

A close-up, high-angle shot of a woman's face, looking down and to the right. Her hair is long and wavy, and the lighting is soft and warm, highlighting her features.

A NOVEL

A small, detailed illustration of a pocket watch with a chain, positioned vertically on the left side of the title banner.

# STEALING JAKE

PAM HILLMAN



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*Stealing Jake*

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## PROLOGUE



CHICAGO

OCTOBER 1874

“Where’s my little brother?” Luke glared at the man with the jagged scar on his right cheek.

“You do as I say, kid, and he’ll be along shortly.” Pale-blue eyes, harder than the cobblestone streets of Chicago, bored into his. “Otherwise, I’ll kill him. Understand?”

Luke stood his ground, memorizing the face of the man who’d paid off the coppers.

“Get in.” The man motioned to a wooden crate not much bigger than an overturned outhouse.

Luke crammed in, the three other boys squeezing together, making room. Nobody said a word. Nobody cried. They didn’t dare. Scarface would kill them if they disobeyed.

## STEALING JAKE

Luke knew he'd been stupid. He'd tried to teach Mark the art of picking pockets, and they'd gotten caught. But instead of going to jail as expected, money had changed hands, and they'd been handed off to the man with the scar.

And now Luke would be shipped out of Chicago. Without Mark.

He pulled his thin coat tight around him and curled into a ball for warmth.

*Bam! Bam! Bam!*

Luke shuddered with every slam of the hammer against the nails. He drew his knees to his chest, shivering. This time not from the cold.

*Bam! Bam!*

He pinched his eyes closed, fighting the urge to throw up.

His heart raced faster than the first time he'd picked a pocket.

Where was Mark?

## CHAPTER ONE



CHESTNUT, ILLINOIS

NOVEMBER 1874

The ill-dressed, grimy child jostled a broad-shouldered cowboy, palming the man's pocket watch. Gold flashed as the thief discreetly handed his prize to another youngster shuffling along the boardwalk toward Livy O'Brien.

Livy didn't miss a thing—not the slick movements, not the tag-team approach. None of it.

Neither boy paid her any attention. And why should they? To them she was no more than a farmer's wife on her way home from the mercantile or maybe one of the workers over at the new glove factory.

If they only knew.

Her gaze cut to the man's back. When he patted down his pockets and his stride faltered, she made a split-second decision. As the thin boy with the timepiece passed, she knocked him into a pile of snow shoveled to the side of the wooden walkway. She reached out, pulled the child to his feet, and dusted him off so fast he didn't have time to move, let alone squirm away. She straightened his threadbare coat, two sizes too big and much too thin for an icebound Illinois winter. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Fathomless dark eyes stared at her from a hollow face. Eyes that reminded her of her own in the not-so-distant past. She wanted to hug him, take him home with her.

"No, ma'am." The words came out high-pitched and breathless.

"Hey, you!" The man hurried toward them.

Fear shuddered across the boy's face, and he jerked free of her grasp and darted down a nearby alley.

Livy let him go and stepped into the man's path, bracing herself as he slammed into her. The impact sent both of them hurtling toward the snowbank. The stranger wrapped his arms around her and took the brunt of the fall, expelling a soft grunt as Livy landed on top of him. Her gaze tripped off the end of her gloved fingers and collided with a pair of intense jade-green eyes. She stared, mesmerized by long, dark lashes and tiny lines that fanned out from the corners of his eyes. A hint of a smile lifted one corner of his mouth.

A slamming door jerked Livy back to reality.

Heat rushed to her face, and she rolled sideways, scrambling to untangle herself. What would Mrs. Brooks think of such an unladylike display?

“Ma’am?” Large, gloved hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to her feet. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Those kids stole my watch.” A muscle jumped in his jaw.

“Are you sure?” Remorse smote her with the same force as that of the stranger’s body knocking her into the snow. She’d reacted, making a split-second decision that could have resulted in catastrophe.

“Yes, ma’am.” He patted his sheepskin coat again. Suddenly he stilled and removed the watch from his pocket. “Well, I’ll be. I could’ve sworn . . .” He gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry for running into you like that, ma’am.”

Livy breathed a sigh and pulled her cloak tight against the cold. Disaster averted. *Forgive me, Lord. I hope I did the right thing.* “That’s all right. No harm done.”

