in Nevada and another one in Alder Gulch, Montana and another one..."

"So... we aren't Virginia City anymore," Parent hollered at them as he pounded the podium. "Who are we gonna be?"

"We've got to discuss this and make a motion and get it down in the town records right."

For a minute, nobody said anything.

Alex Parent fidgeted, shuffling through his papers. "Well, somebody say something. We've got to have a name for this town. Come on. Let's have ideas."

One hand rose in the crowd. The hand belonged to Uley, a youngster who'd come from Ohio four years before to work in the Gold Cup Mine.

"Yep, Uley? What is it, son?" "I think," Uley said, in a timid voice that, if anyone had thought about it, sounded a touch too high-pitched for a boy of his age, "we ought to select a name that tells people something about this place. Remember last month, when that fellow from New York got off the stage on Alpine Pass? While the driver stopped to change horses?"

Of course everyone remembered. They'd been talking about it in town for weeks.

"The fellow went to the spring to get a drink," Uley said, telling the story over again, just in case somebody hadn't heard it. "But he wouldn't drink out of that rusty tin cup they keep up there. So, George Willis pulled out his Winchester and shot off that fellow's derby, then made him drink six cups of water."

Hollis Andersen took up the story: "And when the newcomer tried to get back on the stage, Willis said, 'You're too good to drink out of a cup that was good enough for hundreds of thirsty men. That cup's been sitting on that rock for five years, and you're the first skunk to pick it up, refuse to drink out of it and throw it into the bushes. If I ever see you in these parts God made for men-and not your kind-I'll shoot lower and put a hole in that thick head of yours. Savvy?'"

Everybody in the place started hooting.

Parent banged his cup against the podium again to quiet the roaring crowd. His efforts came too late. People were laughing, clapping each other on the back. "Silence," Parent shouted. "Silence!"

Silence did not come. Somewhere in the back, somebody bellowed, "It's got to be Tin Cup! Tin Cup! Tin Cup!"

Every man in the meeting room took up the cry. "Tin Cup! Tin Cup! Tin Cup!"

Parent knew he had to preserve parliamentary procedure. "I move we name this town Tin Cup! Do I hear a second? We, have to have a second.

"I second It!" Uley's hand lifted above the crowd. "Tin Cup is perfect! "

"Any discussion? If there's no discussion, I've got to call for a vote." Parent banged his cup yet again. "I've got to call for a vote!"

"Vote!" they all shouted. "Vote! We want to vote for Tin Cup!"

"All in favor." Parent did his best to count hands, but that proved impossible. "All against."

In the end, he found it easier to tabulate the nays and subtract them from the number attending the meeting. It worked out-on paper-as one hundred votes cast in favor and three votes opposed.

And so, this town would change its name. When the paperwork was completed, the officers of Virginia City would sell their rights and seal to the new town for the price of two hundred and fifty dollars. "Tin Cup, Colorado, it is-one hundred to three," Parent shouted.

Hats flew in celebration. Stetsons. Wool caps. Bowlers. Even a beret or two. Every hat flew except one. Uley's. Despite the excitement, Uley stood still, hands propped on hips, hat very much in place.

"Here we go again," Hollis Anderson remarked. "All of us are gonna end up at Frenchy's Place-alone-when we ought to be having a gathering with womenfolk."

"We can have a party," Charlie Hastings told him. "We'll just get half the men to wear aprons and we'll *pretend* we've got ladies in this town."

Uley wanted to throw her woolen hat into the air. She wanted to let all her curls underneath tumble out and give away her secret. But she was stuck. Stuck like a pine marten gets stuck when it climbs down somebody's chimney and ends up in somebody's wood stove.

"You going up to Frenchy's?" somebody asked her pa. Samuel Kirkland glanced at Uley sideways, the way a mule glances when it's unsure of its footing. "Don't think so, Amos. Uley and I've got to get home. Tomorrow's going to start early."

"Aw, Sam," Amos said. "It'll start early for everybody. Come on over and keep the celebration going."

