

# AN EXCELLENT TEAM

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EDITH MAXWELL

**I**t was a Tuesday morning when everything changed for Ruth Skinner. As she walked past the massive Baker Boyer Bank building on Walla Walla's busy main street, a young lady cried out near the end of the block. A man in a natty suit and bowler clapped a hand over her mouth. His hand on her arm in an iron grasp, he dragged her around the corner. A black touring car slowed. Its female driver gaped but didn't stop.

Ruth set her mouth and hurried to the side street, but it was empty. Peering into the alley behind the building, she saw the man shaking the woman by the shoulders of her fitted red suit.

"Don't you ever show your tawdry self in there again," he snarled. He slapped her face with such force it whipped her head toward where Ruth stood. The woman's cardinal-colored cloche nearly flew off.

As the man closed his hands around her throat and squeezed, her terrified gaze fixed on Ruth. The woman's eyes widened as her face darkened.

Ruth raised her Winchester .22 rifle. She cocked it and took aim.

"That's not real nice, sir," she called out. "You'd better let her go."

The man loosened his grip and stared at Ruth. "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?"

A deep voice sounded from over Ruth's shoulder. "Just do as the little lady says, Baker."

Ruth didn't lower the rifle until the man dropped his hands. The accosted woman stumbled away down the alley in the other direction. A stocky man in uniform stepped next to Ruth.

"Sheriff Bertrand LaRue, ma'am." He touched his hat.

"I'm Miss Ruth Skinner."

Down the alley, the man he'd called Baker was disappearing into a rear door to the bank.

"It's a dangerous business to be taking the law into your own hands, you know," the sheriff said. "This is nineteen twenty, not frontier days."

"That fella purt' near killed her." She gestured with her chin. "Who is he?"

The sheriff pulled a face. "The errant younger brother of one of the bank's owners."



"Does he always attack ladies like that?"

"I'm afraid he has a temper on him. He doesn't hesitate to exert it on those weaker than he."

"Why don't you do something about the coward, Sheriff?"

"My hands are tied."

Ruth stared up at him. "I suggest you untie them."

A young woman in a red suit sat alone in the Cascades Cafe that afternoon, nearly trembling, nursing a cup of coffee. Dorothy Henderson surreptitiously sketched the flyaway blonde curls, the brown eyes about to brim over, the way the upper lip naturally folded over the lower, giving its owner a pensive look. Dot had driven by a young woman being attacked that morning. Was this she? Dot wasn't sure.

After some minutes, a guilty pang struck. It was cruel to study the poor creature. She stashed her drawing supplies. Carrying her own coffee over, she said gently, "May I join you, miss? My name's Dot Henderson."

She glanced up. "Sit if you want. I'm Alice Colby." Up close she didn't look much older than Dot herself.

Dot sat. "Looks like you're going through a rough patch, Miss Colby."

Alice's troubles dragged down her heart-shaped face. "I surely am."

Dot waited. Patience wasn't her middle name for nothing.

"It's this way, see." Alice studied her coffee cup and spoke softly. "There's a gent who's been paying me some nice attention, if you get my drift. I was his squeeze, his tomato." She ran a hand down her suit. "Nice dresses, fine jewelry. But now . . ." The corners of her mouth drooped. "Now he's telling me to dust out. He's not giving me no more dough. How am I supposed to pay the rent and my debt at the dress shop? He promised me the moon, Miss Henderson. All's I'm getting is the gutter."

"You poor thing." Dot, normally reserved in the extreme, couldn't help herself from patting the girl's hand. "Did he give you a ring?"

Alice scoffed. "He ain't one to shackle himself." She swallowed and winced, touching her throat. "Worse, he's grown mean as a hungry coyote. Nearly choked me to death this morning."

What a horrid man. "You could go to the sheriff and report the scoundrel."

Alice shook her head slower than a tortoise would, finished her coffee, and stood. "Thanks for listening, hon. Maybe I'll be seeing you around town." She gave a wistful smile before leaving.