The stranger pushed his hat back, releasing a tuft of dark, wavy hair over his forehead. “I don’t believe we’ve met. Jake Russell.”

Her gaze flickered toward the alley that had swallowed up the boy. She didn’t make a habit of introducing herself to strangers, but revealing her name might keep Mr. Russell’s mind off the boys who’d waylaid him. “Livy O’Brien.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. O’Brien.”

“Miss O’Brien,” she said. At least the gathering twilight masked the flush she could feel stealing across her cheeks.

Was it her imagination, or did the grin on Jake Russell’s face grow wider?

“Pleased to meet you, Miss O’Brien. May I escort you to wherever you’re going?” His eyes twinkled. “It’ll be dark soon, and a lady shouldn’t be out alone after dark.”

Livy sobered. She'd never claimed to be a lady. The tiny glow inside her faded with the setting sun. Mr. Russell would never be interested in Light-Fingered Livy O'Brien. "No thank you, Mr. Russell. I'm not going far. I'll be fine."

"I'd feel better, ma'am." He gestured toward the alley. "Especially after what happened."

He held out his arm, one eyebrow cocked in invitation. Her emotions warred with her head. She shouldn't allow such liberties, but what harm would it do to let him escort her home?

Just once.

She placed her hand in the crook of his arm. "Very well. Thank you, Mr. Russell."

"Call me Jake."

Livy's heart gave a nervous flutter. Did Mr. Russell mask his intentions behind a gentlemanly face and kindly words? A common enough practice where she came from. "I'm afraid using your given name would be a little too familiar. I don't know anything about you."

"Well, I can remedy that. What do you want to know?"

Livy shook her head, softening her refusal with a smile. It wouldn't do to ask the man questions about himself. If she did, then he'd feel at liberty to ask questions of his own. Questions she didn't want to answer.

He chuckled. "You sure are a shy little thing, Miss O'Brien."

Better to let him think her bashful than know the truth. A couple of years ago, she might have spun a yarn or two to keep him entertained, but no longer. If she couldn't speak the truth, she'd say nothing at all.

Her silence didn't stop him. "You must be new around here. I don't remember seeing you before."

"I arrived in Chestnut about two months ago."

"That explains it. I've only been back in town a few weeks myself."

Livy darted a glance from the corner of her eye to study him. Discreetly, of course—she'd at least learned *something* from Mrs. Brooks. The top of her head barely reached his chin, and broad shoulders filled out his coat. A late-afternoon shadow dusted his firm jawline.

He stepped off the boardwalk and helped her across a patch of ice. Her stomach flopped when his green eyes connected with hers, and she blurted out the first thing that popped into her mind. "Oh? Where've you been?"

She could've bitten her tongue. She shouldn't have asked, but curiosity had gotten the best of her. What made her want to know more about Jake Russell? Mercy, why should she even wonder about the man? He wasn't anyone she should worry with.

If only her foolish girl's heart would listen to reason.

"Taking care of some business in Missouri. It's good to be home, though."

They ambled in silence past the Misses Huff Millinery Shop and the recently opened Chinese laundry. The scent of green lumber tickled Livy's nose, bringing forth the image of the fresh sprig of mistletoe hung over the door of the orphanage.

The boardwalk ended just past the laundry. Livy gestured into the gathering darkness. "It's a little farther down this way."

"I don't mind."

The snow-covered ground lay frozen, Livy's footprints

from when she'd trekked into town the only evidence of anyone being out and about on this frigid day.

They rounded the bend, and Livy eased her hand from the warmth of Jake's arm when they came within sight of the rambling two-story house nestled under a grove of cottonwoods. "Thank you, Mr. Russell. This is where I live."

\* \* \*

Jake studied the building before returning his attention to the petite lady at his side. He'd known the moment he laid eyes on her that they hadn't met. He would have remembered. "This is the new orphanage, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's right."

"I heard someone opened one up. 'Bout time. Lots of young'uns needing a place to stay these days."

"We already have five children in our care."

They stepped onto the porch, and she pushed the hood of her cape back. Light from inside the house shot fire through reddish-brown curls and revealed a smattering of freckles across a pert nose.

She'd knocked the wind out of him earlier, and the feeling came back full force now.

*Whoa.*

Jake stepped back, putting some distance between them. He didn't have the time or the energy to be thinking about a girl, no matter how pretty she might be. His days and nights were chock-full as it was. He tipped his hat. "Good night, Miss O'Brien."

