



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary
of Angeline Reddy*



Behind the Masks

SUSAN PATRON

SCHOLASTIC INC. • NEW YORK

For Richard Jackson, with love



While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Angeline Reddy is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Patron, Susan.

Behind the masks : the diary of Angeline Reddy / Susan Patron. — 1st ed.
p. cm. — (Dear America)

Summary: In the “wild west” of an 1880s California gold-mining town, Angeline investigates the supposed murder of her father, a famous criminal lawyer, who she and her mother are certain is still alive. Includes historical notes and instructions for making a mask from muslin.

ISBN 978-0-545-30437-5

[1. Frontier and pioneer life—California—Fiction. 2. Robbers and outlaws—Fiction. 3. Diaries—Fiction. 4. Lawyers—Fiction. 5. Gold mines and mining—Fiction. 6. California—History—19th century—Fiction. 7. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.P27565Di 2012

[Fic]—dc23
2011023826

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 12 13 14 15 16

The text type was set in ITC Legacy Serif.

The display type was set in Rogers.

Book design by Kevin Callahan

Photo research by Amla Sanghvi

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, January 2012

Bodie, California



1880

Friday, June 4, 1880

Dear Diary,

I know I'm going to have to look in Papa's casket just to prove he's not in it. When we heard he got murdered, Momma took it pretty hard. I would have, too, if I'd believed it, which I did not. Stabbed in the back, the messenger said, on the stairway between Molinelli's Saloon and Papa's law office on the floor above. But Papa's much too smart to be dead.

This news was delivered tonight by a young clerk from the Wells Fargo & Co. office who said his name was Antoine Duval. He said "Madame" to Momma and "Miss Angeline" to me and explained that Wells Fargo was deeply saddened by our loss, which was also the town's. I think what he meant was that the town of Bodie would never have as great a lawyer — Papa had not once lost a case even though he often represented rogues and scoundrels that everyone else considered to be guilty. And he'd recovered a lot of the bank's loot stolen during stage robberies.

Mr. Duval regretted that the knife used by the

murderer had not been found and there were no other clues. Momma swayed a bit on her feet.

She had received him wearing a black veil to hide her inflamed cheek, caused by an infection from something lodged under her gum. Yesterday her cheek had swollen so much that it forced her eye to close.

Since she was in some distress, I took the paper Mr. Duval offered. “Look, Momma,” I said to her, pointing to the signature.

She frowned at it. “This doctor must have been almighty liquored up or else on a choppy ocean when he declared my husband officially dead,” she said, “since his name goes above and below the line and all the way off the page. Where was the doc when he signed it?”

“Molinelli’s,” Mr. Duval admitted. Everyone knew that of all the saloons in Bodie, Molinelli’s had the cheapest drink, the crookedest gambling, and the worst brawls. Papa got a lot of clients just by going downstairs and offering his services when things got particularly loud.

“Well, I guess that’s as good a place as any for

the doc to practice medicine,” Momma said as she ripped the paper in two and threw the pieces over her shoulder. “But I believe he made a mistake about this particular death.” When she gets mad, you don’t want to be the person in front of her — she’ll take it out on you for dead sure. I was glad that she had regained her spirits, but regretful that this young man was receiving the brunt of her fury. There are times when she embarrasses me nearly beyond toleration.

Since I didn’t believe Papa to be in the least bit dead, I felt free to observe our visitor. Mr. Duval had ink stains on his long fingers, a thin white scar from his forehead down through his left eyebrow, and a rare gentlemanly grace about him. Dark hair curled at his neck, side whiskers shadowed his jaw, and a sharp Adam’s apple jutted from his throat. His bearing was gallant and dashing. I imagined him as able to recite poetry while dancing a waltz, handle a dagger as well as a quill pen, strum a banjo or kill a rattler — what I mean is, he had the air of a man of numerous and dangerous talents — so he got my interest.

Antoine Duval bowed politely and tipped his Stetson to Momma. He turned to me and raised his handsome, tragic eyebrow. Then he did a most shocking thing that I confide here and only here in my secret diary. He winked at me, as if we were in a saloon and I were some sort of fancy woman. Yet it seemed more friendly than forward, and I returned his look with wide eyes and pink cheeks. As he backed out of the door, I wondered if the wink was a signal, not of any improper attitude toward me, but about Papa's supposed death.

Plenty of people had tried to kill Papa since he became a criminal lawyer. If someone finally succeeded, which is about as likely as church services in Molinelli's Saloon, I wanted proof of it.