Dot left too. She walked slowly back to the ladies' boardinghouse, her unsettling encounter weighing on her heart. If one couldn't count on law enforcement, where did one turn?

Dot emerged from her room at six to go down for supper, as Mrs. Lockhart put it. When Dot had inquired if one should dress for the meal, the proprietor laughed away the idea.

"This is the West, my dear, not one of your high society homes back East."

Dot hadn't bothered to correct her that Indianapolis was hardly "back East." That would be Boston or the nation's capital.

The door across the hall opened as Dot shut hers.

"Hello, there," said a petite woman with curly dark hair. She wore wire-rimmed cheaters on her tiny button nose and had the tidiest little waist in her blue-sprigged dress.

Dot felt like a gargantuan in her tailored suit. She swallowed and greeted the lady, who looked a bit older than she. "I'm Dorothy Henderson, but please call me Dot. I just rolled in today."

The smaller woman extended her hand. "And I'm Ruth Skinner, Dot." She gave Dot a keen look as they shook. "You were driving an automobile near the bank this morning, weren't you?"

"Why, yes, I was." Dot gazed just as keenly back. "Say, were you carrying a rifle? I saw a man grab a girl in the worst way and I think I glimpsed you going after them. I wanted to help, but the traffic was terrible, and I couldn't."

"He tried to hurt her in the worst way too. He slapped her hard and tried to choke her to death."

*Alice.*

"Winnie and I convinced him not to." Ruth smiled widely, her blue eyes sparkling. Her lashes were some of the longest and curliest Dot had ever seen.

"Winnie?"

"My trusty Winchester twenty-two. The sheriff appeared out of nowhere and backed me up. He said Mr. Baker, younger brother of the banker, is a scoundrel who picks on the less powerful."

Dot shuddered at the thought.

"The sheriff also claimed his hands are tied to do anything about the coward, more's the pity." Ruth sniffed the air. "Shall we go down? Mrs. Lockhart makes a chicken stew that's absolutely the berries."

"Let's. I'm ravenous." Dot's stomach rumbled to confirm the statement.

"I'd like to get to know you better, Dot. A lady who can drive a car sounds like a good friend to have."

Dot nodded. "As does a woman with a gun." No matter how little she was.

At a knock on her door, Ruth called out, "Come in." She'd invited Dot for a chat after dinner so they could get to know each other better.

Dot, her suit now changed for a loose sweater and baggy trousers, held up a flask. "You don't mind, do you?" Her other hand held a drinking glass.

Ruth gaped. "Um, well . . ." Liquor in her room? What if Mrs. Lockhart found out? "It's against the law, you know."

Dot threw back her head and laughed, the first cheerful expression Ruth had seen from her. She tucked an auburn strand of her fashionable bob behind her ear.

"There are ways around the law, Ruthie, dear. My car is full of bottles of

hooch under the floorboards. What's life without a glass of giggle juice in the evenings?"

Ruth had never touched a drop of firewater in her life—no God-fearing Baptist would—and didn't intend to start now. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. But you go on ahead. I brought up a cup of tea, myself."

"Sure you won't join me? A splash in tea is tasty."

Ruth shook her head in a quick gesture. "No, not at all, but thank you."

The taller woman lowered herself elegantly into the other chair, crossed her legs, and took a sip. "Tell me more about yourself so we can become better acquainted." She drank again and looked like she was rolling the liquor around in her mouth—and enjoying it too.

Ruth wrinkled her nose at the smell but didn't mention it as she studied Dot's face. Her intelligent eyes below a wide brow were the color of hazelnuts, and while she didn't smile much with those thin lips, amusement played on her face in subtle ways.

"I can do just about anything domestic," Ruth began. "I bake, knit, sew, you name it."

"I've never learned to cook, and I can't sew a blessed thing." Dot didn't look chagrined in the least. "Mother pays housekeepers and seamstresses for that kind of work."

Which was all well and good if you could afford it. "I was raised in South Dakota, Idaho, and then Hermiston, Oregon, which isn't far from here."

