



Rachel and the Hired Gun

By Elaine Levine

My first book, Rachel and the Hired Gun, is being published by Kensington Books in January of 2009. This story won several competitive writing awards, the most notable of which was the prestigious RWA Golden Heart Award for the Best Long Historical unpublished romance manuscript in 2007.

Here's the first chapter...look for the book in your favorite bookstore in January 2009!

--Elaine (ellevine@elainelevine.com)

Elaine Levine is a wonderfully fresh and original voice in western romance. RACHEL AND THE HIRED GUN is full of fast-paced action and powerful emotions. I loved it!

-- Joan Johnston, Bestselling Author

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Chapter One

The Oregon Trail, Eastern Dakota Territory
April, 1867



Rachel Douglas shivered beneath the brittle cottonwood. The light was failing, but she could see the wolf's spiky fur. He watched her, head lowered, shoulder blades making peaks in his back. Though he was a dozen paces from her, she smelled his hot, fetid breath. She squeezed the stick she held until the bark pricked her palms.

"Ellie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whispered to the little girl in the tree above her. Whimpers were her answer. "You're going to have to get yourself back to the wagon train." More whimpers. "Do you hear me, Ellie?"

“Mm-hmm.”

“Do you know which way is west?”

“No. Miss Rachel, please don’t stay down there.” Rachel heard the catch in Ellie’s voice. “He’s gonna eat you. Please, ma’am, please come up here.”

“You’ll have the sun on your back in the morning and on your face in the afternoon,” Rachel continued, ignoring the child’s plea. “Stay close to the river. Are you listening to me, Ellie?”

“I can’t do it.” She was crying, now, in full-belly sobs that excited the wolf. He growled, his lips wrinkled into a snarl, baring white fangs. Rachel steeled herself to the heart-wrenching sound of Ellie’s fear as she considered the animal before her.

Wolves had often followed the wagon train, but Rachel had only seen them from a distance. Captain Norbeck said they wouldn’t attack people. What was wrong with this one? White foam dribbled from his long jaw, and his steps were unsteady, his strong legs wobbly. He coughed and shook his head, sending spittle everywhere before settling into a growl again.

“Don’t come out of that tree until morning,” Rachel warned Ellie. “If you can find my horse,” if he’s still alive, she thought to herself, “you can ride him back to the company. You’ll be fine. You’re no more than two days away from camp, if you follow the river and ride hard.”

Rachel heard riders coming in fast, horse hooves pounding. The end was near. Ellie felt it too. She screamed at the same time the wolf crouched, his muscles bunching to power his leap. He jumped forward, his massive, foamy mouth open, his fangs arching toward her.

Rachel extended the stick, pushing upward, eye squeezed shut. The wolf fell short of his target--her throat--ripping a length of her skirt from waist to hem instead. It was then she heard the dying echoes of a gunshot. The wolf lay unmoving at her feet, the faded wool of her skirt snagged in his fangs. A bullet hole in his side seeped blood and an arrow protruded from his neck.

An arrow.

Dear God--Indians! A new fear filled her, deeper and colder than ever before. Her head jerked up as she looked for the source of that arrow. The horses she’d heard a moment ago pulled up in front of her, their riders an Indian and a white man. At least, she assumed one was a white man--he wore cowboy clothes.

Maybe they hadn't seen Ellie yet. Maybe they weren't here for trouble. They had killed the wolf, after all.

The cowboy dismounted and let his reins hang loose in front of his horse. He didn't look like an Indian, but until now, she had never seen a living one, only pictures of them, so she had little to go on. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His long coat was unbuttoned and spread about him like dark wings as he came toward her. His black hair was cut unevenly and hung in jagged wisps about his tanned face. A few days' growth of beard shadowed a hard jaw. His eyes were a pale color, indistinct in the failing evening light--not the black or dark brown she expected of an Indian's eyes.

He looked her over, his gaze missing nothing, his face angry. She wished she wore her coat, but she'd given it to Ellie. The man looked at the dead wolf and said something over his shoulder to the Indian in a language Rachel didn't know.

