



Anna Finch and the Hired Gun

A Novel

KATHLEEN Y'BARBO

Praise for
Anna Finch and the Hired Gun

“Kathleen Y’Barbo has written a high-spirited novel about the kind of woman we’d all like to be: spunky, creative, witty—and a good shot.”

—DIANN MILLS, author of *A Woman Called Sage* and *Sworn to Protect*

“I love Kathleen Y’Barbo’s deft hand, combining romance, comedy, and suspense. Her books are pure fun to read. *Anna Finch and the Hired Gun* was my favorite so far. I was hooked from the first word.”

—MARY CONNEALY, author of *Doctor in Petticoats*

Praise for
Kathleen Y’Barbo

“With excitement, romance, and humor, Kathleen Y’Barbo spins a tale that captures your mind. The author’s enthusiasm for writing spills out of every scene, creating, as it should, enthusiastic readers.”

—STEPHEN BLY, award-winning western author of more than one hundred books, including *One Step Over the Border*, *Paperback Writer*, and *Wish I’d Know You Tears Ago*, commenting on *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper*

“A fun read. Delightful, engaging, charming, and yes, funny. Humor in the characters, and humor in the events. I thoroughly enjoyed this romp of a read.”

—LAURINE SNELLING, author of the Red River series, *Daughters of Blessing* series, and *One Perfect Day*, commenting on *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper*

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and the
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To Jess

Which rhymes with "bless"

For rescuing my mess!

And to my village.

He was a dentist whom necessity had made a gambler; a gambler whom disease had made a vagabond; a philosopher whom life had made a caustic wit; a long, lean, blond fellow nearly dead with consumption and at the same time the most skillful gambler and the nerviest, speediest, deadliest man with a six-gun that I ever knew.

—*Wyatt Earp, regarding Doc Holliday*



We had a little misunderstanding, but it didn't amount to much.

—*Doc Holliday*

April 30, 1885, Denver, Colorado

Daybreak found Anna Finch astride her horse, Maisie, heading for the foothills west of Denver. Her father had given her the mare before he decided riding horses across the high plains was not for well-bred women of marriageable age.

As the youngest of five daughters, Anna had always been able to tug on her father's heartstrings and get whatever she wanted from him, and what she'd wanted was a proper saddle. Not one of those sidesaddle contraptions where a lady had to balance herself and her bustles to avoid falling and injuring more than just her pride. Despite her mother's vocal protests, Anna soon had exactly what she wished for. That old saddle still served her well, though Papa long ago believed she'd retired it, along with her habit of watching the sun rise out on the prairie, astride a trusty horse.

As an observer of people, Anna had learned by watching her sisters, who'd been forced to give up all but the most docile pursuits, that there would come a day when this would be asked of her too.

And once that day came, she'd no longer have the freedom to ride like the wind. Instead, she'd be left knitting in some parlor, praying for a breeze.

Shrugging off the thought, Anna urged her horse to a trot and let the mare find her own pace across the plain. Wild streaks of orange and gold teased a sky painted deepest purple as she loosened her hairpins and tossed them behind her.

If the maids wondered why they had to fetch so many hairpins from the mercantile, they never said. Nor did anyone question why Anna's skirts were often coated in trail dust or why the occasional set of youth-sized trousers found their way into the carpetbag she carried on her rides. Those who resided under the Finch roof, be they servant or family, preferred a sort of self-induced blindness that relegated all but the most obvious to the edges of their vision. And sometimes even the obvious was missed.

Anna, on the other hand, prided herself in seeing details. As a girl, she'd begun the custom of writing in a journal. Once the risk of Mama or Papa coming across a written record of her life became a concern, Anna had turned to poetry and, on occasion, fiction. Writing poems and stories couldn't be counted against her, she reasoned, so she'd created characters and events that gave her staid life in Denver a sparkle it might not otherwise have.

Her dream, however, was to use her love of writing to make a difference. Wouldn't Mama and Papa be shocked to know their youngest daughter's fondest wish was to become a journalist? She smiled at the idea of someday seeing her byline beneath a headline on the front page of the *Rocky Mountain News* or the *Denver Times*.

Maisie sidestepped a rift in the ground, jolting Anna back to a more careful observation of the trail ahead.

It did not escape her that tomorrow was May Day. How odd to think that the girls at Wellesley College would don their best gowns tomorrow morning and make merry at the May Day celebration, just as Anna had each year while there. Odder still that she'd gone from that to this, from a woman longing to be a wife to a woman bent on escaping the title by writing about it.