"Are those the places where you learned to shoot?"

"Of course," Ruth said. "It's all rather wild territory, or it was when I was younger. What are you doing in Walla Walla?"

"I adore driving and picked Walla Walla off the map because the name amused me. I came up from California. What about you?"

"I simply had to escape my family, so Winnie and I took the train here."

Dot bobbed her head as if she understood. "Say, that girl you rescued this morning? I'm pretty sure I met her in a cafe a few hours ago. Her name's Alice."

"You did? What did she say?" Ruth leaned forward.

"She told me Baker had been paying her some nice attention. He was giving her money, clothes, jewelry. She didn't exactly say, but I'm sure he was getting what he wanted in return. She's not much older than I and is remarkably pretty."

"And?"

"And now he's done with her. She's feeling desperate, Ruth. And the sheriff wouldn't do anything if she *did* report the violence you yourself witnessed."

"Mrs. Lockhart said at dinner Sheriff LaRue was put in his job by the Bakers, didn't she? He did back me up this morning, but maybe he didn't want to see the fellow shot."

Dot pulled out a silver case and fitted a cigarette into a holder. "You won't mind if I have a gasper, will you? It helps me think."

"I'm sorry, but I would mind terribly. I can't abide tobacco, especially not indoors."

Dot pulled her mouth to the side, but said, "Yes, ma'am. Now, what are we going to do about this Baker gent?"

"We? Do?" Ruth's jaw dropped for a second time. "What in heaven's name do you mean?"

Dot tilted her head. "We can't let him meander about the place beating on defenseless ladies, can we?"

"No, I suppose not."

"I mean, look. If our comrades on the suffrage line could risk all to gain us the vote, we need to be at least as strong for poor Alice and all the other girls in a similar pickle."

"Just think, next month we'll be able to vote for president for the very first time."

"That'll be the bee's knees." Dot bobbed her head. "But first we need to figure out where Baker lives, what he does, all that."

Ruth lifted her teacup and extended it to clink with Dot's glass. "Let's make a plan, my new friend."

The next morning the two strolled along the main street. It wasn't Indianapolis, Dot reflected, but it was thriving and had an energy the Midwest lacked.

"They had quite a boom here during the Gold Rush," Ruth said. "Lately the commerce is turning more to growing fruit."

"Aha!" Dot murmured. "The scoundrel in question is heading into the haberdashery across the street."

"I was just thinking I'd like a new hat." Ruth's laugh was a peal of little bells. She tucked her arm through Dot's.

"You're a regular peach, my friend. Who wouldn't want a fresh topper for the fall?" Dot had the feeling she and Ruth were going to make an excellent team.

They waited until a few Fords and Dodges passed, along with a plodding mare hauling a milk wagon and a buggy pulled by a high-stepping stallion. The new alongside the old, as it was everywhere these days.

"Now," Dot said. The tall and short of them dashed across, barely avoiding a fragrant pile of horse droppings.

"Remember our plan. Engage him in polite conversation," Ruth whispered. "Get to know the fellow a little. Perhaps discern where he lives." She frowned. "I hope he doesn't recognize me from yesterday."

"You look quite different today, and you're not toting your weapon." She'd crimped Ruth's hair into Marcel waves this morning and urged her to wear her nicest dress and hat. Dot smoothed down the pleated skirt of her green drop-waist dress and adjusted her matching floppy beret. "Let us march into the fray."

Baker stood, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, conversing with a fellow at the counter. The right side of the store displayed men's headgear, while the left and back held ladies' hats in all styles. Mirrors abounded.

"Welcome, ladies," the clerk called out. "I'll be right with you."

Dot raised a hand and smiled before turning to the hats. "You peruse," she muttered sotto voce. "But keep your eye on him." She sidled over, ending up near the men's toppers, and surreptitiously studied Baker in the mirror. He was six feet tall, about forty. While the cut and fabric of his suit was high quality, the cuffs on the trousers were frayed.

She pulled off her beret and set a purple brim bucket hat on her bob. She touched the wide fold-up. "What do you gents think?" She winked at Baker.

