

## MISS STARR'S GOODBYE

### A Stagecoach Mary Story

“Sarah, you are coming home with me, and that is final.” The slender man in the black suit stomped his heeled boot on the boardwalk, and the vibration rattled the planks all the way to where Josie stood, in front of the Cascade Mercantile. Three horse lengths. Josie didn’t know how to figure that in regular numbers.

“And I told you, James McCumber, I am going nowhere.” The woman called Sarah raised her chin defiantly, the reddest rose Josie had ever seen nestled in her pile of chestnut hair. Was the rose real? Sarah perched her hands on her hips, her waist impossibly narrow, her blouse impossibly white. “This is my home now.”

“This godforsaken backwater? Sarah, you were meant for better things. For a refined, respectable life.”

Josie felt Mary stiffen beside her. Half the county came to Cascade on Saturday afternoons, as they had, to pick up the mail and supplies and see a few folks. It was a hot, sticky day, mid-way through August, a brief lull before the last push to bring in the wheat. The shouting had lured everyone out of the shops and businesses, even the sheriff, standing in the doorway of the single-story sandstone jail across the dirt street.

“By respectable, you mean marrying a man I don’t love, being at his beck and call, one more shiny object for him to brag about? No, James. If you want to take me back to Philadelphia, you might as well kill me first. Because a life in a gilded cage would be the death of me.” Sarah

shook her head, the magnificent hair somehow staying put. She caught sight of Mary and threw her a big smile. "And Montana's not godforsaken, is it, Mary? How many nuns live at St. Peter's Mission now? Half a dozen? And a pair of priests, with an honest-to-goodness bishop just up the river in Helena. They pray for us all. Even me."

"Miss Starr," Mary replied. "Good to see you."

Josie glanced at Mary, surprised that she knew the woman.

"It's not enough," James said, his face flushed, "that you've given yourself over to a life of iniquity? You're friends with Negroes, too?"

"I am friends with whom I please," the woman replied. She cocked one hip, the folds of her dark red velvet skirt swaying. "And when I please a certain kind of friend, I am paid quite well." With her last words, her voice and eyes grew sharp. The man clenched his fists, his jaw tight and his eyes bulging, but Miss Starr didn't flinch.

Mary reached for Josie's hand. "Miss Dolly would kill me for letting you hear such talk." She tugged Josie past the Mercantile where other on-lookers were beginning to shuffle their feet and look uncomfortable.

"Mary, what's a quinn—quinninity?"

"A what?" Mary said as they turned the corner from Main on to First Street. "Oh, hush, child. If I'd known you were going to ask so many questions ..."

But what she would have done had she known, the big black woman didn't say. They had reached their destination.

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"Now, Mary, you know I ain't got no problem with you coming in to quench your thirst,

but that girl..." The mustachioed man behind the bar in the Horseshoe shook his head. "Can't be lettin' her in."

Mary shook the dust from her black skirt, the pistol she always carried heavy in her pocket. The black-and-white dog at her heels sneezed.

Two men hunched over the bar craned their necks to stare, no doubt spoiling to see if she'd pick a fight. At nearly six feet, she was taller and wider than the barkeep. Taller than just about any man within a day's drive of Cascade, Montana, and she didn't mind that most folks thought she was meaner, too.

If Josie were a white boy, nobody would blink an eye at seeing her in the saloon on a Saturday afternoon. If she were a white girl, the barkeep would tell Mary to send her down to the Mercantile for penny candy, and maybe sneak her a coin or two.

But a half-breed was another story, even one in a plain cotton dress and white pinafore, and shoes on her feet.

Mary's throat cramped, dusty and dry. Weren't no use fighting things that weren't going to change. She turned to the girl, still straddling the threshold. "You go down to the river, Josie. See if you can scare up some wild flowers for Miss Dolly. Keep outta trouble, you hear?"

"Yes, Miss Mary." Josie's voice rang out clear, and Mary heard a snigger from a table in the corner shadows. The girl's footfalls echoed as she ran across the wide plank porch and down the wooden steps, fading to nothing as she reached the dusty street. Mary marched to the bar and wrapped her thick, calloused fingers around the whiskey glass.