"Don't move," he ordered her, holding up a hand. He looked up in the tree, where Ellie was crouching, whimpering. "You hurt?" he asked her. Ellie shook her head. "Then c'mon down." He reached up and plucked her from the branch.

"Miss Rachel!" Ellie cried, reaching out to her.

"No, Mister! Leave her alone." Rachel grabbed for the little girl. "Give her to me! Ellie!"

The cowboy pinned Rachel against the tree, his hand on her collarbone, his face full of dark intent as he turned sideways, keeping Ellie away from her. "I said don't move." He held the crying Ellie face down on his hip like a sack of flour. Rachel could only watch helplessly as he handed Ellie off to the Indian, who picked up the reins of the cowboy's horse and his own, then led both horses up the hill to the small campfire Rachel had left burning.

"Miss Rachel!" Ellie called again, reaching her arms out over the Indian's shoulder.

"Please--don't let him hurt her. She's only a little girl," Rachel pleaded.

The cowboy's stone-cold eyes turned on her. "He'll take care of her. He's gonna get some food going. She doesn't need to be here." He pulled the stick out of Rachel's hand and tossed it over by the wolf. Giving her a warning look, he shrugged out of his coat and hung it over a low branch, a little ways away. His vest soon followed. He lowered his suspenders and pulled his shirt free of his pants, unbuttoned the cuffs, then yanked it over his head.

Rachel glanced around, trying to find a way to run--a place to run to. He was big, and he was close. She wouldn't get far. And even if she did, what about the Indian by her campfire--how long could she elude the two of them?

A sick feeling boiled up in her belly as she looked at the man's smooth, naked chest, a wall of dark skin, full of muscles and rippling sinew. He was going to rape her. There was nothing she could do about it. She couldn't run. She couldn't fight--if she did, he might kill her. She had to stay alive for Ellie, had to get her back to the wagon train.

The man gave her a dark look as he leaned over to untie the thongs that held his holsters to his thighs. Rachel watched him, the evening air cold on her tear-streaked cheeks. He straightened and unbuckled his gun belt, laying it over his clothes on the branch. He took his boots and socks off and set them near the riverbank.

The Indian brought a blanket down, some clothes, and a leather pouch of something. He looked at Rachel and spoke in a low voice to the cowboy, then left.

The cowboy gathered up kindling of small sticks and dried grass and as much old wood from the riverbank as he could find. He laid it out in a large circle, then took a match from his coat and lit the pile. Flames spread hungrily over the dried wood and thin sticks and grass. Soon the fire roared. He added still more wood to it.

She watched him pick up the dead wolf and gingerly set it on the bonfire. The flames hissed as the fire consumed the wolf's fur. The sweet scent of wood smoke was soon fouled by the eye-watering smell of charred fur. He went to the river and rinsed his hands, rubbing at them with the soap he'd taken from the pouch. He walked back toward her, his gaze taking in every detail of her person.

"Now, we can do this the hard way or the easy way. But either way, you're gonna strip and get in that river."

She stared at the dark cowboy as panic fused her muscles. He wasn't some random man who happened upon her and Ellie; he'd been sent by her uncle. How else would he know to taunt her with the river? "No," she said, her voice a piny whisper.

"You are. That wolf was rabid. And you have its foam all over you. I've seen a man die of rabies--it's a hard death. It doesn't come on real fast after an encounter. You think you're gonna be okay. Then the fever comes. A week of agony as it chews up your mind, and you're dead. Were you bit?"

She looked at the wolf in the fire, his blackened face still contorted in a snarl. A shiver rippled down her spine. It made sense now, all the saliva, the wolf's weakness.

She sighed with relief. This stranger intended neither rape nor to carry out her uncle's mischief. She swiped at the tears on her cheeks. He was right. She had to bathe.
"Please, turn around."

"No. I'm not takin' chances--I'm not letting that spit out of my sight. Hand me your clothes, I'll burn 'em."

"You can't! What will I wear?"

"You don't have a change of clothes with you?"