But that was another story, one she'd told time and again through the now-retired character Mae Winslow—named for the May Day celebration that spawned the first story.

Even her best friend Eugenia Cooper Beck, ironically one of Mae's biggest fans, had no idea the real author of those embarrassing dime novels was Anna Finch herself.

Or had been, Anna corrected as another hairpin went flying. She'd negotiated for a dozen of those silly books, falling into the career backwards when a story she wrote as a joke for her literature class at Wellesley was mailed to an editor at Beadle & Adams on a dare.

Still, Mae's stories had given Anna a venue for expressing how she felt about the confining institution of marriage as embodied by the arranged alliances her sisters had made. The fact that the only way she could get out of her contract was to marry the character off still galled Anna. At least she had escaped with a nice sum, now gathering interest at the National Bank of Boston.

An amount she would have gladly traded for the opportunity to garner a different type of interest from Daniel Beck, the only man

who'd made her reconsider her feelings about donning the shackles of a wedding gown. However, her handsome neighbor, now Gennie's husband, had never seen her as anything more than the girl next door.

Another hairpin fell, and a strand of hair blocked her vision. She swiped at it and shook her hair free to blow in the fresh breeze. The last day of April looked to dawn kind and gentle rather than with the harsh chill of last week. It was still cold enough, however, for Anna to wish she'd chosen clothes for greater warmth rather than greater anonymity.

The mare slowed, which meant she'd caught the scent of water. To the south lay a creek that had proved not only reliable but also safe from prying eyes. After a quick check of the sky, Anna decided to allow Maisie her favorite treat, a cold drink of spring water and the carrot Anna had in her pocket.

Beyond the scrub that lined the stream, the bank tilted at an angle just steep enough to allow a horse to traverse it without sliding in. At the water's edge, the shadows were still long, showing little of the daylight that crept across the plain. The weather was glorious. The last of the April snow remained only in sparkling patches. Soon the upstream melting would begin and, if combined with a decent thundershower, turn this peaceful stream into a raging river.

Anna guided Maisie to her favorite spot and slipped off the horse. Stretching the kinks left in her back from a night of too much reading and not enough sleep, she debated whether to reach for the Smith & Wesson pistol in her saddlebag and see if she could still match her record of five straight hits on the old log on the other side of the stream. It had been some time since she'd made the attempt.

To keep her hair from hindering her vision, Anna fashioned a hasty braid and retrieved the hat from her saddlebag. She lifted the Smith & Wesson from the bag as well and made short work of filling its chambers with six bullets. After all these years of performing the same rote action, loading the weapon still gave her the tiniest of thrills. Probably because shooting was another in a long line of pastimes she'd been required to give up. At least as far as her father knew.

But then, there was so much he didn't know.

Anna set the pistol on a rock, then hobbled the horse in case the sound frightened her. Maisie was a high-strung mare under the best of conditions, though she always returned when she bolted. Still, this might be the time she did not, leaving Anna to find her way back to Denver on foot.

Anna raised the pistol and took aim on the log. The fallen tree was slightly larger than a man and of sufficient age to have been used for target practice for two winters. In summer the faded green of the grass made for easy shooting, but in winter the long shadows, occasional covering of snow, and brown earth upped the ante. Here in the golden glow of early morning, the sun danced across the log's imperfections, invitingly highlighting several places at which to aim. Anna chose a knothole and closed one eye, bringing the makeshift target squarely in her sights.

A squeeze of the trigger, and she saw the first bullet zing off the end of the log. A good shot, but barely, and certainly not close enough to the knothole. Easing her aim a bit to the right, she fired two more rounds directly into the center of the log.

Then she heard the bear. At least she thought it was a bear from the volume of its howl.

Maisie heard it too and began to spook. Wherever the bear was, he'd either been hit by one of her bullets or awakened before his winter nap ended.

In either case, Anna didn't want to meet him.

She tucked the gun into her waistband and ran for her horse. The faster she tried to remove Maisie's hobbles, the longer it took. Finally she kicked the last one free, pulled out the gun, put one foot in the stirrup, and swung her leg over the saddle.

Only somehow, Maisie slipped from beneath her.