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Josie's shoes pinched, but she was not going to take them off. Shoes meant she was

somebody. A pupil at the Ursuline academy at St. Peter, ten miles northwest of town. The only Indian girl who'd stayed the summer, her mother dead and her father off tending his cattle. She knew some white folks scoffed at the idea of educating Indian children. But Mother Amadeus, the woman Mary always called "Miss Dolly," would have none of that. She'd come west to teach Indian girls, at the request of the Jesuit priests, and Mary said that when Miss Dolly got the bit in her teeth, weren't no stopping her.

At the corner, Josie paused. The river lay to her right. But this was her first chance to see the town on her own, so she made a left, hopping up onto the boardwalk as a wide wagon, laden with supplies, rumbled past.

Mary had taken her into the Mercantile earlier in the day, the nuns' list of supplies in hand. She'd felt the other customers' eyes on them, the big black woman and the small girl, one quarter Blackfeet. But not all the folks had been unfriendly. It was Mary who drove the wagon into town every Saturday, and who delivered mail or supplies for folks living near the Mission who couldn't get away. It was Mary who fetched the doctor or the priest, and folks who knew her trusted her.

When Josie paused in front of the glass candy jars, Mary had frowned and pulled her away, muttering something about not spoiling her, the trip to town being treat enough. Now, Josie thought she might go in for another look. She didn't have any money, but a look was almost as sweet as the taste itself.

"Hey, you half-breed. Get on home," a rough, male voice shouted, and Josie froze. With all the people coming and going, she couldn't see who had yelled at her. Her cheeks grew hot with shame, and she darted in to the alley, another shout and sharp laughter following her.

Partway down the alley, she stopped, breathless, flattening herself in a doorway. Mary had told her to stay out of trouble, to go down to the river. Why hadn't she listened?

She stood in the shadows for a long time, until her heart quieted and her breath calmed. The nuns said when you quieted the voices inside yourself, you could hear the whisper of God. You could hear it in the church, of course, but also in the willows and the song of the meadowlark.

But that wasn't what Josie heard now. A loud voice, its volume matched by another. Both male. She leaned forward ever so slowly, but the alley was empty. The shouting continued and she glanced up. A window stood open on the third floor of the hotel across the alley, its board siding painted a soft, buttery yellow.

Cascade is the fightingest town, she thought. The harsh tones made her insides jump, like she'd swallowed a live grasshopper. Like when her father had shouted at her mother and hit them both. It never took much to set him off—too many flies in the outhouse, the ladle slipping into the bucket, the rooster crowing when he shouldn't have. She wanted to love her Pa, except that he scared her. But he had let her go live with the nuns and go to school after Ma died, though she often cried herself to sleep over missing her mother. The nuns were kind, even if the chores were sometimes hard, and the sewing needle pricked the tips of her fingers bloody red, but she was learning to read and write and do simple sums. And Mary and the cook always made sure she got enough to eat.

The voices broke into her thoughts, and she gazed up at the window again. The dark-haired man in the black suit—wasn't he the man who'd been arguing with the pretty lady in the street? James, she had called him. A hand came into view, one finger pointed, and James backed

out of sight as the finger-pointing man appeared in the window. He was taller and stockier, his thick hair the color of golden wheat. But from the alley below, Josie could only pick up snatches of their argument. James mentioned the train to Philadelphia, a name she recognized from the map that hung in the schoolroom. The two men were moving back and forth in front of the window and she couldn't clearly make out the reply. Something, she was sure, about going to hell.

Nearby, a horse whinnied and she glanced down the alley both ways, but saw nothing. When she looked up, the window was empty. Josie had no idea how long she'd been hiding, but surely long enough for the man who'd taunted her to be gone. She crept forward silently, her hands gripping the red bricks of the Mercantile as she peered around the corner.

"Why, hello, little girl!" a voice boomed, and Josie jumped six inches. The voice came from behind her, and it belonged to the golden-haired man she'd seen in the window.

