



Alison L. Randall

End of the Line

When Frank and I stepped through the post office doors, there was a crowd gathered, gawking at the new fixture on the wall like a chorus of wide-mouthed frogs. I had to get closer, and that was where being a girl that's scrawnier than a wire fence came in handy. Fortunately, Frank, my twin of eleven years, was just the same.

"Come on." I said, grabbing his hand, and we slid through the cracks between people until we spilled out in front.

Finally I got a good look. It was fixed to the plaster next to the postmaster's window, the place of honor usually reserved for the Wanted posters. Beady-eyed Zedekiah Smith, the bank robber, still hung there, but even he had been pushed aside for something more important.

A telephone. The first one in town.

"How's it work?" Noah Crawford called out. Noah's the best fix-it man around, and I could tell he was itching to get his fingers on those shiny knobs.

"Don't rightly know," answered the postmaster, and he tugged at his goatee as if it might tell him. "I do know the sound of your voice moves along wires strung on poles. It's sort of like the telegraph, only you hear words instead of dots and dashes."

"Ah," the crowd murmured, and I felt my own mouth move along.

I gazed at that gleaming wood box and something happened inside me. Something — I can only guess — that might be like falling in love. The

thought of talking into that box — of making my voice sail through wires in the sky — it took over my brain. I couldn't get it out.

"Frank," I whispered to my twin. "I have to use that telephone."

Five minutes later, Frank towed me up Main Street, toward home. "Liza — " he began, but I cut him off. We two thought so much alike, I had Frank's questions answered before he even asked.

"You're right," I said. "It costs five cents and I don't have it. But look." I pulled him over to the window of Poulson's Variety Store. "You see those?"

I pointed to a handful of shimmery rocks spread on black velvet. Some were a shiny gray shot through with gold streaks, others yellow as cheese curds. And one, clear and jagged, sat like an icicle, leftover from wintertime.

Frank's eyebrows screwed up and I could tell he wasn't following.

"If I found one of those, I bet they'd pay me for it." I explained.

With a shake of his head, Frank hooked two thumbs under his suspenders. "But Liza — "

I held up a hand — he couldn't tell me anything I didn't already know. "I've got that figured, too. I'll bet we could find some at North Creek — in the mine."

Frank shrugged, pretending not to care, but I knew better. He wanted to explore that old mine, same as me. Besides, Frank knew he had no choice. Twins stick together, especially scrawny ones, 'cause it takes two of us to make one of most people.

We spent half the morning on the dusty road to North Creek. Ma packed a lunch but said she couldn't understand walking all that way for rocks. She thought we were off to search the dry creek bed, and I didn't correct her.

I felt a bit guilty about fooling my ma, but whenever a pang hit, I conjured up the vision of my voice dancing along wires in the sky. It looked a lot like me, my voice did, only wearing a pink tutu and carrying a frilly umbrella.

We reached the old mine around noon. The hole in the sage-covered hill had been shored up by timbers. They were weathered and splintery, and looked like a picture frame around nothing.

I stepped inside, my arms turning to goose bumps from the chill. The air smelled of mildew and rotted beams, but also of horse sweat and wood smoke. Strange. That mine had sat empty for years.

Once my eyes got used to the dim, I gazed around, hoping to see shimmery rocks littering the floor, but dust was all I saw. Frank walked past me to where the walls narrowed, then disappeared around the curve. I followed fast.

I'd come up right behind Frank when, *ting*, his boot connected with metal. He stooped, grabbed, and when he stood, his palm held more than we'd hoped.

A gold coin. Frank's eyes nearly popped.

"Where did that come from?" I whispered and reached out a finger to touch.

Just then, voices sounded in the next cavern over: "Zed, hold it higher." Two men stepped through a gap in the far wall.

They weren't miners. I could tell that from one glance. They were dressed for riding, with leather chaps and spurs. One held saddlebags over a shoulder and had a mustache that hung past his jaw. The other wore a battered hat, his face hid in its shadow. When he raised his lantern, the light shone full on those beady eyes.

It was Zedekiah Smith, the bank robber.

I plastered myself to the wall, hoping to disappear into shadow. Frank hunched over, hiding his head in his sleeves. But for once, we weren't scrawny enough.

"Hey!" The mustached man pointed, then dropped his saddlebags and ran for us.

I tried to run, too, but met up with Frank's backside. The next thing I knew, Frank and I were on the ground, being hauled to our feet by a sharp-nailed hand.

"Lookee here, Zed," our captor cried, "a couple of spies."

"No," I said, brushing myself off. "We're not spies. We were looking for rocks to sell. There's a new telephone in town, and I just wanted to — Ow!"

The mustache man yanked my hair. "Does she always talk this much?" he asked Frank. Frank — the traitor — nodded.