Uley said nothing. A Christian young lady did not enter a place like Frenchy's, a man's place, without having her reputation sorely tainted. But what did it matter, anyway? With the deception she was playing on the whole town, she had no right to be counting anyone else's sins. As long as she and Sam lived in Tin Cup, nobody would know her as a genteel young lady. Things had already gone too far for that.

"Come on, Sam," Amos urged her pa. "It'll be hard work in the mines tomorrow. Tonight let's cut loose."

Uley could tell by the way he glanced at her again that her pa wanted to go.

"You should come, too, Uley." Amos clapped her on the back. "They're gonna start a poker game up there at ten. It's about time a young fella like you learned to hold his own in a gambling den."

"No thanks, Amos."

The raucous crowd funneled through the doorway, then fanned out onto the street, heading toward Frenchy's, the most popular of the town's twenty saloons. *That was certainly a subject a Christian lady shouldn't know about*, she thought, somewhat grimly, as she watched her pa get swept up in the throng. *Gambling dens and salons.*

Uley walked toward the little house where she and her father made their home. The cob-worked cabin on Willow Street suited them much better than the crude shanties most of the miners had pieced together in the hills. She knew her pa had purchased the pretty little place in town because he wanted to do right by her.

"Hey, Uley!" Marshal Harris Olney called out as he passed by. "Why aren't you over at Frenchy's with the rest of them?"

She thought before she spoke, and consciously pitched her voice lower. "That's not a place I enjoy going."

"Wish everybody else thought that way, too," Harris shook his head jovially. "I'll be up all night."

Uley figured the marshal probably never got a decent night's rest. People worked hard all day long in the mines, and at night, when you'd think they'd be exhausted and ready to sleep, they came out to carouse in saloons that never closed, celebrating a few nuggets of gold-which were usually gone by sunup. *Oh, Father. It seems like nothing I could ever do would change this place.*

As she hurried up the street, Uley heard a slight sound to her left. The sound wasn't much, just a pebble skipping across the dirt. She glanced up, couldn't see into the shadows. Something about being here alone this time of night with everybody else down at Frenchy's made her adrenaline flow.

Just suppose she'd come upon a mountain lion.

Just suppose she'd come upon somebody up to no good.

Just suppose.

Uley didn't miss a stride. As she rounded the next corner, she spied a stranger standing at the edge of the darkness.

"Hello," she said to him, an unreasonable fear knotting her stomach.

He nodded without answering. As she passed him, all she caught was a glimpse-a black leather vest, legs long as a stallion's, a dark felt Stetson, a glint of moonlight reflecting in his eyes and in his hands.

A glint of metal.

Uley stopped three paces past him. The stranger was holding a gun. She turned to see him step out into the pale moonglow to take his aim.

This man, all black leather and legs, with a shadow for a face, was going to shoot the marshal in the back!

Uley didn't take time to think. She didn't take time to cry for help. She sprinted toward the man, mud muffling her long strides. She took a racing leap and sprang at him.

She hit him full tilt and heard his breath rush out of his lungs. The gun pinwheeled out of his hands. He grunted as he went down.

She fell on top of him and pinned him. She clamped her arms firmly about his neck, not about to let him go.

He tried to throw her off. She clung to him like the mountain lion she'd been afraid of moments before, her attention riveted to his neck, the only part of him small enough to hang on to.

For the first time in her life Uley offered thanks for her muscles, which were honed to do the same job as any man's. She fought for breath. "He's tryin' to shoot Olney! Somebody get over here!"

She heard feet pounding in her direction. *Thank you, Father: Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you.*

The man beneath her cursed again and said, "Now I'm going to get tried for murdering Harris Olney, and I didn't even get to kill him."

"You hold still." She glared down at him. "You don't say anything." She realized he was staring up at her now the way a man might stare at someone dead. His eyes got as big around as silver dollars.

He gasped, "You're a *lady*."

Holding him down did not frighten her, but this did. He'd found her out. Uley let go of his neck, grabbed her head and, sure enough, the cap had flown away. Her hair hung in sodden, muddy ribbons around her neck.

She looked alternately from the man beneath her to the woolen cap lying upside down in the mud.