"He-hello," she said. "Sir."

He crouched, lowering himself to her height. "Who are we spying on?" he whispered, his gaze flicking playfully to the boardwalk.

"No-nobody." Josie's braids flew as she shook her head.

Golden Hair laughed and straightened. "It's all right, little bird. Your secret's safe with me." He reached a hand into the pocket of his dark brown trousers and tossed her a silver coin. "Don't spend it all in one place." Then he winked, and sauntered off down the boardwalk.

Josie stared, open-mouthed, at the coin in her hand. Could she, dare she? She glanced up and down the street. No sign of Mary. She dashed around the corner and into the Mercantile. No one would chase her away when they saw that she had money, would they?

A few minutes later, the treasured candy in her pocket, Josie sauntered down to the river, praying Mary would not be waiting. Mary liked to take her time in the saloon, but sometimes she came out cross. Her dark moods never lasted long, not around Josie, anyway, but better not to have to tiptoe around them.

The flat sandstone ledge where she and Mary liked to sit was warmed by the summer sun and cooled by the river breeze. Josie clambered up, the soles of her shoes slipping a bit, then sat and pulled out the peppermint stick.

The sun and peppermint must have made her drowsy, because she didn't hear Mary approach until the big woman's foot struck a loose rock and sent it tumbling down the river bank. Josie stuffed the candy in her skirt pocket and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Oh, these old bones," Mary said, settling herself next to Josie while the dog dashed down to the water. Mary set the clay jug, stoppered with a birch plug, between them, but didn't take a drink. Instead, she pulled a soft buckskin pouch out of her skirts and withdrew a pipe and tin. She held the pipe away from her, squinting, lips pursed, as she tamped tobacco into the bowl. She struck a match on the rock, lit up, and took a deep draw. Leaned against the sandstone cliff behind them. "Oh, that is fine."

They sat in silence as Mary smoked and Josie watched the white pelicans drift along on the currents below them. Funny birds, their orange beaks longer than their necks, their wing and tailed feathers dipped in ink. Mary had been all up and down this river, the mighty Missouri, and said it was wider and not so still downstream. Josie thought it paradise.

"Mary," she said, "you knew that lady in the street, didn't you?"

"What lady? Ohh, Miss Starr." Mary chuckled. "There are some don't call her a lady."

“Why not? And why didn't she want to go home? Doesn't everyone want to go home?”

Mary lowered her pipe and turned to study her. “Do you want to go home, child? Back to your daddy's cabin on Lepley Creek?”

“No!” Josie felt herself flush. “No, I mean the mission. That's my home. Where my cot is, and the chickens I take care of, and the school books and my slate. But Miss Starr told the man she didn't want to go home. If that man wasn't her husband, who was he?”

“Miss Starr ain't got no husband. Reckon that's what the set-to was about. Could be that man—”

“James. She called him James.”

“I believe James is Miss Starr's brother, sent out by the family to return her to the fold.”

“Is her name really Starr?” Josie said. “Like in the sky? And is it her first name or her last? He called her Sarah.”

Mary drew on the pipe again. “You and your questions. She goes by the one name, Starr. It may not be the name her mama and daddy gave her, but if it's the name she chose, it's real enough for me.”

“You mean she changed it?” Josie tucked one leg beneath her. “Like the nuns changed their names, when they gave themselves to God?”

Mary started coughing, and leaned forward to clear her throat. After several minutes, she straightened, wiping her cheek with one broad finger.

“I think Miss Starr is like my mother,” Josie said. “They have different names for different places. My pa called my ma Annie, but her people called her Wawatseka. Mother Amadeus is like that, too. You knew her in Toledo, so she lets you call her Miss Dolly. That's

her home name, like Miss Starr's brother calls her Sarah. But why does he want her to go home? Miss Dolly's brother doesn't want her to go home, does he? He sent you out here to take care of her when she got sick."

"Oh, Lordy, child. Ain't nothing wrong with your mind." Mary emptied the bowl of her pipe into the brush beside the rock, then tucked it back in its buckskin pouch. "That sun be high in the sky. Time to fetch the horses and wagon, and load up our supplies."