"No." She'd left in a rush to go with the Hansons to find their daughter. She'd barely packed any supplies. The rest of what she owned was back at the wagon train with her mule.

"Then I guess you'll wear a goddamned blanket. Strip."

She glared at him, now grateful that she wasn't wearing her coat--at least it wouldn't be burned. Her hands shook as she reached behind her to unfasten her tunic's bow. She lowered her gaze, unable to look at him. She folded the apron front of her tunic over the skirt, then unfastened the skirt.

"Careful--" he coached. She knew her face turned fiery red as he watched her slip the skirt down over her petticoat. She handed it to him. He dropped it on the fire on top of the burning wolf. Light flared as the flames roared over the fabric. Her gaze flew to his face. He met her look, his expression dark, unreadable. She turned her back on him and began unfastening the buttons down the front of her shirt. She undid the cuffs, then pulled it off her shoulders, holding it out behind her. He took it, and again she heard the fire hiss when he dropped it on the flames. Then she felt him tug at the laces of her petticoat.

"No!" She whirled to face him.

"You're taking too long."

"I don't need your help," she ground out as she pulled the petticoat over her hips and handed it to him. The fire hissed. She untied the drawstring at the neckline of her chemise and drew the garment up over her drawers and camisole. She handed it to him. The fire hissed. Except for the thin cotton material of her camisole, drawers, stockings and boots, she was now naked. She'd abandoned corsets early in this trek--they were far too constraining for life on the trail. She regretted that decision now, preferring as many layers as possible between her skin and this man's cool gaze.

“That’s good enough.” He crouched down and undid the laces of her boots. No traces of saliva on the dusty leather, she noticed. They looked clean enough--surely he wouldn’t burn them? When he took hold of her calf, she stifled a gasp at the unfamiliar contact of a man’s hand on her leg. Worse, she had to touch his bare shoulder for balance as he freed first one foot, then the other. His skin was warm beneath her cold hand. The muscles of his back bunched and worked as he pulled her stockings down from her knees and set them with her boots off to the side. She watched him warily as he moved the blanket to a branch near the river, took up the soap bar, and waved her on to the water.

“Let me do this myself.” She hated the catch in her voice.

He shook his head. “That water’s barely above freezing. Once you’re in there, you’ll have about one minute before you go into shock. It’ll take that long for you just to breathe when the water hits you. There’s no way in hell you can do this yourself.”

“You’ll freeze, too. What’s the difference?”

“I’m bigger than you are--takes longer for the water to chill me. Let’s go. We’re gonna do this quick. I’ll dunk you, lather you up, dunk you again and get you outta there.” He held his hand out to her. “You gotta remember to breathe.”

Rachel ignored his hand and took a couple steps into the water, trying to hide her fear. The water was deeper than she thought. And bitter cold. He knocked her legs out from under her, pushing her to her knees in the water. The fast moving current washed over her. She had to fight her rising panic. He set his hand at her neck and forced her down under the water, then pulled her up quickly. It was cold, so cold. Her body locked up on her. She couldn’t inhale.

“Breathe, damn it, breathe!” he growled in her ear, crouching behind her. He dipped the soap in the water and rubbed it roughly over her stomach. Rachel sucked in a chest full of air, clinging to his thighs for there was nothing else to hold on to, nothing to keep her from being washed away except the man behind her. He rubbed the soap over her breasts and chest, her neck and arms, scrubbing at her hands. Lifting her with an arm around her ribs he scrubbed at her thighs and knees. Then he lathered her hair, rubbed her face, and dunked her again, quickly swishing the soap off her body and hair.

“Done!” He straightened and dragged her out of the water. Pulling the blanket from the branch, he wrapped her in it, covering everything but her eyes, then scooped up her stiff body. At last she sucked in a breath with a deep gasp. He looked down at her, his eyes pale in the dark shadow of his face.

“Rachel Douglas, I think you’re gonna live.”

She shut her eyes, too horrified to look at him. God, he was her uncle's man. How else could he know her? She'd come so far. She'd almost escaped them.

