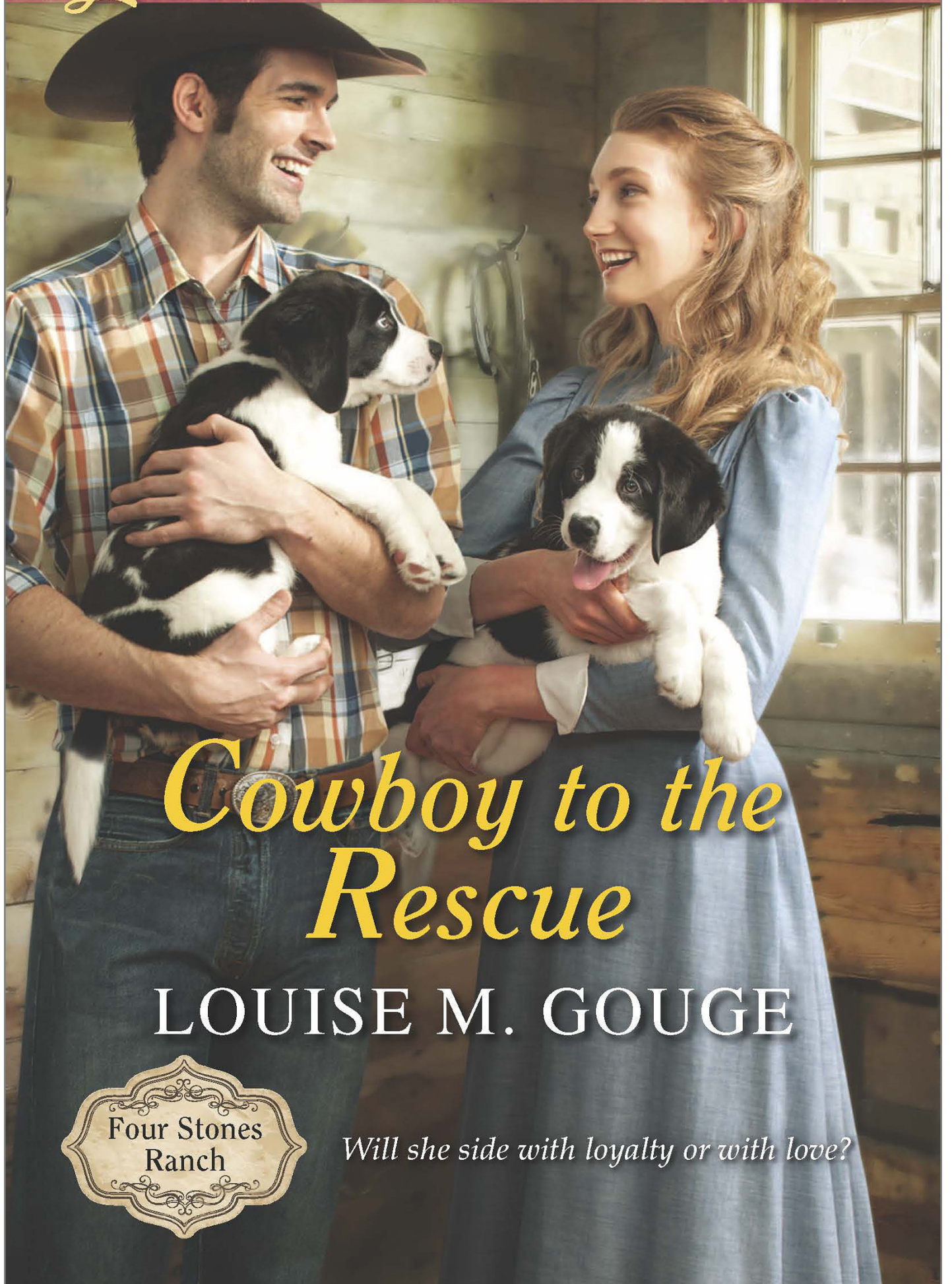


Love Inspired® HISTORICAL



Cowboy to the Rescue

LOUISE M. GOUGE



Will she side with loyalty or with love?

Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical

Louise M.