Josie patted her pocket for the peppermint stick and jumped off the rock. She'd witnessed two fights, gotten a silver coin, and bought herself a piece of candy, all in one afternoon.

You never knew what would happen on a day with Mary.

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Mary would have relished Josie's company the next Saturday—she was a good girl, and any education she could get would help her avoid her poor mama's fate. Besides, her questions were more amusing than annoying. But Cook had a vat of chokecherries to put up for winter jelly and needed the girl's help. So Mary drove the team toward town alone, her and the dog. She liked being alone. Before the war, when she was property, she'd rarely been alone and never got the chance to make her own choices, even after she was grown. The war gave her rights, but it hadn't given her a lot of options.

The desire to make their own choices might be the only thing she and Miss Starr had in common. Why the woman had fled a life of ease and wealth for a dusty frontier town, Mary had no idea. Still, despite the powerful tug of independence, she also knew the ache that came from disappointing those who loved you.

A mile into the drive, she dropped off a basket of fresh bread and butter for a man whose

wife and newborn had died a few weeks earlier, despite ministrations from Mary and the nuns. At least she'd been well-loved, unlike Josie's mother, the poor little sparrow. The loss had hit the man hard, but the neighbors and nuns kept an eye on him and his two young boys. And his fields looked good—he wouldn't suffer a crop loss to boot.

She pulled the wagon into the corral at the edge of town, and she and the stable master took a look at the gray's hind foot. They pried out a stone lodged between shoe and hoof. "You keep an eye on that shoe," he warned her, and she grunted. No point telling him she'd been driving a team since before he was born.

At the Mercantile, she dropped off the nuns' supply list and picked up a new tin of tobacco, as well as the face cream one of the young nuns was partial to. Mary didn't mind keeping the girl's secret—face cream weren't no big sin, even if Miss Dolly wouldn't approve. Miss Dolly had been young and vain once, in a house where Mary had worked, and Mary knew a few of her secrets, too.

In the Horseshoe, the barkeep set her glass of rye at the end of the bar. A few sips in, the door opened and a stocky man in a brown suit with hair the color of ripe wheat entered, three men in city black with waistcoats and watch chains in tow. They settled at a scarred, round table near her, and the man in the brown suit called to the bartender for a bottle of his best whiskey.

"My friends and I are celebrating a new business venture," he said.

The bartender set the bottle and four glasses on the table. "What kinda venture, if I may ask?"

"A good, solid cash business," the man replied, and one of his friends chuckled.

“Providing necessary services.” More laughter.

“Ain’t seen you fellows before,” the bartender said. “Where you planning on setting up this business?”

“Down in Helena,” one of the men said, though he pronounced the name of the capital Hell-EE-na, marking him new to the territory. “Plenty of money and plenty of demand. By the time statehood comes around, our reputation will be unsullied.”

He cackled again, and they all reached for their glasses.

“Just a few bumps in the road,” the leader of the crew said. “Nothing a little persuasion can’t work out.”

A dark look crossed his sunburned face, disappearing so quickly Mary wasn’t sure she’d seen it. He had a kind of ruthlessness she remembered too well, the kind of cruel determination to get your way that she’d seen on the faces of plantation foremen with whips in hand.

He raised his glass. “Gentlemen, a toast to the Eastern Star.”

A mine, a rail line? Could be either one. Mary kept one eye on the men as she sipped her whiskey. Something about them—about the man in the brown suit—made her wary. He was clearly the talker in the foursome, and his companions laughed at his stories, but she noticed how their eyes narrowed as they flicked towards him, not matching their too-broad smiles. Whoever he was, whatever yarns he was spinning, they didn’t quite trust him, either.

She drained her drink, set the empty glass on the bar, and looped one finger through the handle of her jug. If Miss Dolly minded Mary keeping a supply of whiskey in her cabin, she kept her thoughts to herself.

Time to check on the horses, and leave these natterin' men behind.