Every fellow in Tin Cup would arrive within seconds.

Uley made a fast decision. She figured the stranger would get away, but she had to get her hat on. She leapt off of him, grabbed her hat and shoved the muddy tendrils beneath it.

The stranger lay in the precise spot he'd landed. "You're just a *girl*!"

His words made her mad. Here she sat in the muck, a fullgrown woman, strong enough to take him down, nineteen years old, well into marriageable age. How dare he call her just a *girl*?

She locked her arms around his neck again.

She couldn't think of anything worse than this, having someone find her out after all the work she'd done in the Gold Cup Mine. Just now, the only thing more humiliating than being a woman would be having them all find out she was one. "You don't tell anybody, you hear me?" She wagged a tiny, clenched fist at him. "You don't tell anybody, or I'll give you what's coming myself."

The horde of men from Frenchy's flocked toward them. The stranger didn't move his glinting eyes from her own. "Okay. Yes, ma'am."

By early morning, it was all over the new town of Tin Cup that Uley Kirkland, one of the most spry young fellows in Tin Cup, had apprehended a man trying to murder the marshal. Everyone talked of a hanging. They couldn't hang the scoundrel, though, until Judge J. M. Murphy came back from visiting his daughter in Denver.

All day, fellows clapped Uley on the back and talked about a trial. Others deemed the stranger should just be shot. After all, sidearms had kept the law in the valley for a long time before Harris Olney ever wore his star.

As Uley worked alongside her pa at the Gold Cup, she found herself wishing somebody would shoot the murderer and end this entire contemptible affair.

If the stranger died, her secret would die with him.

*Oh, Father, wishing somebody dead is not what I should be thinking, either. What a vile sinner I am!*

Around lunchtime, word filtered out that the stranger, Aaron Brown, was registered up at the Grand Central Hotel. When Uley first heard his name, she and her pa were working side by side as timbermen in shaft eleven. Uley knew this work almost as well as her father knew it, how to square off the lumber with a broadax, how to chink the fittings so that the joints stayed watertight in the shaft. "Don't you go worrying about Aaron Brown," Sam told her. "You did a good job last night. I'm proud of you. That criminal will be dead before we get our next paycheck."

But what if Aaron Brown talked before then? What if he sat on the back of his horse right before they hanged him and shouted, "Uley Kirkland is a girl! Uley Kirkland, who has cut timber right alongside you and who you've invited to play poker in gambling dens and who you've talked to about all sorts of private fellow things, the one who tries to talk to you sometimes about the Lord and His ways, is a girl!"

She thought, *How can you live one part of your life hanging onto the truth when the other part of your life is a lie?*

Uley'd certainly fooled these men. If they knew who she really was, they'd get all tongue-tied and red in the face and flustered. She and her pa had only deceived them for propriety's sake, a necessary little white lie so she could come West and they could stay together. Uley had not known that a small deception could carry such a heavy weight.

All day long, she could only think of a man in jail named Aaron Brown. All day long, she could only think that he knew her secret.

*He knew.*

By the time she'd finished her day's work, she figured she knew what she had to do with him. As soon as the four-thirty whistle sounded, she headed to town. She walked right into the jailhouse and sat down.

When Harris Olney saw her, he about pumped her arm off. "Uley Kirkland," he said, grinning. "If it weren't for you, I'd be six feet under today. Thank you, son."

"You're welcome, Marshal." Uley paused. It was time for her to save herself. "I came by wondering if you'd do me a favor."

"Anything I can do for you, I'll do it. You're a fine young man, Uley. I'll always do you favors. I'd especially like to see you happy today. What is it?"

"I'd like to see the prisoner."

Harris furrowed his brows, sending deep creases alongside his nose. "Why on earth would you want to do that?"

For one brief moment, Uley faltered. "It.. it was dark outside. I really didn't get a good look at him. I thought I'd just like to see who I tackled by the light of day."

Harris thought about it a minute. "Well." She could see him hesitating. Of course, she would be the one to testify in court and convict him. "Odd request, it is. But I *did* promise you a favor." Harris hoisted an iron key ring off a peg. Then he led her through a door and pointed to one of the cells. "He's right over there. You stay as long as you want. Holler at me if he gets ugly."