Cowboy to the Rescue

«HarperCollins»

M. L. G.

Cowboy to the Rescue / L. G. M. — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical)

CAPTIVATED BY THE COWBOY Though Georgia belle Susanna Anders agrees to accompany her father on a silver prospecting trip to Colorado, her heart belongs to the South. Then charming cowboy Nate Northam saves her father's life and gives them shelter at his ranch. Feeling gratitude is only natural, but falling for a Yankee? Both of their families would be outraged. While Susanna's father recovers at the Northam's home, Nate can't help being drawn to the sweet Southern beauty... and wishing he were free to think of courtship. That is until shocking revelations compel both Nate and Susanna to choose where their loyalties lie—fettered to the past or to the promise of a bold new love...
Four Stones Ranch: Love finds a home out West

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Four Stones Ranch: Love finds a home out West

“What do you think your town will be named?”

Nate shrugged one shoulder. “Don't have any idea.” He stopped and gazed down at her, his green eyes bright in the daylight. “Don't know how to say this in Spanish, but I'd like to call it ‘the place where I hope Susanna settles down.’”

She should answer with something saucy. Should laugh and walk away. Instead, she breathed out, “Oh, Nate, what a lovely thing to say.”

She had no idea how long they stood staring at each other. Yet she felt no embarrassment or awkwardness, just very much at home. Distant sounds reached her ears. Birds sang. Cattle bawled. Bess barked. None shattered the wrapped-in-cotton feeling that surrounded her. Against everything Mama had taught her, against her own sense of right and wrong, she longed for him to kiss her right here and now. She also hoped he would not. That was a bridge they must not cross, not now or ever.

LOUISE M. GOUGE

has been married to her husband, David, for forty-nine years. They have four children and eight grandchildren. Louise always had an active imagination, thinking up stories for her friends, classmates and family but seldom writing them down. At a friend's insistence, she finally began to type up her latest idea. Before trying to find a publisher, Louise returned to college, earning a BA in English/creative writing and a master's degree in liberal studies. She reworked that first novel based on what she had learned and sold it to a major Christian publisher. Louise then worked in television marketing for a short time before becoming a college English/humanities instructor. She has had fifteen novels published, several of which have earned multiple awards, including the Inspirational Reader's Choice Award and the Laurel Wreath Award. Please visit her website at blog.louisemgouge.com.

Cowboy to the Rescue

Louise M. Gouge



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Except the Lord build the house,
they labor in vain that build it.

—Psalms 127:1

This book is dedicated to the intrepid pioneers who settled the San Luis Valley of Colorado in the mid- to late 1800s. They could not have found a more beautiful place to make their homes than in this vast 7500 ft. high valley situated between the majestic Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountain ranges. It has been many years since I lived in the San Luis Valley, so my thanks go to Pam Williams of Hooper, Colorado, for her extensive on-site research on my behalf. With their permission, I named two of my characters after her and her husband, Charlie. These dear old friends are every bit as kind and wise as their namesakes. I also must thank my dear husband of forty-nine years, David Gouge (a U.S. Army veteran), for his help in character development, especially for my military characters.

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June 1878

Daddy wouldn't make it through another bitter-cold night. Susanna wasn't even sure how she'd managed not to freeze to death on this Colorado mountainside over the past ten or so hours. Maybe her anger had kept her alive, a real rage like some folks back home in Georgia still felt toward the North and all Yankees. For the first time in all her nineteen years, she understood firsthand how they felt.

The only trouble was that she had no idea whom to hate. Still, if God brought them out of this predicament, she would see to it that justice was meted out on whoever robbed Daddy, beat him almost to death and left him to die amid their scattered belongings. If Susanna hadn't been over the hill fetching water for their supper, she had no doubt those men would have done their worst to her, as well. Always the protector, Daddy had managed to tell her that when the villains had demanded to know who owned the female fripperies in the wagon, he'd told them his wife had been buried on the trail. Such a lie must have cost her truthful father dearly, but it had saved her from unknown horrors.

She placed a small log on the fire and used a poker to stir the flames she had somehow kept alive throughout the night. The sun had just begun to shed some light on La Veta Pass, so the day should soon warm up enough for her to make plans about how to get out of this mess. Daddy's fever didn't seem too high. Or maybe the cold just made his clammy skin seem cooler. No matter. She had to find a way to get them down into the San Luis Valley to a ranch house or town. One thing was sure. His silver prospecting would have to wait until he recovered.