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The next week, Josie helped Mary unhitch the horses in the town corral so they could get a good drink and rest a bit. The dog settled in the shade beneath the wagon. She could count the number of horses in the corral with half her fingers. As Josie began to brush the black, the stable master approached to inspect the gray's hind hoof.

"Looks good," he pronounced as he straightened. "I'll say this for you, Mary. You got a good hand with a team."

Mary grunted.

"Reckon you heard about the troubles in town," he said. Mary glanced at Josie, then led the man away and they spoke, out of earshot. When she returned, the grim set to her mouth troubled Josie, and she promised God in her heart that if she'd upset Mary, she would not spend the coins safely tucked in her pocket on another peppermint stick, but would give them to Mother Amadeus instead.

On their way to the Mercantile, Josie was surprised to see the streets so quiet. Inside, the shop was empty except for a woman sorting through bolts of calico while her husband waited, a worried expression on his face. Mary handed the shopkeeper their list without a word. He looked it over, said he had everything she needed in stock, and he'd box it up for her. Then he smiled at Josie and pointed at the candy jars. Josie opened her mouth, but Mary grabbed her hand and hustled her away before she could answer his unspoken question.

Outside, Mary found her tongue. "Child, things are ugly in town right now, and I don't

want you wandering around by yourself. You got to come with me, and be real quiet and real good.”

Josie got shivery inside, like when the dark clouds built up in the western sky and you knew a storm was coming, but you didn't know when or how wild it would be. “What is it, Mary? What's happened? Is that why the people stayed home?”

“Ain't no use trying to keep anything from you, is there?” Mary huffed out a long slow breath. “I reckon you'll figure it out soon enough. The man you saw arguing in the street with his sister?”

“Mr. James and Miss Starr,” Josie said.

Mary clucked, a disapproving sound. “James McCumber was found stabbed to death last Thursday night in the alley behind the hotel. Fool sheriff's gone and arrested his sister.”

“Miss Starr? Did she do it, Mary? Did she kill her brother?” The thought was both thrilling and horrifying.

But Mary didn't answer. She waited for a wagon to roll by, then stepped off the boardwalk and headed for the jail, Josie running behind.

Outside the jail, Mary pointed to a bench and Josie sat, swinging her feet while Mary trudged up the wooden steps and pushed open the door. She sat for the longest time, but Mary did not return. Her bottom grew all wiggly until she couldn't sit one more minute. She stood on the bench and peeked in through the glass window. Inside, the sheriff's tiny office was dark and gloomy. The sheriff, in uniform, sat with his feet on the desk, his tan, dirt-scuffed hat pulled over his face.

Josie shielded her eyes with her hands and made out a metal door, shut tight, a lock through the hasp. Had they locked Mary up, too? Or was she behind the door, talking with Miss Starr?

Josie jumped down and walked around the side of the building. In the rear, higher than she could reach, iron bars covered a window. No glass. It must get cold in there, she thought. Would they keep Miss Starr through the winter? Or would they hang her? Josie had heard talk of hangings, back when she lived with her parents and a tradesman had stopped to pass the time of day with her pa. Hanging sounded terrible, worse than anything she could imagine. But it's what they did to killers.

A hot, sharp burst of fear ran through her.

She leaned against the warm stone wall. From the window, words drifted out, and she recognized the voice as Miss Starr's.

"You've got to believe me. I could not let James haul me back to Philadelphia and enslave me in a so-called life of respectability, but I did not kill my brother. Oh, Mary, forgive me. I shouldn't have said it like that."

Josie could not hear Mary's reply, but Miss Starr's next words came through clearly. "He arrested me to show me he's in charge."

"Why he want to do that?" Mary said, her voice gruff. "He know you valuable to this town. Men come in to drink and re-supply, then visit you. And he makes his share, don't he?"

"Oh, he does, and that's where the trouble started. He jacked up his take. It was pure extortion." Miss Starr sounded agitated, her voice moving in and out of Josie's hearing. Pacing,

Josie thought. "I'm a businesswoman. I made other plans."

Was Miss Starr paying the sheriff? Why would she need to do that? Josie slapped a fly away from her face.