Anna was vaguely aware of the horse's hindquarters as they trotted over the rise to disappear into the prairie grass. Most of her attention focused on whatever yanked her from the saddle and now held her by the middle in a grip so tight her breath came in short gasps.

Her flailing boots struck something solid, and her attacker dropped her. Anna skittered backwards out of the bear's reach. The sun blinded her, but she could see the grizzly's proportions. When her boots refused to find solid ground, she rolled to her belly and began to crawl.

Only then did she realize she still held the Smith & Wesson in her hand.

Panicked math told her three bullets remained in the chamber. Three chances to save her skin. Three shots between her and meeting Jesus well before she expected to.

Taking aim wasn't possible, so she turned and fired off two quick shots. The second one felled the bear, and he went down with a mighty roar and a string of blistering words.

Words?

Anna sat bolt upright.

The bear had transformed into a crumpled mass of buckskin and

boots, but appeared to be human. And from the sound of his growl, decidedly male. Leaning out of the sun's glare, Anna eyed her writhing attacker, definitely man and not grizzly, though shaggy and trail-worn.

A few yards ahead, Maisie appeared over the rise, her desire for spring water obviously overruling any fear or good horse sense she might have. Even with an aching backside, Anna thought she could reach the horse faster than this stranger could find his feet and give chase.

But with a howl, he surprised her as she scrambled to her feet by lurching forward and hauling her up by the back of her pants.

"I ought to tan your backside, boy," he shouted, "but I'll let your pa do that. Where is he? I doubt he'll appreciate his son shooting at an innocent man. And the law's not going to like that you probably chased Doc Holliday himself away. You're not with Holliday, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Her arms swinging wildly, Anna tried to free herself. "Release me this instant, you brute, or I'll see that my father has you shot. Again."

It was a stupid comment made in panic, but the bluster did its trick. The man let her go. Anna scrambled for Maisie.

"You won't get anywhere running off like that," the stranger shouted. "I'm bigger and faster, and my aim's a whole lot better than yours. Now *stop*, or you won't have to wonder if I'm telling the truth."

The boy froze. Or rather, the *girl* froze. This was definitely a girl.

Jeb Sanders had become painfully aware of the fact as soon as she spoke. If he were a man given to embarrassment, this would have been the point where he'd have felt it.

Instead, he felt the sting of the shot that winged past him, the one that woke him from the first good night of sleep he'd had in a month of Sundays. It was the second shot, however, that wounded his pride, because he'd stood right there and let her do it.

At least the first time around she'd snuck up on him.

Come to think of it, that was nothing to brag about either.

In an effort to ignore his wounds, Jeb focused on his attacker. That he'd assumed the shooter to be anything but female proved he'd been sound asleep when he made the determination. Though the oversized shirt and trousers she wore looked stolen right off a miner's clothesline, what lay beneath was pure female and hard to hide. Her expression begged him to believe she'd shoot him again, but her wide eyes told him she'd likely swoon before she could pull the trigger.

That alone disqualified her as an associate of Holliday. Anyone who traveled with him had seen blood and plenty of it.

Jeb followed her gaze to his torso, the apparent cause of her discomfort. Lifting the hem of his shirt, he showed her the slash just above his hip bone where the bullet had grazed him. Cold air hit his bare skin and stung the wound, which was only a few inches long and just deep enough to bleed.

She swayed but caught herself. "That's a lot of blood," she said, all her bluster gone.

"It's only a scratch."

Wide eyes looked up at him through a tangled curtain of dark hair. He couldn't see much of her face, but what he did see, an upturned nose and a dimple in her right cheek, he liked.

She still stared at his midsection, so he looked down to see what

she found so interesting. He was bleeding like a stuck pig, but it was nothing a few hours and a bandage wouldn't cure. The woman, however, looked as if she might keel over at any minute. The last thing he needed was a frantic female on his hands.

"This is nothing." He let go of his shirt and gestured to the place above his heart where a scar served as a souvenir of his run-in with a would-be train robber back in '82. "You should see this one. It was right after they got Johnny Ringo. Took a bullet that nearly did me in. A man has no idea how much blood he's got until he's shot in the chest. Train didn't get robbed that day after all." Jeb chuckled then noticed the woman hadn't caught the humor in it. "Oh, now, come on," he said, taking a step toward her.

She flinched and backed away. "You mean you were..."

She didn't seem able to finish the question, so he did it for her. "Shot?" He nodded. "It happens in my line of work, but most bullets that come my way I manage to dodge. Guess that makes you among the few who actually hit what you were aiming for."