Her smile lit up the dreary winter landscape. "Thank you for escorting me home, Mr. Russell. Good night."

He headed back toward town, rehashing the brief conversation he'd had with Livy O'Brien. She'd sure seemed reluctant to talk about herself. Come to think of it, she hadn't told him much of anything.

Did he make her nervous? He should have told her who he was, but the thought hadn't crossed his mind. Knowing he was a sheriff's deputy would have put her at ease, but she hadn't seemed the least bit interested in who he was or what he did for a living.

He continued his rounds, confident he'd find out more about Miss Livy O'Brien soon enough. It was part of his job, plain and simple. He chuckled. He didn't remember anything in his job description that said he needed to investigate every beautiful lady he ran across. Still, it was his job to protect the town, and the more he knew about its inhabitants, the better.

Not that Chestnut needed protection from Livy O'Brien. A pretty little filly like her wouldn't hurt a fly.

His steps faltered when he stuffed his hands in his pockets and his fingers slid over the cool, polished surface of his father's gold watch. Not prone to jump to conclusions or get easily flustered, he'd been certain those kids had lifted his timepiece. How could he have been so mistaken?

Good thing he'd bumped into Miss O'Brien, or he would have had a hard time explaining why he'd chased an innocent kid down the street.

Still, he had reason to be suspicious. There'd been reports of scruffy young boys like the two tonight roaming the streets of Chestnut. Urchins from back East, Sheriff Carter said. Run out of Chicago, they rode the train to the nearest town large enough to provide easy pickings.

He settled his hat more firmly on his head. Those ragamuffins didn't know it yet, but they shouldn't have stopped in Chestnut. The town wasn't big enough for thieves and robbers to hide out for long.

Jake clomped along the boardwalk, part of his thoughts on the youngsters, part on the girl he'd left at the orphanage, and part registering the sights and sounds of merchants shutting down for the night.

He hesitated as he spied Paul Stillman locking up the bank. An urge to turn down the nearest alley assaulted him, but he doggedly stayed his course.

The banker lifted a hand. "Jake. Wait up a minute."

A knot twisted in Jake's gut. Would Stillman call in his loan today?

The portly man hurried toward him, his hand outstretched, a wide smile on his florid face. "Jake. How're things going?"

"Fine." Jake shook the banker's hand, the knot intensifying. Mr. Stillman's continued grace made him feel worse than if the banker had demanded payment on the spot.

"And your mother?" His concern poured salt on Jake's unease.

"She's doing well."

"That's good. I should be going, then. I just wanted to check on the family."

Jake rubbed his jaw. "Look, Mr. Stillman, I appreciate all you've done for my family, but I'm going to pay off that loan. Every penny of it."

The banker sobered. "I know you will, Jake. I never doubted it for a minute. The last couple of years have been tough for you and Mrs. Russell."

“Pa wouldn’t have borrowed money against the farm if he’d known. . . .” Jake’s throat closed. “If the crops hadn’t failed the last two summers, I could’ve made the payments.”

The banker took off his glasses and rubbed them with a white handkerchief. His eyes pinned Jake, razor sharp in intensity. “That investor is still interested in buying your father’s share of the Black Gold mine, you know.”

“The answer is no. I’m not selling.” Jake clenched his jaw. He wouldn’t be party to more death and destruction.

“That’s what I thought you’d say.” Stillman sighed. “I admire your determination to protect miners by not selling, but as much as I’d like to, I can’t carry that loan forever.”

Jake shifted his weight, forcing his muscles to relax. It wasn’t the banker’s fault that life had dealt him a losing hand. “I know. This summer will be better.”

“We’ll see.” Mr. Stillman stuffed the cloth in his pocket, settled his glasses on his nose, and tugged his coat close against the biting wind. “I’d better get on home. This weather is going to be the death of me. Say hello to your mother for me, will you?”

“I’ll do that. Good night.”

The banker waved a hand over his shoulder and hurried away. Jake stared after him. Would this summer be any different from last year? It would take a miracle to bring in enough from the farm to pay off the loan against the defunct mine.

A sharp blast rent the air, signaling the evening shift change at the mines. Jake turned northward. The low hills sat shrouded in a blanket of pure, white snow. Peaceful.

An illusion. The mines beneath the ground held anything but purity. Coal dust, death, and destruction existed there.