"That may be," Mary answered, "but unless you come up with a better explanation for why your brother be dead, one nobody can deny, you gonna swing."

"Oh, Mary. You know how it is to be blamed for things you didn't do." Miss Starr's voice was closer now—she must have heard Josie's silent urging to stand still, by the window. "You've got to help me."

Mary grunted. "Don't know how, but I'll try."

Josie dashed back to the front of the building and sat on the bench. A moment later, Mary emerged, the sleepy sheriff in the doorway behind her.

"You heard her threaten him," he said. "Two weeks ago, right there in the middle of the street. Half the county heard her."

"I heard no such thing," Mary replied, her voice low and sure. "I heard a woman say she meant to be in charge of her own life. That don't mean she'd kill her brother."

"Judge is due a week from Monday," the sheriff said. "Then we'll have justice."

Mary held out a hand for Josie, and they marched down the street toward the river. "Justice, my eye," she muttered. "That no-count lawman wouldn't know justice if it bit him in the bee-hind."

They climbed up to the rock ledge and sat. Mary pulled out her buckskin pouch and held the pipe in her hand, but didn't fill it. Josie didn't know whether to tell Mary what she'd heard

and risk being punished for eavesdropping, or hold her tongue, as both Mary and Mother Amadeus often told her to do.

“Miss Starr in a heap o’ trouble,” Mary finally said, her voice heavy. “She say she didn’t kill her brother, and I want to believe her, but how can I? We heard them having words, and we heard her say she’d die before going back to Philadelphia with him. So did they argue again? Did they struggle, and she stab him, like the sheriff say?” Mary made a stabbing motion with her fist, still clutching the bowl of her pipe.

“You always say I ask too many questions, Mary, but it sounds like you’ve got plenty of your own.”

Mary glanced at her, startled, as if she’d forgotten Josie was there. Then she grunted and one corner of her wide mouth twitched.

“Mary,” Josie said, “if I tell you something, and by the telling you know I disobeyed you, will it still be a sin and will you still punish me?”

Mary turned her broad face to the girl, her black eyes wide. “Child, what are you going on about?”

“I—I might have heard something that could help Miss Starr.”

“Go on.” Mary’s brow creased, her voice gentle.

Josie told Mary about hearing Mr. James and the man with the golden hair arguing in the hotel.

Mary frowned. “You make out anything they said?”

“Just that—just that Mr. James was talking about the train to Philadelphia, and the other

man laughed in his face. He said"—Josie broke off, trying to remember—"he said something about going to hell."

"Well, that don't narrow it down much. You think you recognize this man, if you see him again?"

"Oh, yes." Josie's head bobbed up and down. "He gave me a silver coin." She clapped her hand over her mouth. She shouldn't have said that. Now she was really going to be in trouble.

"He gave you a coin?" Mary didn't wait for the answer, tucking her pipe back in the buckskin bag—she hadn't even filled it, let alone smoked it—then she put a hand on Josie's shoulder and pushed herself up. "Come on, child. You've got to tell that story again, and pray it be enough."

Josie scrambled to her feet and followed Mary back to town. Never had she seen the big woman move so fast.

A few minutes later, when she'd finished telling him what she'd seen, the sheriff squinted at her, then turned his attention to Mary. His big hands lay flat on the small wooden desk, next to a knife with a carved bone handle and a steel blade.

"Now, why should I believe some tale you cooked up with this half-breed to try to save a murdering whore from the rope?"

The blood rushed from Josie's head and she felt Mary's hand on her shoulder, steadying her.

"Because it's the truth. She took that silver coin the man tossed her and bought herself a

peppermint stick in the Mercantile. I smelled it on her breath. You ask the shopkeeper. He'll remember."

The sheriff glared up at Mary, then turned his hard stare back to Josie. "You spend it all on candy?"

"No, sir." Josie dug in her pocket and drew out a lump of grimy white cotton. She untied the square, a wobbly letter J embroidered in white on one corner, to reveal two small coins, the change from her purchase. The first purchase she'd ever made in her whole life.