"But I don't shoot people." Her lower lip trembled. "N-not in real life."

"Well, darlin'," he said slowly, "you did today."

When she swayed again, he reached out to grab her elbow. She allowed it, but only for a second. Feisty, this one, though she appeared to be losing her spunk faster than he was losing blood.

"I didn't kill you," she whispered so softly he wasn't sure he'd heard it.

"Well, not yet," he said with humor he shouldn't have felt. His gaze fell to the gun still in her hand. "You don't plan to, do you?"

She stared at the revolver in horror. “Oh,” she gasped. “Oh no, oh no, oh...”

“You all right?” he asked.

She staggered backward and made a run for the horse.

“Hey,” he called. “Come back. You just winged me.”

Why he wanted her to return, he couldn't exactly figure. She'd shot him fair and square and likely hadn't known she'd done it until afterward. After all, who expected a man to be taking a nap behind a log in the middle of nowhere? Certainly not a city girl dressed in country clothes.

Though the way she slid into the saddle and spurred her horse into a full gallop was too impressive to believe she'd spent all her days in town.

Jeb might have whistled for his horse and tried to catch her, but that seemed foolish. After all, if she was carrying a six-shooter, she still had one shot left.



My father taught me when young to attend to my own business and let other people do the same.

—*Doc Holliday*

Anna raced all the way back to Denver, fear chasing her faster than Maisie could gallop. While Mae Winslow wouldn't have given a second thought to firing a round into some fictional bad guy, Anna had actually done it.

Had actually shot a man.

She swiped at her cheek and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Lord, forgive me," she whispered through the sobs. "I didn't mean to shoot that man."

As she rode toward Denver, the trail blurred by her tears, Anna wondered if she, like the man back at the creek, might now be considered an outlaw. Ludicrous as that seemed, she had shot a man, then fled the scene.

Perhaps she'd done the noble thing by preventing him from committing whatever crime he had planned for that day. Though he seemed to be a nice man and not in need of shooting in any way, he *had* admitted to some discourse with train robbers. She tried to rein Maisie in so she could better logic this out.

If a potential crime was not committed due to her panicked mistake, then shooting him wasn't the awful act it felt like. And it did feel awful to actually put a bullet in someone. Or rather "wing him," as the stranger had said.

Her conscience stinging, Anna knew she should go straight to the police and give them a description of the criminal. He was tall, a full head above her in height, and broad of shoulder. Much more so than Papa or any of the men her sisters had wed.

What else? Her writer's eye sought out the details.

Dark hair. Longish and a bit mussed, though likely from his nap behind the log. His skin was burnished brown by the sun. He had a scar just to the left of the dimple in his chin.

Despite good breeding and better sense, she thought of what he'd revealed with a lift of his shirt. His skin was darker than hers even in places that should have rarely seen the sun. And a scar lay just to the right of...

She blinked to remove the image, then felt like a fool. What modern woman was shocked by the dark and muscled midsection of a healthy specimen of the opposite sex? Hadn't artists made great sculptures and paintings from the same subject matter? Between her time at Wellesley and her many trips to the Continent, she'd seen her share. And the man had worn trousers. It wasn't as if she were staring at Michelangelo's *David*. Though what little she saw of his torso bested the Italian statue by a Colorado mile.

Anna blushed at her own brazen thought.

Bypassing the secluded spot where she usually slipped out of her trousers and into her more feminine riding attire, Anna took a deep

breath and let it out slowly as she lowered her head, allowing Maisie to find her way home. While she never completely lost the fear of being recognized, Anna had learned that a slight youth astride a mare attracted little attention on any street in Denver. Even hers. Today she had neither the strength nor the steadiness of hand to negotiate the ordeal of buttons and ribbons involved in her other set of clothing. Better she slip home unnoticed and race to her chambers.

Anna kept her hat low and her head down as she rode the last quarter mile past familiar gates and beautiful lawns. As was her custom, she jumped off the horse behind the Finch stables and allowed the groom to take the reins. Only then did the reality of what happened—of what could have happened—hit her with full force.

She could have killed a man.

Or, given that he was obviously sleeping in a log because he didn't want to be found, he could have killed her.

A welling up of emotion stalled her and rendered her legs useless. The familiar world blurred, leaving only smudges of color. Green, blue, and gold swirled around her.