"Looking for rocks, eh?" Mustache Man pried open Frank's fingers. The gold coin glowed warm in the lantern light. "Lookee here, Zed. Musta fallen out."

Zedekiah Smith strode over and picked the coin out of Frank's palm. "You don't want that, boy. That's dirty money."

"You made it that way," I told him. "You stole it."

Zedekiah Smith narrowed his eyes, turning them even beadier. "Caleb's right. You do talk a lot."

Five minutes later, Frank and I were back to back on the ground.

"That's what you get," Caleb said, as he tied our hands behind us.

"Shouldn't go poking your noses in bad places."

"It wouldn't be bad without you," I said, and Frank twitched.

"Sure it would," Caleb said. "Old mine's a dangerous place. You could've got caught in a cave-in, or bit by rattlers. Lucky you got us instead. He, he!" He tightened his knots then stood straight. "Someone will find you in a day or so. We'll be long gone by then. Right Zed?"

"That's right." Zedekiah Smith stood back, watching Caleb do the dirty work, his eyes shaded again.

"Just let us go," I begged. "We won't tell."

"Ha!" Caleb shouldered the saddlebags. "I'd like to see you keep your mouth still."

Zedekiah Smith took up the lantern and without looking back they passed through the opening in the rock wall. I listened until the jingle of their spurs faded.

We were alone in dark so thick it stopped up my nose. Caleb was right. This was a bad place. I wouldn't last a day. And worse, when Ma found my lifeless body, she'd know I was a liar.

I was about to sink into despair, but Frank distracted me with more twitching.

"There," he said. "I'm free."

I couldn't believe it when the ropes went slack. Jumping to my feet, I rubbed my wrists, trying to figure how Frank had managed to surprise me so. It wasn't that he'd worked his bony wrists out of Caleb's knots. That was plain Frank. The real surprise was that he'd come up with the idea without my help.

"Phew," I said, relief washing over me at my second chance at life. Ma wouldn't have to find my lifeless body after all. And as for the liar part, well, I'd work on that.

But first, I had another good deed in mind, the best way to begin my new life. I was about to turn in that outlaw.

I grabbed Frank's arm and towed him toward the exit. "We need to get to town and report Zedekiah Smith." Then something else occurred to me. "Think of the telephone calls I could make with that reward money."

'Liza — " Frank started up, but I knew where he was heading.

"Of course we'll split it."

We rounded the wall and ran smack into another, one with chaps and a hat. Zedekiah Smith was back. Before we could move, he had us trussed in his arms like two pigs for slaughter.

"Let go!" I cried, pounding his chest.

"Shh," he whispered. "Caleb thinks I forgot something."

I froze. "But . . ."

"I came back to cut you loose."

For once, I had a hard time filling my mouth with words.

"Now, you stay hidden until I get Caleb away," he whispered. "It won't do to have him telling people about my weak stomach."

"Are you feeling poorly?" Frank asked and Zedekiah Smith laughed.

"No, but I've got no stomach for hurting people." His arms went limp, releasing us, and he took a step back. "You'd better do your duty and report me. But take this in case that reward money's long in coming." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pale yellow rock studded with honey-colored crystals. "I saw it out in the dry creek bed. Might be worth a telephone call."

He dropped it into my hand and gave a wink. Then he turned and walked

out into the sunlight. Frank and I gawked, like a duet of wide-mouthed frogs.

We didn't make it to the Sheriff's office until the next morning. I reported Zedekiah Smith, just like I should, but for some reason, it didn't feel like a good deed anymore.

Our next stop was the Variety Store. Old Mr. Poulson's eyes kindled when he saw the crystal rock. Twenty-five cents went to Frank, who wasted it on candy. I saved mine for something monumental.

The post office wasn't crowded anymore. Still, there were a few lookers as I walked to the counter and laid down my nickel.

"I'd like to make a telephone call," I announced.

"How about that," the postmaster said, stroking his goatee. "You'll be the first. Who would you like to call?"

"Who?" I echoed. And just like that, my vision dissolved. Pink tutu and frilly umbrella, both drifted off like a dandelion in the wind. My voice couldn't dance along wires — it had no place to go. Nobody I knew had a telephone.

I turned to Frank and found him grinning.

"You saw it all along," I accused.

He shrugged. "I tried to tell you."

"You did?" I thought back to the day before and realized that maybe he had. I'd been too busy using my own mouth to notice.

After taking one last, loving look at the telephone, I turned away from the counter. Maybe candy would be a good use for that nickel after all.

"Frank," I said, pondering those thoughts he kept having without me, "next time you have something to say, speak up. I'll try hard to listen."

The poster of Zedekiah Smith seemed to nod at me as we passed.