*Along with enough coal to pay off the loan.*

Jake turned his back on the mine and walked away.



Mrs. Brooks glanced up from the coal-burning stove when Livy entered the kitchen. “How’d it go?”

Livy took off her cloak and hung it on a nail along with several threadbare coats in varying sizes before moving to warm her hands over the stovetop. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. The aroma of vegetable soup simmering on the stove and baking bread welcomed her home. “Nobody’s hiring. Not even the glove factory.”

Mrs. Brooks sank into an old rocker. The runners creaked as she set the chair in motion. “What are we going to do?”

Worry lines knit the older woman’s brow, and Livy turned away. She rubbed the tips of her fingers together. How easy it would be to obtain the money needed to keep them afloat. Livy had visited half a dozen shops today, all of them easy pickings.

She slammed a lid on the shameful images. Those thoughts should be long gone, but they snuck up on her when she was most vulnerable. When Mrs. Brooks’s faith wavered, Livy’s hit rock bottom.

She balled her hands into fists and squeezed her eyes shut. *Lord, I don’t want to go back to that life. Ever.*

Livy forced herself to relax and turned to face Mrs. Brooks. “Maybe the citizens of Chestnut will help.”

“I’ve tried, Livy. A few have helped us out, mostly by donating clothes their own children have outgrown. And I’m more than thankful. But money to keep up with the

payments on this old place? And food?” Her gaze strayed toward the bucket of coal. “Except for our guardian angel who keeps the coal bin full, most everybody is in about as bad a shape as we are. They don’t have much of anything to give.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am.” Livy patted the older woman’s shoulder, desperate to hear the ironclad faith ring in her voice. “You keep telling me the Lord will provide.”

Mrs. Brooks smiled. “You’re right, dear. He will. I’ve told you time and again that we should pray for what we need, and here I am, doubting the goodness of God. Let’s pray, child. The Lord hasn’t let me down yet, and I’m confident He never will.”

The rocker stopped, and Mrs. Brooks took Livy’s hand in hers and closed her eyes. “Lord, You know the situation here. We’ve got a lot of mouths to feed and not much in the pantry. Livy is doing all she can, and I thank You for her every day. We’re asking You to look down on us and see our need. These children are Yours, Lord, and we need help in providing food for them and keeping a roof over their heads. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.” She heaved herself out of the rocker and headed to the stove, a new resolve in her step. “Call the children, Livy. It’s almost time for supper.”

Livy trudged down the hall to the parlor. The short prayer had cheered Mrs. Brooks but hadn’t done much to ease Livy’s worry. She’d have to find some way to bring in a few extra dollars if they were to make it to spring. Otherwise, she and Mrs. Brooks and the small brood of children they’d taken in would be on the streets of Chestnut before winter’s end. The elderly woman would never survive if that happened.

A wave of panic washed over her like fire sweeping through the slums of Chicago. Livy couldn't have another life on her conscience. She took a deep breath. They weren't on the streets yet. And as long as they had a roof over their heads and food on the table, there was hope.

She stepped into the parlor. Mary, the eldest child at twelve, kept the younger ones occupied on a quilt set up in the corner. The two boys, Seth and Georgie, stacked small wooden blocks, then howled with laughter when they knocked the tower down, only to start the process again.

"Libby! Libby!" a sweet voice trilled.

Livy held out her arms as Mary's little sister, Grace, toddled to her. "Hello, sweetheart."

The toddler patted her cheeks. "Libby's home! Libby's home!"

Livy nuzzled the child's neck, inhaling her sweet baby scent. Grace giggled.

"Yes, Libby's home." Livy glanced at Mary and the other children. "It's almost time for supper. Go wash up now."

Against her better judgment, Livy's mind conjured up flashing green eyes as she wiped Grace's face and hands. Would Jake Russell call on her? Why would such a thought even occur to her? What man who could have his pick of women would call on a girl who lived in an orphanage, a girl who came from a questionable background and didn't have a penny to her name?

And one who'd sprawled all over him like a strumpet.

Mercy! What if Miss Maisie or Miss Janie, the Huff sisters, had witnessed such an unladylike display? Her reputation would be in tatters. Not that she'd brought much of

a reputation with her to Chestnut, but Mrs. Brooks had insisted she could start over here. There was no need to air her past like a stained quilt on a sunny day.