Her legs began to shake, and her feet inched forward. The stable boy asked a question and she managed a nod, though she had no idea what he'd said. Another inch forward, another victory for knees that knocked and hands that shook as they felt for the rough boards of the stable.

She could have killed a man.

This was not fiction. Not some Mae Winslow adventure with guns blazing and outlaws fleeing to Boot Hill in a bloodless battle that killed them nonetheless. This was real.

He was real. A real, live, breathing man, with eyes the color of a gray winter day and hair that matched the cherry wood of Mama's grand piano. A man who would forever be scarred by the bullet that, had it hit him a hair's breadth to the left, could have ripped through his gut and caused a slow and painful death.

While Maisie was led away, Anna slipped into the thick shrubs that lined the border between her home and the Beck property and fell to her knees. A wave of nausea hit, and she lost the remains of her hurried, predawn breakfast.

How long she remained kneeling, Anna couldn't say. At some point she turned to prayer, though her pleadings felt as dry and dusty as the banks of the spring where she'd spent her morning.

When she could manage it, Anna rose and dusted off her trousers, then swiped at her mouth with the back of her sleeve. Another wave of nausea chased her as she darted across the gap between the stables and the kitchen. By the time she reached the door, however, the feeling had subsided.

Hurriedly stabbing hairpins into her hopelessly ruined coiffure, she slipped into the kitchen and bolted for the back staircase.

"Anna Finch."

Papa. She froze, unable even to respond. Her father called her name again, and Anna slowly turned to see him standing in the kitchen entrance. His glower made her feel half her age.

"Come with me," he said shortly, turning and marching down the corridor. Anna followed helplessly.

Her father entered the library, leaving the door open. Anna stalled in the doorway, knowing that as soon as this conversation began, her freedom ended. She squared her shoulders and breathed a

quick reminder to herself that she was a modern woman with no desire to have her father treat her like a child. Then she stepped into the room.

And instantly the woman gave way to the girl, and Anna Finch lost all interest in her personal declaration of independence. Tucking what she could of her hair back into place, she ran sweaty palms over the garments she now wished she'd never donned.

As if her thoughts paraded before her, irritation tightened her father's usually kind face. "Shut the door," he commanded.

She managed it on the second try. The bindings holding her chest flat began to slip, and Anna pressed her arm to her side to avert disaster. At least this disaster.

"Sit down."

Anna considered taking the seat nearest the door should the need to escape overwhelm her. She made a poor attempt at removing any sign of unease from her expression. *I am a grown woman. A woman who shot a man.*

"Sit," her father repeated as his gaze slid the length of her with obvious disdain.

"Yes, Papa." Anna sank to the edge of the chair nearest Papa's desk and tried to still her shaking knees as she noticed her borrowed boots had tracked a mixture of mud and leaves across the carpet. At least she hadn't brought any of the man's blood with her.

Another wave of nausea bubbled up inside her, but Anna bit back on it until it passed. In its place came the urge to unburden herself to Papa. To tell him the horrible events of the morning and ask—no, *beg*—him to make them go away. To right the wrong of shooting a man, whether innocent or not.

But she couldn't do it. He already thought so poorly of her. Given his demeanor, he likely expected she'd done much worse.

When finally his stare met hers, Papa seemed ready to speak, but then he looked away and studied something on the opposite wall. Anna swiveled to follow his gaze and saw the portrait on which his attention rested.

Five young ladies in their best Sunday dresses smiled back at her. Finding herself in the portrait was easy. She was the smallest of the group and the only one who refused to smile. Not that the casual onlooker would notice, for the artist, who'd earned a hefty commission for commemorating the gathering of the Finch girls, had taken the liberty of painting a smile on her anyway.

Slowly Anna became aware of her father's silence, a silence that stretched far and deep into the chasm between them. Though she longed to find the easy banter that had rarely failed her where Papa was concerned, no words would come.

Anna watched the light glint off the heavy gold chain that attached her father's pocket watch to his vest button and wondered if the ticking was as quick as her heartbeat. Her bindings slipped another notch, and she crossed her arms over her chest.

Her father walked around the desk to stand before her. "If you were a child, I'd know how to remedy this. Unfortunately, tanning your backside for this ridiculous indiscretion of yours would solve nothing. Am I wrong?"

There was no good answer to his question, so Anna said nothing. She did, however, realize that her father was the second man to make that threat today, and it was not yet noon.