He widened his eyes. "It's dashing, Miss . . . ?"

"Lucy Edmonds." In the mirror she spied Ruth looking startled. Dot didn't think there was a reason in the world to give the man her real moniker.

Baker set down the derby he'd been trying on and beamed at her, with his upper lip catching on a protruding eyetooth. "I'm Horace Baker of the Walla Walla Bakers, Miss Edmonds. You're new to town, I'd wager." His light hair was the color of dirty dishwater, and the blotches and veins on his face a witness to overindulgence. "I'd be happy to show you and your friend around."

"That's a lovely offer," Dot replied. "I'm afraid we're otherwise occupied for the moment, but we thank you." She made a small pointing gesture toward a missing button on his blue serge suit jacket. "You'd better ask your wife to replace that button for you."

"His wife?" the clerk scoffed. "There's no settling down for this one. He operates out of his room at the Walla Walla Hotel, don't you, Mr. Baker?"

Baker reddened and cleared his throat. "That's as it may be. I'll take the derby, if you'll be so kind," he addressed the clerk in a pompous tone.

Dot, apparently dismissed, set down the bucket hat and strolled over to Ruth. "Let's skedaddle."

"You didn't want him to know your real name?" Ruth asked as they ankled back to the boardinghouse.

"I did not," Dot said. "A cake-eater like that? I wouldn't care for him trying to look me up."

"An excellent idea." Ruth wasn't sure she would've thought quickly enough to give a false name. She pointed at a stately building. "There's the hotel where he lives. Why doesn't he have a house?"

"Short on funds, I imagine," Dot said. "His hems were worn and you heard me mention his missing button. By the look of him, I'd say he probably spends beyond his means on things like drink and gambling."

"I daresay you're right. Let's go into the hotel. I have an idea."

Inside, a concierge greeted them from behind a desk, next to which towered a potted fern.

"Can I help you charming ladies?"

All they'd done was walk in and not appear down at the heel. But Ruth could deliver charming.

"Thank you, kind sir," she began. "It's this way, see. My husband has been admiring the tailoring of Mr. Horace Baker. I hope you can tell me who

makes his suits." She twittered and batted her eyelashes at the man. "I wanted to surprise him with a new garment for his birthday."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. . . . ?"

Ruth cast about frantically for a name. "I'm Mrs. Hermiston, Mrs. Frank Hermiston."

Dot turned a snort into a cough at Ruth using the name of her former hometown.

"Very good, Mrs. Hermiston. I'll just jot down the tailor's name for you, shall I?"

Ruth folded her hands and smiled. She'd never had an adventure like this in her entire life. She quite liked it. She accepted the slip of paper and thanked the man.

"Shall we be off, Miss Edmonds?" Ruth lifted a single dark eyebrow.

"We shall."

The boardinghouse proprietor presented split pea soup, bread, cheese, and sliced apples for the midday meal.

"I say, Mrs. Lockhart, this is one of the tastiest apples I've ever eaten," Dot said. "Are they grown around here?" She savored the winey, crisp fruit.

"Indeed, they are, Miss Henderson. Over to the Fletcher orchard on the west side of town. Not a bad walk from here, if you were wanting to visit it."

"Thank you, ma'am." Dot raised her eyebrows at Ruth, who sat next to her. "Fancy a postprandial stroll, my friend?"

"A chance to get out in nature? You bet."

And stroll they did, on this clear fall day. Ruth changed out of her fancy dress into a more serviceable one, and Dot donned sensible shoes for the excursion.

Ruth, rifle in hand, gasped as they crested a hill. "Would you take a gander at all that?"

Hundreds of neat rows of trees marched away from them. A two-story farmhouse was situated to the right, with a red barn behind.

Dot's gaze traveled out over the orchard to their left. "Let's walk among the trees. I have an idea for a drawing."

"I'll follow you."

Ruth selected an apple from the ground, inspected it, and bit. "I can't believe I've never eaten an apple close off the tree before. This is even better than the ones Mrs. Lockhart provided."