The cold air froze the exposed skin of her face and feet. Violent shivers racked her body. He carried her up the hill, depositing her on her bedroll in front of the fire. Anxious to find Ellie, she drew the blanket down, away from her head, unable to see much the way he'd wrapped her up.

"Hi, Miss Rachel." Ellie waved to Rachel from her seat on the Indian's knee. "This here's Blue Thunder," she said, pointing a thumb behind her.

Relieved that Ellie was unharmed, Rachel tried to give her a reassuring smile. The way her teeth were chattering, it was probably more a grimace. She studied the Indian, taking his measure. He wore a necklace of several strands of white beads, a peach calico shirt, and leather jacket and leggings. His face was clean-shaven, and a thin braid bordered both sides of his head. He'd taken more care with his appearance than the cowboy had. Was he one of the hostiles Captain Norbeck was always on the lookout for? He didn't seem very fierce. Ellie certainly appeared at ease around him. And he had prepared food for them. Ellie was scooping something out of a tin cup, eating with gusto. Stew. Rachel caught a whiff of it cooking over the campfire. And coffee. Her stomach growled.

"Was you taking a bath, Miss Rachel?" Ellie asked.

Rachel could only nod; her jaw wasn't working. She hadn't had a chance to talk to Ellie since finding her moments before the wolf caught up with them. The little four-year-old had wandered off from the wagon train nearly three days earlier, delirious with fever. She seemed much recovered, though shadows darkened her eyes, and her small face appeared drawn. There were a few scratches on her neck and cheek, and new tears in her dress, but nothing too terrible considering the adventure she'd been through.

"Blue Thunder said you stunk," Ellie said with a grin, holding her nose. Rachel looked at the Indian. So, he must speak English, she realized. He returned her look with a steady, expressionless regard.

"My ma can wash herself," Ellie said, her mouth full of stew.

Rachel groaned, thinking how this was going to spread like wildfire when they got back to the company.

The cowboy rejoined them then. Rachel was relieved to see he'd put his clothes back on, including a dry pair of trousers. He set his wet pants on a nearby boulder, then

started rustling through her saddlebags.

“Wh-what ar-re...” Her teeth were chattering so that it was hard to form words.

“I’m looking for something dry for you to put on. I can’t believe you came out here without any change of clothes. A shirt, somethin’. Here we go!” He held up her cotton nightgown. The wind caught the material, making it billow like a sail. Rachel felt hot blood flood her face. As cold as she was, it burned her skin. She cast a quick glance at Blue Thunder, horrified to see him looking at her nightgown.

“Damn. There’s enough fabric here to cover a wagon,” the cowboy commented. “If that don’t fix your sensibilities, well, I reckon I don’t know what will.”

“Th-that’s a n-nightgown.”

“So it is. And it just happens to be night, so I’m guessing it’s the right thing to wear. Get over here and put it on.”

Rachel shook her head. This was unbearable. Surely he wouldn’t make her change in front of everyone? The cowboy gave a long sigh, then went to his pack and took out a blanket from his bedroll. “Look, I’ll hold this blanket up. You’ll have all the privacy you need. Little Ellie, there, can holler if I peek.”

Rachel was still not moving. She was so cold, even if she wanted to she couldn’t have gotten her limbs to cooperate. She just wanted to lie down and sleep. The stubborn man came over and picked her up, taking her a little ways off from the fire. Rachel cast a nervous glance back at Blue Thunder as her bare feet hit the ground.

The cowboy followed her gaze. “You don’t have anything he hasn’t seen before.” Rachel’s gaze flew to his face. His hair was damp and hung heavily about his face and shoulders. This close to him, she could see thin wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

“Cept maybe he hasn’t seen anything quite so white--” he frowned.

“En-nough!” Rachel took the nightgown from his hands. He pulled up his blanket, blocking her from curious eyes, his own included as he turned his back to her. Rachel dropped her damp blanket, gasping as cold air enveloped her. Blast it all. She would have been fine in her underclothes. The blanket had absorbed most of the moisture. She peeled off her drawers and camisole, then jerked her nightgown over head, instantly feeling less cold. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad suggestion.