"When a female of marrying age is no longer amenable to

remaining under the guidance of her father, it is my opinion she should be handed off to a husband who can perhaps do a better job of it.” His eyes, the color of her own, narrowed. “And you, Anna Finch, have proven by your audacious behavior today and, I daresay, on many as-yet undiscovered occasions in the past, that you are well beyond any control I might have over your person and behavior.”

Anna took a deep breath and let it out slowly, fighting to hold her tongue. After all, this was Papa, and she was his favored child, his baby girl. Surely calmer heads would prevail once he had a chance to think on things.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said. “I never meant to bring any—”

“Tarnish to your reputation or the reputation of your family?”

He paused. “I fear it’s far too late for such concerns.”

This statement wounded her far deeper than she expected. “But, Papa, I’ve not done anything that would cause such tarnish. I swear it.” *Other than shot a man.*

His gaze slid over her once more as he walked back to his chair, and she cringed. “Did you purchase that outlandish garb or steal it off the servants’ clothesline?” Before she could answer, he held up a hand. “No, don’t tell me. I truly don’t care which you’ve done. What I do care about is how this whole debacle can be quietly made to go away.”

She stiffened with panic. “Papa,” she said, the words pouring out of her, “I promise you I had no idea that outlaw was there. Who sleeps inside a log meant for target practice?”

Her father’s expression turned from serious to shocked, and Anna realized her mistake. Of course Papa had no idea she’d discharged her Smith & Wesson into a man. How could he?

His face reddened, and a vein on the side of his neck began to throb. She'd seen him this mad only once, and the horse that had thrown him was sold before sundown. Likely she would suffer the same fate.

She probably deserved it.

"You shot a man? Today?" he demanded.

"By the river, but I promise I hadn't any idea he was behind the log. I only thought to practice with the Smith & Wes—"

"Quiet."

She ducked her head. "Yes, Papa."

He made a note on the page spread before him. From her vantage point, Anna could see the words *Pinkerton* and *Thompson*, and a sum in excess of one thousand dollars. When he spied her looking, Papa turned the paper over. "Did anyone see this transgression?"

"He's fine. He said so himself. And quite strong. Despite his blood loss, he managed to haul me up against him and..." Anna bit her lip to stop babbling.

"Who was he?"

She shook her head. "I truly don't know."

"No one whom you've seen before? Not a son of friends or well-placed clients? Not anyone we might come across on the streets of Denver? Or at church?"

"No." She'd never seen him before, but should she ever meet the stranger again, Anna would know him. She doubted a girl ever forgot the first man she shot.

"We're done speaking of this. You will never repeat this foolishness. Now, to the more important matter." He paused, rose from his

seat, and seemed to think a moment. "Indeed it is a conundrum as to which gentleman I shall honor with the duty of taming you."

Anna felt her brows rise as she absorbed the statement. "Apparently you've not read that awful Mr. Mitchell's gossip column. I'm a hopeless candidate for a bride."

The first sign of amusement showed on her father's otherwise stoic face as he closed the space between them. "Anna, darling, when you've the resources of the Finch family, one can never be considered hopeless, and there are *always* choices."

She rose carefully and inched toward the door. "Then perhaps I choose to go up to my chambers and—"

Papa caught her wrist and held her in place. All signs of good humor disappeared from his face. "You've tested me since you first learned to say the word 'no,' Anna." His grip tightened just enough to get her attention. "Know with no uncertainty that you've tested me for the last time with today's escapade. Now—go and change before someone other than the help sees you."

"Yes, Papa." She managed to remain upright despite her once again churning stomach.

"And rest assured you will marry, Anna Finch. And soon." Her father released his grip but held his position. "If I choose a man who will keep you in the parlor rather than the paddock, so much the better. In fact, I think I'll make that a requirement to gain your hand. What do you think?"

Anna squared her shoulders and turned toward the door, feeling the eyes of her married sisters staring back from the awful portrait. As she reached the hall, Papa called after her.

“Anna, you’ve ignored my question.”

She froze. “I assumed it was rhetorical.” She eased around to face him. “But if you’re truly asking my opinion, I don’t think much of your requirement. As you’ve said, a Finch always has choices.” Her temper flared and her voice betrayed her. “And I choose not to marry a man for whom I have no feelings. So there’s your answer, Papa. No.”

Papa’s chuckle held little humor. “In this you do *not* have a choice, even if you *are* a Finch.”