Dot barely heard her. She spied a shade of red through the leaves, a red that wasn't apple colored. *Oh, no.* She hurried toward it. A low branch raked her forehead, but she pressed on. Her foot turned on an apple. She stumbled, then froze, her breath rushing in with a rasp.

Someone in a red suit lay on her side under the tree just ahead. *Alice.* Dot knelt next to the woman and touched her neck. She snatched her hand back from the cold skin. A cloud of angel hair covered the body's face. She peered at the ground next to Alice and plucked up an object.



"Dot?" Ruth called from a distance. "Where are you?"

"Here. Come quickly." Dot sat back on her heels, one hand covering her quivering mouth.

Branches snapped as Ruth made her way over. "Good gracious. Is that . . . ?" Her voice trailed off.

"It's Alice," Dot whispered. "And she's dead. Not by natural means, either. Look." She pointed to the finger marks still evident in the woman's neck. Dot stared up at Ruth, who had a grimmer expression than Dot had yet seen on her little face. "I've never seen a, a corpse before. Have you?"

Ruth shuddered. "Unfortunately, yes."

Dot opened her palm to reveal the button from a man's tailored suit coat. "See what was lying here next to her?"

"We have to get him, Dot."

She nodded gravely. "We'll need another plan."

"You go see if the farmhouse has a telephone," Ruth said. "I'll guard the body and give some thought to our next steps."

Dot hurried back to Ruth's side from the ranch house with Sheriff LaRue in tow, who'd arrived remarkably fast after the woman in the farmhouse had let Dot use her telephone.

"My friend is keeping watch over the body." Dot pointed at Ruth, who stood alert, rifle at the ready.

"Miss Skinner, we meet again." The sheriff touched his hat. "What do we have here?"

"We have a poor lady who was throttled to death by Horace Baker some time since yesterday afternoon, probably under cover of darkness. Ruth, clearly disgusted with the sheriff's lack of action, nearly spat the word "throttled." "Look at the marks on the skin of her neck if you don't believe me. This is what happens when you let your hands be tied, as you put it." She straightened her spectacles, glaring at him.

He squatted and checked for a pulse. He peered closely at the neck. "What makes you think Baker did the dirty work here?"

Dot pulled the button out of her pocket. "I found this next to the body. Unless that phonus balonus has been out here harvesting apples, I'd say this puts the nail in his coffin."

"This morning Dot noticed he was missing a button on his coat," Ruth explained.

"Where did you two run into the gent?" LaRue tilted his head, brushed off his hands, and stood. He didn't extend a palm to take the button.

"We were at the haberdasher. Baker was too." Dot kept her gaze on poor dead Alice.

He blinked. "They have some very fine hats in that shop. I'll call the wagon to take her away. But, as I'm sure you know, a common button isn't exactly ground for arrest."

Ruth peered around the corner in the hall as Dot knocked on the door of

Baker's hotel room. They'd made two stops on their way here, after Alice's body had been loaded into the sheriff's mortuary wagon.

A coat-free and shoeless Horace pulled open the door. Ruth couldn't see his expression, but when he spoke, his tone was jovial. She made sure she had a good grip on Winnie.

"Well, well. What a sight for sore eyes you are, Miss Edmonds. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Baker." Dot spoke in an uncharacteristic simper.

Ruth had to smother a laugh. Her new friend could excel on the stage if she wished.

"I was wondering if I could take you up on your ever so kind offer to show me the town?" Dot went on. "My friend is indisposed."

Horace's voice turned throaty, a tone Ruth imagined he thought would be alluring to ladies. It wasn't.

"Nothing would make me happier, you lovely creature. Please come in while I prepare myself."

"Why, that would be improper, Mr. Baker. I'll wait here." Dot tittered even as she gestured to Ruth without looking at her.