"And you say you saw this man in the Horseshoe last week?" the sheriff asked Mary.

"The very same. Ain't hard to put two and two together. You got greedy. You pressured Miss Starr, but she wouldn't go along with your demands."

Josie wasn't entirely sure what Mary was talking about, but from the look on the lawman's face, it was clear that he understood all too well.

"So when this other man made her a proposition to let him and his investors set her up in an establishment of her own in Helena, she decided the timing was right. She could get your hands out of her pockets." Mary paused, locking her gaze on the sheriff's pale, watery eyes. After a long moment, he blinked, and she went on. "And put her talents to a more profitable use."

The sheriff folded his arms over his chest and leaned back, his wooden chair creaking. "Even if all that's true, why should I believe this man—a man whose name you don't even know—killed James McCumber, when I've got a perfectly good suspect behind bars."

"Because you don't want it known that you put so much pressure on a poor working girl

that her only choice was to leave town," Mary replied. "Or that you arrested her to teach her a lesson."

They were talking about the golden-haired man who'd given her the silver coin, Josie knew, the man Mary thought a killer. Her insides wriggled, and she shoved the handkerchief and coins deep in her pocket. She would have to think long and hard what to do with them.

"So the timing was right for Miss Starr, the Eastern Star," Mary continued. "But the timing was wrong for her brother. He showed up the same day her benefactor came in from Helena to finalize the deal. When he heard about the argument in the street, he confronted the brother in the hotel, but James wouldn't back down, determined to get his sister away from here. And our man knew he couldn't count on Miss Starr holding out against her brother's efforts. So he removed the obstacle to his plans himself, staging the killing to look like a late-night robbery. He didn't count on you jumping to the wrong conclusion for your own selfish reasons."

"And you think this big-time businessman from Helena would stoop to murder."

"I think you'll find that knife belonged to him, and that one of his cronies will be all too happy to identify it. Obviously, Miss Starr can tell you his name and where to find him. You ain't the kinda man who'd let a woman hang for a crime you never thought she done."

The sheriff gave Mary a long look. Then he reached for the knife and slid it into his desk drawer. He pulled out a ring of keys, stood, and walked slowly to the locked door.

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"Mary! You came." Sarah McCumber, once Miss Starr, never to be the Eastern Star, extended her hands, a beaded reticule hanging from one white-gloved wrist.

Mary took the offered hands in hers and held them tight. "You sure about this, Miss Sarah? You swore you weren't never going back."

Behind them in the corral, the coach driver and the undertaker were tying a pine casket on the back of the Helena stage, the full-chested black horses waiting patiently.

"Though I resented his interference, I'm not cruel enough to send my brother's body back to our parents by itself." She released her grip and fingered a tear from one powdered cheek. "I'm through with the life, Mary. I enjoyed the freedom it gave me, but it killed my brother."

"Ain't freedom that killed nobody, Miss Sarah. It was greed, pure and simple." Mary raised a hand to shade her eyes from the sun. "What will you do, back East?"

"Time will tell." She cocked her head, one corner of her mouth turned up. "Do you suppose the good sisters would have me?"

"Ready to board, Miss," the driver called, and she nodded, then turned back to Mary.

"You tell that little Josie thank you and goodbye for me." She pulled several silver coins from her bag and laid them in Mary's palm. "Give her these. And buy her a peppermint stick."

Mary swallowed hard as the elegant woman in traveling black climbed into the stage and waved goodbye with one gloved hand.

There weren't no telling about people in this world.

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***Historical note:*** *Mary Fields, aka Black Mary and Stagecoach Mary, was born in slavery in Tennessee in 1832. She came west in 1885 to nurse Mother Amadeus Dunne, head of the Ursuline Sisters at St. Peter's Mission near Cascade, Montana. The mission was one of the first*

*schools in the territory to teach Indian girls, like the fictional Josie. Mary earned a reputation for “the temperament of a grizzly bear,” with a soft spot for children, baseball, and flowers. She died in Great Falls, Montana on December 5, 1914.*