Maybe she wouldn't see Jake again. Or maybe she would. Chestnut wasn't that big.

More importantly, did she want to see him?

She didn't have any interest in courting, falling in love, and certainly no interest in marriage and childbirth. She knew firsthand where that could lead. Rescuing children from the streets fulfilled her desire for a family, and she'd do well to remember that.

Georgie shoved ahead of Seth. Livy snagged the child and tucked him back in line. "Don't push. You'll have your turn."

When all hands were clean, Livy led the way to the kitchen. A scramble ensued as the children jockeyed for position at the long trestle table.

Mrs. Brooks clapped her hands. "All right, everyone, it's time to say the blessing." Her firm but gentle voice calmed the chaos, and the children settled down. "Thank You, Lord, for the food we are about to partake. Bless each one at this table, and keep us safe from harm. Amen."

The children dug in with relish, and Livy took Grace from Mary's arms. "Here; I'll feed her. Enjoy your supper."

Livy mashed a small helping of vegetables in a saucer and let them cool.

"Grace do it," the child demanded.

"All right, but be careful." Livy concentrated on helping the child feed herself without making too much of a mess.

*Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!*

Livy jumped as loud knocking reverberated throughout the house.

“I wonder who that could be?” Mrs. Brooks folded her napkin.

“I’ll get it.” Livy stepped into the foyer. Resting her hand on the knob, she called out, “Who’s there?”

“Sheriff Carter, ma’am.”

Livy’s hands grew damp, but she resisted the urge to bolt. The sheriff didn’t have reason to question her or to haul her off to jail. Jesus had washed away her sins and made her a new creature. She wasn’t the person she’d been two years ago. She prayed every day she wouldn’t let Him down.

Some days were harder than others.

She took a deep breath and opened the door, a smile plastered on her face. “Good evening, Sheriff. May I help you?”

The aged sheriff touched his fingers to his hat. “Evening, ma’am. Sorry to bother you, but we’ve got a problem.”

“Yes?”

The sheriff glanced toward the street, and for the first time, Livy noticed a wagon and the silhouettes of several people.

Mrs. Brooks appeared behind her. “What is it, Livy?”

Sheriff Carter spoke up. “There’s been a wagon accident. A family passing through on the outskirts of town. Their horses bolted. I’m sad to say the driver—a man—was killed, leaving three children.”

Livy peered into the darkness, her heart going out to the little ones. “Are the children out there? Are they hurt?”

“They’re fine. Nary a scratch as far as we can tell. We thought the orphanage might take them.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Brooks took charge. “Bring them in out

of the cold. Livy, go fetch some blankets. The poor dears are probably frozen with cold and fear.”

Livy ran, her mind flying as fast as her feet. Less than an hour before, they'd prayed for help to feed the children already in their care. How could they manage three more? Of course they couldn't turn them away. They'd never do that. But would she be forced to do something drastic to feed them all?

*Lord, don't make me choose. I'm not strong enough.*

Heart heavy, she found three worn blankets and carried them downstairs.

Mrs. Brooks met her in the hallway. “They're in the kitchen. Mary's already taken the other children to the parlor.”

Her arms laden with the blankets, Livy followed Mrs. Brooks. Two girls huddled together on the bench at the table, their eyes wide and frightened. Poor things. If only she could take them in her arms and tell them everything would be all right. It must be. She'd beg in the streets before she'd let them all starve.

She searched the room for the third child. Her gaze landed on a tall, broad-shouldered man with a tiny dark-haired child nestled snugly inside his sheepskin coat. The man lifted his head, and Livy came face-to-face with Jake Russell. She saw a fierce protectiveness in his haunted eyes.

“I don't believe you've met my deputy, Jake Russell.” Sheriff Carter waved in Jake's direction.

Dread pooled in the pit of Livy's stomach, and for the space of a heartbeat, she stared.

“Pleased to meet you, Deputy Russell,” Mrs. Brooks said, her attention already on the two little girls at the table. “I'm Mrs. Brooks, and this is Livy O'Brien.”

## STEALING JAKE

Livy jerked her head in a stiff nod. For a few moments tonight she'd let her imagination run away with her, thinking maybe Jake Russell would call on her, that he might want to court her, that maybe he thought she was pretty.

And maybe he would. Maybe he did.

But it didn't matter. It *couldn't* matter.

Jake Russell was an officer of the law, and Livy had spent her entire life running from the law.