Ruth was at the door in a flash. The two stepped into the suite where Baker ran a comb through his hair in front of a mirror. Ruth pointed the rifle at his back. Hardly lavishly appointed, the room held a desk and a washbasin. A low table was awash in papers, spilled tobacco, and a half-empty bottle of an amber liquid. She didn't take her gaze—or her aim—off Baker.

Catching sight of them in the glass, he turned a sickly pale and whirled. "What do you think you're—?"

Dot locked the door and dragged a straight chair to the center of the room.

"In the chair." Ruth pointed her chin toward the seat. "Now."

"You can't do this!" He screeched like a daisy.

Dot, who stood at least two arm lengths from the chair, pointed at it. "Now, Baker." She no longer simpered.

He stumbled to the chair and sat. Dot circled to the back and pulled a roll of wire and a pair of wire cutters out of her bag. Fetching them from her automobile had been one of their stops on the way here.

"That's too tight," Baker whined as she secured his hands behind the chair.

"I'm terribly sorry," Dot said. She didn't move an inch to remedy the situation, instead wrapping the wire several times around his torso and the chair's back.

"Do you think it hurt Alice when you slapped her?" Ruth asked in a low voice. "When you tried to choke her? When you succeeded in throttling her to death in the orchard?"

Baker quit his wriggling and stared at her. "How do you . . . ?" His voice trailed off in defeat.

Dot knelt and wired his left foot to the left front leg of the chair, repeating

it on the right. He didn't resist. According to plan, this left him with his crotch exposed. She stood and wiped her hands on her dress as if they were soiled by touching this awful human being.

"Help!" he shouted. "Someone help me!"

"None of that now," Ruth ordered.

Dot pulled out an oil-smear rag and stuffed it into his mouth, wrapping the wire around his head. She twisted the ends to secure the gag. She wiped her hands on a handkerchief and joined Ruth.

"Horace Baker, you're a disgusting dish of dog dung," Dot said.

Ruth wiped a smile off her face at the turn of phrase.

"We plan to blow your family jewels off," Dot went on.

He shook his head hard, his wide eyes pools of terror.

"Unless, Mr. Baker, you promise never to touch a lady again except with extreme tenderness," Ruth said in her lowest, deadliest voice. "No slapping. No choking."

"And no false promises," Dot added, folding her arms.

His head shake turned into such a vigorous nod Ruth was afraid he'd hurt his neck. Not that she cared if he did.

"Very good," Dot said.

"We hope you have an exceedingly pleasant afternoon," Ruth added. "Let's breeze, Miss Edmonds."

"Let's, Mrs. Hermiston."

The only sound after they shut the door was Baker's moan.

Dot squared her shoulders as she followed Ruth into the offices of the *Washington Statesman* an hour later. This should clinch the deal. At least they hoped it would. They'd agreed Dot should start the talking. Ruth could obviously stand her ground, but she'd confessed that her diminutive stature and sweet face usually made men think they didn't have to take her seriously.

"We're here to see the editor in chief on an important matter," Dot said to the fresh-faced fellow at the reception desk, drawing herself up to her full height. She'd changed back into her heeled shoes during their stop at the boardinghouse and had freshened her hair and reapplied her lipstick. Red, of course.

"Yes, miss," the boy said. "Who may I say is calling?"

"We're not 'calling,' are we, Miss Skinner?"

Ruth shook her head.

"We're delivering a newsworthy story that has a great degree of urgency. You may say Miss Dorothy Henderson, a family friend of Adolf Ochs, is here."

The boy looked bewildered.

"Mr. Ochs owns the *New York Times*, young man. 'All the news that's fit to print?'" Dot quoted.

"Yes, miss. Misses." He leapt to his feet, flustered. "Please have a seat. I'll get Mr. Wheeler right away." He scurried off.

Ruth flashed her a grin. "Your family knows the owner of the best newspaper in the nation?"

"After a fashion, yes."

A harried-looking man strode toward them, the boy struggling to keep up behind him.

"I'll tell you later," Dot whispered. "Mr. Wheeler? I'm Miss Dorothy Henderson." She extended her hand.

