

Flame of the Rockies

Queen of the Rockies Series, Book 6

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Chapter One

July 4th, 1910

Adair, Idaho — *Deep in the Bitterroot Mountains Milwaukee Railroad Western Extension on the Montana-Idaho Border*

JULIANA HAYES SQUINTED AGAINST THE SUN breaking over the sharp rock outline of the Bitterroot Mountains. Each escaping ray ratcheted up the thermometer in the early Pacific Northwest morning.

Giant cedars looming above eighty-foot white pine should offer refuge and shade. Instead their shadows falling across the rails and platform represented the immobile bars of her prison. In the distance, the forest closed so tightly it looked like rolls of dark green velvet. Such beauty hid the malevolent nature of the area's extreme dangers. As dangerous as some of the men Juliana cautiously avoided since being stranded.

How much longer until she could break out of the harsh existence that held her captive for over two years?

The deep snows in winter and the fires in summer, only two of the extremes she could do without. The oncoming train puffed out clouds of smoke against a sky so blue and clear it resembled a lake more than the heavens. But she'd ridden that train many times praying they'd

make it to the next mining camp through heavy snow and bitter cold. Did there exist another place so wildly inhospitable?

"Anot'er hot day, Mrs. Hayes." The baggage handler lifted his flat cloth cap and rubbed a gray cotton sleeve across his forehead. "Who knew America would be such a hot place?" He flopped the cap back on his head as he waited with her on Adair's small, sturdy platform for the train to sidle up. She'd join the shift change for the mines dotted through the wilderness settlements and narrow, serpentine valley to deliver her quota of baked goods.

"We've never had a summer as hot before, not that I can remember." His foreign accent hard to distinguish all the words.

Was he Austrian, Belgian, Croatian? She didn't ask. He obviously wasn't Chinese or Japanese with his blond hair. She tried not to wrinkle her nose. It was blond, wasn't it? Hard to tell when these men likely bathed only on their day off. He stood tall enough to stick out among the Japanese who mostly inhabited the tent city of Adair nowadays.

She could speak to the weather safely. No more though without encouraging him. "After the avalanches in the spring, I don't think anyone expected this drought."

"I heard da winters here are hard. You do good wi' dem?"

She nodded, avoiding too much conversation. There must be more than seventy different nationalities working on the rails and the mines here on the border of Montana and Idaho. Some nationalities so close they spoke similar languages, only the colors or sometimes a piece of native clothing distinguished them one from another. This mish-mash of humanity from every known continent all with the same hope—to make their fortunes, whether to bring over more family or get rich quick or hide from the law. Money drove these desperate men. Some also desperate for a woman.

His clothing suggested another Austrian. They tended to band together, each of these different nationalities. Keeping familiar languages together helped with communication overall as the foremen were hired because they spoke English and the native language of their crews, sometimes a few more languages or dialects.

The mixed-pidgin varieties were endless, and sometimes humorous, but the pidgin languages helped bridge one group to another unless they clashed. They often clashed. Tempers as hot as the rail spikes in the sun after a day of excruciating cold, wet work deep in the rocky mountainsides. Shivering cold in the depth of summer as she sweated by the oven each day held

a fascination for her. Not enough to risk entering the dark abode of miners. As important the sense of togetherness inside a group, ironic how that togetherness habitually incited aggression and animosity toward outsiders. Why couldn't they all just get along? How did they have the energy for savagery?

Juliana did her best to be as neutral and invisible as possible down to wearing dull clothing and keeping her long hair tied up under her baker's scarf. But as a young woman, that worked as well as a queen bee in a hive. She hated developing the stinger that went along with the unwanted attention buzzing around her like soldier bees. But she'd been left with little other protection when her husband died.

Not long now. She calculated her time left based on her weekly pay envelope. She could shed the protective veneer in nine weeks, six days, and twelve hours—give or take the time it took the train to leave the mountains behind. She'd have her trunk on the very next train to Helena without a second glance. There'd be no salt pillar of Juliana Hayes in Adair, Idaho or any other debauched mining town in this forsaken place.

This Austrian, or whatever, was new on the job in a constantly changing mass of men. He'd met her at the brick dome ovens in Adair the last few days to help load a converted mining cart with the staples she baked for the workers up and down the line. At least she could understand most of his English—and he didn't seem to be a Montenegrin, by the look of him. Those vicious men tended to work in Rowland and Taft, on her Tuesday and least favorite route. Why did she have to feed the very men who murdered her husband? A shiver ran through her spine. She'd have to deliver the bread order tomorrow. Each week she considered adding sawdust, or worse, to the dough—and each week she mashed the desire down deep as she punched the bread into submission. Twenty loaves untainted by her dark desire for vengeance.

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. She repeated that verse each time the snake's temptation squeezed its coils around her heart.

"I hear said da snow gets deep as the depot roof."

Juliana nodded again and graced the man with a quick, courteous smile careful not to encourage anything. Too nice a response would garner yet another proposal or a lewd proposition. No response and she'd have to lug all four heavy freight baskets onto the train to the next stop on her daily deliveries. Her pay packet from the railroad would be reduced if she cost precious production minutes, she knew from experience when she first started for the Milwaukee

Railroad. The company didn't care that she was a new widow. They cared she kept up with her quotas.

"Too bad we don't have a little snow left over." She mumbled as pleasant as possible, under the circumstances. "I hope we don't see a fire season so dangerous again as that one two years ago." She didn't want to relive a summer like that for more reasons than the spot wildfires. Her grief had been as thick as the smoke trapped by the jagged peaks.

"Was bad, ja?"

"Yes."

The engine whistle blew three long shrieks as metal on metal squealed a high-pitched complaint braking the train to a stop. The nearness of the rocky mountain slopes amplified the sounds. The conductor, in overalls and brimmed summer hat, leaned out the caboose porch. He leapt onto the wooden platform and ran nimbly along the train before it had a chance to stop, bellowing, "All 'board! Let's be movin', folks." He inspected the waiting cargo, including the amount Juliana brought aboard. "Mornin', Widow Hayes."

"Good morning, Mr. Kelly." She handed him a couple of buttermilk biscuits filled with apple butter wrapped and in cheesecloth. The conductor often missed meals for train delays. "There's one for the engineer also."

"Yer a good woman, ya are." He tipped his hat and strode at a fast pace toward the front. "Johnnie, we been visited by the Angel of Adair! Looky the size of them biscuits!" Only he called her that and only he was allowed. The older man, stronger than his wrinkles led one to believe, had shoved more than his share of miscreants off the train for interfering in her duties.

Johnnie Mackedon tooted out his thanks on the whistle. One of his signatures. Stay long enough and each engineer could be recognized by the way they pulled the train whistle.

She laughed and gave him a quick wave as she called out, "You're welcome, Johnnie."