She saw the stranger sitting on the stained blue ticking of his cot, his knees spread wide, his feet planted firm. His muddy brown Stetson lay upside down beside him.

He didn't see her coming. He'd buried his face in his hands.

"Hello."

He lifted his head and gawked up at her, eyes wide with surprise. In the daylight, she saw they were blue.

"I came to see how you were doing."

"I'm doing dandy." He didn't stand up. "Just dandy."

"Looks like it."

Aaron Brown appeared younger than she'd thought last night. She figured him to be somewhere in his thirties. He didn't look as mean now, either. He just looked sad.

A shock of chocolate-brown hair hung down over his forehead like an arrowhead. He plopped his elbows against his knees and let his clasped hands hang down between them. "You ever going to get tired of looking at me like I'm some kind of animal caught in a trap?"

She shook her head. "No." He wasn't really bad to look at. If he hadn't been the sort of person to creep into town and go after the strong arm of the law; she might have given him a second glance. She amended that thought. Even though he was that sort of person, she gave him a second glance.

"So you're Uley Kirkland," he said softly. "Miss Uley Kirkland. "

"That is correct."

He knew she was a woman, and he treated her like one. If a murderer could be respectful, then Aaron Brown was. It wasn't the way he spoke to her, exactly, but the way he kept his eyes on her. She'd never before seen anyone peruse her with such respect, such open amazement. But then, she'd never before taken a flying leap at anyone, either.

She remembered why she'd come. She leaned closer to the bars to take care of the task at hand. "Judge Murphy's due back from Denver next Tuesday," she told him. "You'll be off this world by Wednesday morning."

"I'm painfully aware of that." She leaned in even closer. "Since you will be gone off this world then, and it is absolutely no concern of yours, Mr. Brown, you must promise me you'll tell no one about the horrible fact you discovered last night."

He knew exactly what she was talking about. "When you lost your hat."

"Yes."

"Good grief," he said, sounding mildly exasperated. "Here I am fixing to hang for murder, and all you're thinking about is covering your own hide."

"Yes."

"And I didn't even get the chance to go after Olney."

"You would have, if not for me."

He cradled his banged-up brown Stetson in his palm as if he'd just tipped it to her. "Now; you don't know that, do you, ma'am?"

It was the most amazing thing, conversing with him. For the first time in four years, she didn't have to pretend. "You never would have gotten out of this valley alive."

"However I had to go," he said. "I *did* figure on taking Harris Olney with me."

She shook her finger at him. "You must promise me, Mr. Brown." When he rose from the cot, she examined his frame.

He was lanky and fairly thin. She'd known from grappling with him how he'd tower over her. He reached through the bars and gripped her wrists. "Your secret is safe with me, Miss Kirkland. I will face eternity next Wednesday with your secret well hidden within my bosom. I will die happy to be the only one knowing that the person who apprehended me and upended me in the dirt was a mere slip of a girl."

She didn't know how she felt about promises from somebody who'd pulled a gun to go after a man. But she'd learned enough about the male species to know they'd risk losing everything before they'd risk losing face in front of others. She turned to the other matter at hand. "I am not a slip of a girl," she said. "I am a *woman*, Mr. Brown. A full nineteen years of age."

"Oh," he said, taken aback at last. Even so, he didn't release her wrists. "I do see what you mean."

When he eyed her again, she saw him taking into account the nubby sweater she wore, and her woolen knickers, covered with mud from working the mine. She saw him surveying the shock of dusty red-brown curls poking out beneath

her apple hat. "You are the most unusual woman of nineteen years I have ever seen."

"I'll thank you to let go of me," she said, her green eyes remaining level on his own.

He dropped his hold. "Why are you deceiving everyone, Miss Kirkland? And how are you hiding it so well?"

She wasn't about to let him lead her onto this subject. "I came for your solemn vow, Mr. Brown."

"You received that last night when you threatened me with your fist."

"Very well," she said, smiling a bit. "We understand each other. Good day, Mr. Brown."