He took it, gave it a quick squeeze, and dropped it just as fast. "What can I help you with, Miss Henderson?" He glanced at Ruth.

"This is my very dear friend, Miss Ruth Skinner. If we might converse with you in private, please?" Dot asked.

"After me, ladies." He ushered them into the only office in the busy newsroom and shut the door. "Please sit."

Once he was seated, too, Dot didn't beat around the bush. "We're in possession of evidence that will convict Mr. Horace Baker of willful homicide. Sheriff LaRue refuses, despite a preponderance of proof, to pursue the killer of a poor defenseless lady slaughtered in the orchard east of town within the last twenty-four hours."

Wheeler gasped.

Ruth held out a sealed envelope. "This contains an accurate drawing of a custom-made button crafted by a tailor on Third Street for Horace Baker's suit coat, a coat currently absent one button. The envelope also contains a copy of an affidavit by the tailor to that effect." The tailor had been their other stop, and he'd been eager to cooperate, having been denied a business loan by Baker's banker brother. "Miss Henderson discovered the button on the ground next to Alice Colby's dead body in the orchard. I—and the sheriff, I might add—witnessed Baker trying to choke Miss Colby to death yesterday morning in the alley behind his brother's bank. Yesterday evening he succeeded."

Dot resumed the narrative. "We request that you publish this story, including a report of the local law enforcement authorities' negligence. They are apparently in the pocket of the moneyed establishments of your fair town. Oh, and should anyone be concerned, they'll find Mr. Horace Baker, ah, detained in his room at the Walla Walla Hotel." Her smile split her face.

"And if Mr. Wheeler chooses not to publish our story?" Ruth asked Dot with an innocent air.

"I very much doubt that will transpire. Am I right, Mr. Wheeler?" Dot asked. "Miss Skinner and I are presently departing town with a duplicate of the button and the original of the affidavit. The tailor retains the original button for safekeeping. If you don't print the story, you'll see it published in a far larger newspaper without delay." She stood.

The editor rose so fast he nearly knocked his chair over. "Now see here, young lady. Are you threatening me?"

"We wouldn't dream of doing such a thing." Dot clasped her hands. "We thank you for your time, sir."

Ruth rose too. "We trust you will do the right thing by an innocent victim who was abandoned on the cold ground by a heartless and ruthless man. Her story must be told."

Ruth twisted in the seat to regard Dot as she drove them west out of Walla Walla at about four thirty. "South?" It hadn't taken the pair long to pack their bags at Mrs. Lockhart's and tell her a tale about Ruth's mother having taken ill.

"Sounds like an excellent direction." Dot swerved to avoid a rut in the road. "What are the odds somebody's already freed our Mr. Baker?"

"I hope Wheeler got his photographer up there first to shoot a picture of him trussed up like a pig ready to roast." Ruth didn't even try to stifle the snort that slipped out.

"I think we should open an investigative agency," Dot said without looking over.

Ruth wrinkled her nose. This was a new twist. "To do what?"

"To help other ladies like Alice." Dot beeped the horn at a dog racing alongside the car. "Preferably before they're murdered instead of after."

"I thought we were just clearing out of town before the rest of the Baker family found us."

"We are, Ruthie girl. I, for one, don't have the slightest inclination to go back to my family and be a proper young lady. I thought you didn't want to, either."

"I don't, and it would be good to earn an income." Ruth watched the sun hit the tops of the distant mountains. "Say, is this auto going to be able to get us over the Cascade Range?"

"Carried me over the Sierras, didn't it? I expect my girlfriend Colina here is going to do just fine." She patted the dash of the Cole car and glanced over at Ruth. "You've got Winnie, I have Colina. We're an all-lady enterprise."

"You and I are going to make an excellent team." Ruth gazed at Dot. "When we decide to open an office, I figure we could be HS Investigations. H for Henderson and S for Skinner."

"I like the way you think, Miss Skinner." Dot extended her right hand for a handshake.

Ruth shook it with a firm grip. Having one's life change in the space of two days wasn't such a bad thing at all. 🐦