“Finished?”

“No!” Rachel shot a look over her shoulder to be sure she still had cover. Her fingers were stiff. She couldn’t button the front of her gown. It hung open well below her breasts.

“What’s takin’ so long?”

“I c-can’t b-b-button this-s--” Before she knew what was happening, the dry blanket descended on her shoulders, and the cowboy came around in front of her. His fingers made short work of the tiny buttons. His large body blocked her vision, so she stared at his chest, defeated. He buttoned every last button, right up to her chin. Rachel was shivering so much her jaw rattled. A cold draft came up her legs from her bare feet.

She drew the blanket tightly about herself, refusing to blush as the cowboy picked up the damp blanket and her undergarments to lay them out next to his pants. She turned toward the fire, her feet burning from the cold ground. She took a step. And another. Her body was so stiff, so heavy, it was hard to move. The fire wasn’t more than twenty feet away. Not far at all, but she wasn’t going to make it. Her knees started to give out. Suddenly, she was lifted against the cowboy’s strong chest.

“Wh-what’s wrong with m-me?” she whispered, all resistance gone out of her.

“You’re freezing.” He carried her to the campfire, setting her down on her bedroll.

“My ma can dress herself.” Ellie announced, coming over to kneel by Rachel. “I can dress myself, too, ‘cept’n’ I can’t tie my boots.”

Rachel folded her knees up in front of her, covering her feet and legs with the cowboy’s blanket and burying her face in her knees. This was not going to go over well back at camp. Not at all. The cowboy returned, carrying a white linen towel and a bottle of whiskey. He sat behind Rachel, spreading his legs out on either side of her. He rubbed her head with the towel until tears came to her eyes, then he milked the long wavy tendrils of her hair with slow, squeezing strokes.

“My daddy never dries my ma’s hair,” Ellie commented, watching the proceedings with avid interest.

Rachel stifled a groan. The company would expel her. Good Lord, what would she do then? She had to get to her father’s ranch. Surely they wouldn’t just leave her, out here, in this wilderness? Perhaps she could convince this man that her father would pay more to get her to the Crippled Horse than her uncle had paid to return her to Virginia.

His ministrations had eased into light touches against her hair and scalp. She held

herself in a tight ball, refusing to lean back against him, refusing to touch any more of him than was necessary in this compromising position. Blue Thunder handed him a bowl of stew and a cup of coffee. The cowboy leaned forward, his arms coming around in front of her as he poured a measure of whiskey into the coffee.

Rachel watched the flames through the bottle of amber liquid. That was the color of the cowboy's eyes, she realized. Amber.

“Who ar-re y-you?” she asked the man sitting behind her. “H-how d-do you know me?”

“The name's Sager. Your pa sent me for you.”

“My f-father! M-my father hi-hired you?” She twisted around to look at him. Not her uncle?

“Yep. Take a sip of this.” He held the steaming coffee to her lips.

She let the steam warm her face, then she took a sip. It was hot and burned all the way down her throat, but nothing had ever felt so divine.

“Lean back. We gotta get you warmed up.”

Rachel took the coffee, holding it close to her face as she leaned stiffly against his chest. Blue Thunder brought another blanket and spread it over the two of them. The comment he made in that strange language was met with stony silence from the man behind her.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing worth repeating. Eat some of this stew,” he ordered, shoving a spoonful in her mouth. He ate a spoonful, then fed her another. She realized she was starving. She had eaten very little for the last few days in the interest of conserving her supplies. She sipped her doctored coffee between spoonfuls of stew, beginning to feel warmed through and through. She relaxed a little, nestling into the warmth he offered. The blanket smelled like horse and dust, but she didn't mind. Her jaw had stopped rattling; she thought she could finally speak without stuttering.

“Better?” he asked, his mouth close to her ear. His voice, rough and velvety, touched her like a living thing. She nodded; her shiver this time had nothing to do with cold. “Good. Then suppose you tell me what the hell you're doing out here alone? No gun, no supplies. What the devil were you thinkin'?”

