

SILVER LIES

By Ann Parker

Synopsis

They came to Leadville, Colorado, with one thing in mind:

Get in. Get rich. Get out.

As 1879 is drawing to a close, this Rocky Mountain boom town has infected the world with silver fever. Investors, confidence men, merchants, miners . . . all flock to Leadville looking for the next strike. Women join the rush as well. A few aim to work their own claims, some intend to civilize the raw mining town, still others scheme to part the miners from their silver using liquor or female companionship.

Unfortunately for Joe Rose, a precious-metals assayer, death stakes its claim on him before he can get out of town. When Joe's trampled body is discovered behind the Silver Queen Saloon, saloon owner Inez Stannert finds herself dealing with more than shots of Taos Lightning. East Coast born and educated, Inez has a past that doesn't bear close scrutiny, including her elopement with "sportin' man" Mark Stannert and a brief flirtation with Kansas lawman Bat Masterson. The Stannerts came to Leadville and acquired the Silver Queen intending to "mine the miners." But Mark has disappeared, leaving Inez to run the saloon with the aid of Mark's gambling partner Abe Jackson, who is an ex-Union soldier and a man of color, and hired hand "Useless" Assenmacher, who left a job as doorman for local madam Cat DuBois in hopes of becoming a full-fledged bardog at the Silver Queen.

Everyone believes Joe's death is an unfortunate accident. But Inez wonders: Why was Joe—a loving husband and doting father—carrying a brass token good for "one free screw" at the exclusive parlor house of Denver madam Mattie Silks?

When Emma Rose—Joe's widow and Inez's best friend—asks Inez to straighten out Joe's business affairs, Inez reluctantly agrees. However, when Inez goes to Joe's assay office, she finds his assay laboratory torn apart and a page missing from his business ledger. Much to Abe Jackson's dismay, as Inez digs deeper into Joe's affairs she begins to doubt that Joe's death was an accident. Many locals appear to have motives for murder: Joe's assistant Nils Hansen, prospector Chet Donnelly, local madam Cat DuBois, silver baron Harry Gallagher—even city marshal Bart Hollis, a hired gun brought in by Gallagher to impose order in Leadville before his East Coast investors arrive. Inez's suspicions also fall on interim minister Reverend J.B. Sands, who arrived in town shortly before Joe's death. Smooth-talking, attractive, and charismatic, Reverend Sands speaks little of his past but seems worldly for a man of the cloth.

Reverend Sands becomes involved in the mystery surrounding Joe Rose's death, dropping hints to Inez that Joe did not deserve his sterling reputation. He gains her trust, and Inez finds his charm difficult to resist. As she continues searching for possible reasons for Joe's murder, the stakes increase. The assistant manager at Joe's bank gets his throat cut while trying to help Inez untangle Joe's business dealings. Finally, someone breaks into the Roses' home and brutally attacks Emma, leaving her unconscious and near death.

Inez's world unravels further when she finds a note in Emma's Bible hinting that Emma—a proper young matron in Leadville—was once a working girl for Denver madam Mattie Silks. When Inez discovers bogus banknotes hidden in a rocking horse belonging to the Roses' young son, she takes them to the bank only to learn that she, Abe, and her missing husband Mark are suspects in a counterfeiting ring. Bat Masterson arrives in town, and Inez learns that Sands has connections with the counterfeiting underworld. Inez feels she can't trust Sands or anyone else in Leadville. The answers, she decides, lie in Denver.

A meeting in Denver with Mattie Silks provides Inez with pieces to the puzzle of Joe Rose's death: Cat DuBois blackmailed Joe over gambling debts and Emma's past, forcing him to be a counterfeit courier. When Joe assayed prospector Chet Donnelly's Lady Luck claim and found it rich in silver, he thought he saw a way out of his difficulties. Joe presented false assay results to Cat DuBois, who had grubstaked Chet's claim, convincing her the claim was worthless. Then he bought his own stake in the Lady Luck. Cat was the killer on horseback, trampling Joe in a back alley after she discovered his double-dealing.

Inez returns to Leadville to learn that Abe Jackson is in jail, his bloody knife having been found at the scene of Emma's attack. Emma is unconscious in Leadville's hospital, unable to identify her attacker. Inez's only hope to clear her name and free Abe lies within Cat's parlor house. Inez gains entrance by disguising herself as a man. With the help of Angel, one of Cat's girls, she discovers a trunk of half-finished engravings and copper plates, plus a crate of counterfeit money. Useless, Inez's hired hand, surprises the

women and hauls them off to face Cat. Useless has been working for Cat DuBois all along; he not only spied on Inez, he attacked Emma and planted Abe's knife.

As a parting shot, Cat DuBois shows Inez a counterfeit bill of sale for the Silver Queen. With Mark gone, Abe under arrest, and Inez dead, she'll have ownership of the saloon. Following Cat's orders, Useless takes the two trussed-up women to the counterfeiting workshop outside of town, intending to kill them. Angel extracts a knife from Inez's boot, Inez trips Useless, and Angel finishes him off.

Reverend Sands, who has been working for silver baron Harry Gallagher to track down the counterfeiting ring, arrives with news of Cat's arrest and the destruction of the ring. Emma regains consciousness and identifies Useless as her attacker. Abe is released. Inez and Reverend Sands enter more intimate territory even though Mark Stannert's status—dead or alive—remains unknown.

Silver baron Harry Gallagher's investors arrive from the East and, impressed with Leadville and her prospects, invest heavily in Gallagher's mining interests. Gallagher also buys the Lady Luck from Chet Donnelly, widening his silver empire. However, this strategic move goes almost unnoticed, because the railroad, at last, is coming to Leadville.

The city will never be the same.