Not fair, Rachel thought. He'd lulled her into complacency, nestling her in the warm cocoon of the blanket and his body. She knew there was no answer that would satisfy him. There simply was no good answer. She had foolishly exposed herself to danger, but she wouldn't apologize; she'd saved Ellie's life--that had to be worth something.

"I went with the Hansons to find Ellie. She'd just wandered off that afternoon. She hadn't been gone more than a couple of hours. I didn't think I was going to be away long--I wasn't planning on being out almost three days."

"And what happened to the Hansons? They go back to the company?"

Rachel knew without looking that Ellie was still listening with rapt attention. She didn't want to talk about this in front of the little girl. Her parents had quit searching. They were frightened of the hostiles Captain Norbeck said were in the area. What choice did they really have? The wagon train captain said he would hold the company back for no more than two days. At dawn this morning, they turned back. They left their own child alone in the wilderness, abandoning her to the elements and a rabid wolf while they returned to the safety of the wagon train.

Rachel would never let Ellie know that. "They went back for supplies," she fibbed.

"And what of the woman your father had your uncle hire to chaperone you? Did she just let you go off with the Hansons?"

"I don't have a chaperone. I paid a fee to the Hansons to let me travel with them." Her uncle hadn't made her travel arrangements. In fact, she hoped he didn't know where she was.

"Are you riding in their wagon?"

Rachel shook her head. "I have my horse and a mule with my supplies. I was lucky to find a family willing to chaperone me. It's not acceptable for a woman to be in the company alone. There are...problems that causes."

"I'll just bet there are," he growled. Silence. She felt the muscles in his arms and thighs tighten around her. She sipped her coffee. "So anyone been giving you trouble? There anyone I need to deal with when we catch up to the train?"

"No." This trek had not been easy, but it was by no means the hardest thing she'd ever done. There was no need to tell the truth; no good would come of it. No good at all.

* * *

Sager eased the coffee cup from Rachel's hand, glad sleep shielded her from him. He pulled the blanket higher about her shoulders, breathing in the soft scent of her hair. He'd expected Old Jack's daughter to be the spitting image of her pa. Short, squat, and mean. The only feature she shared with him was her sky-blue eyes. She had long, palomino blonde hair with just a hint of a curl to it. She was average in height with curves that would make a Madam rich.

Every time he shut his eyes, he saw her stripping out of her clothes, her slim fingers working the buttons, bows and ties, piece by piece. He remembered the way her hands had gripped his thighs in the river, her back arching against him.

If dry clothes, food and blankets don't warm her, you'll have to make love to her. Blue Thunder had helpfully suggested, as if Sager hadn't already been thinking the same thing.

Except it wasn't love he intended to make.

He eased himself away from Rachel's warm body, settling her next to Ellie's sleeping form and adjusting the blankets over them. Blue Thunder was awake, watching him. Sager met his brother's look, trying to shutter his expression. He wasn't successful.

He shoved his hands into his coat pockets and walked away, heading down to the fire. Tossing more wood on the flames, he stared at the enormous, blackened carcass. If he and Blue Thunder had been just a few seconds later, Rachel would have been dead for sure.

Norbeck was going to pay for this. His irresponsibility had almost cost Sager his revenge.

"She is brave, for a white woman," Blue Thunder said as he came to stand at the rim of the fire. "She will be a good wife to you. I am pleased. I am glad I came to meet her with you."

Sager glanced over at his brother. "She's nothing to me."

"Not yet, perhaps."

"Not ever. She belongs to Logan."

Blue Thunder briefly put his hand on Sager's shoulder. "The mind cannot override the soul's intent, Brother."

Sager looked away, ignoring the cold ache that crept into his gut. Blue Thunder's predictions were never wrong. He was the last in a long line of shaman. He had known, way back, when his parents adopted Sager, what the cost would be. He had known, and he had been a brother to Sager anyway.

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That's the end of chapter one. Send an email to me at elvine@elainelevine.com to let me know what you thought of it! Check out my [website](#) for video clips and news about my upcoming releases!

Until next time...over and out!

Elaine Levine

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