A familiar ache smote Susanna's heart, but she quickly dismissed it. No use reminding herself or Daddy that if they hadn't left Georgia, they wouldn't be in this fix now. Oh, how she longed for her safe, comfortable home back in Marietta. All she had ever wanted was to marry a good Christian gentleman and raise a family in the hometown she loved so much, just as her parents had. Many of her friends had already married. Some had children. She couldn't think of a more satisfying life. But before Mama died last autumn, she'd made Susanna promise to take care of Daddy. She didn't regret her promise, but she was fairly certain Mama never dreamed he'd want to go prospecting out West. She'd had no choice but to pack up and go with him, deferring her own dreams for his and leaving her future to the Lord. After last night's attack, surely she would have no trouble convincing Daddy to return to their safe, happy life in Marietta.

"Belle." His raspy voice cut into Susanna's thoughts.

"No, dearest." She swallowed the lump in her throat. Several times in the night, he'd cried out for Mama. "It's me, Susanna."

"Ah, yes. Of course." Daddy's eyes cleared and seemed to focus on her. Then he grimaced in pain and clenched his teeth. After a few moments of clutching his ribs and writhing, during which Susanna dabbed his fevered forehead with a cloth, he shuddered as if to shove away his pain. "Young lady, have you made my morning coffee yet?"

His gruff, teasing tone would have encouraged her if she didn't know the terrible extent of his injuries. The thieving monsters who had attacked him seemed not to have left an inch of his body

unbeaten. She knew he had some broken bones, yet he was being brave for her, as he always was. Now she must somehow be brave for him.

“Coffee, is it? I guess I could manage that.” She tucked the woolen blankets around him, then gathered her rifle and bucket. “I’ll get some water and be back before you can whistle a chorus of ‘Dixie.’” She waited a moment for one of his quipped responses, but his eyes were closed and his breathing labored. Please, Lord, watch over him.

Trudging up the small, tree-covered rise, Susanna paused to stretch and shake off the stiffness that had crept into her limbs while she’d slept on the cold ground beside Daddy with only a few blankets for cover. She hadn’t been able to lift him into the prairie schooner, and she couldn’t leave him alone outside.

The thieves hadn’t simply stolen their horses, her favorite cast-iron pot and her silver hairbrush; they’d slashed the bedding and dumped out their flour and cornmeal in search of hidden money. Still, they’d found only the paper bills Daddy had kept in his wallet for just such encounters. Even though they’d destroyed just about everything in the wagon, the secret compartment below its floorboards remained secure, as did the gold coins sewn into her skirt. But she’d trade all that gold to be sure Daddy would survive his injuries.

Once over the small hill, she made her way down the shadowed slope to the snowy banks of the rushing creek. Imagine that, snow in June. Back home in Marietta, she reckoned folks were already feeling the summer heat.

Resting her rifle against an aspen, she anchored herself by gripping a budding green branch with one leather-gloved hand, then dipped the metal pail into the surging waters with the other. It filled in seconds, and she hoisted it back to the bank with little effort, snatched up her rifle and began her trek back to the campsite.

What would Mama think of her newfound strength, her growing muscles? Mama had always said that a lady should never be too strong or too capable when it came to physical labors. Such work was for men and servants. But these past months of crossing mountains, rivers and plains had put Susanna through trials harder than any Mama had ever faced.

The moment she thought it, she changed her mind. After all, when those wicked Yankees had gone and burned down the plantation house, Mama had risked her own life to save Susanna and her brother, Edward, Jr. After the war, she’d helped Daddy and Edward build a dry-goods business in Marietta. She’d become a respected society maven, greatly beloved because of her charitable works. Surely, all of that had been harder than walking across America as a pioneer, even considering the rattlesnakes and coyotes Susanna had encountered.

She sniffed back tears. Oh, how she missed Mama. But Mama always said dwelling on the past wouldn’t help. That was how she’d managed to go on after the war. Susanna would honor her memory by having that same cheerful attitude. Surely, after Daddy got his fill of searching for silver, he would take her back home to Marietta. But he would have to recover from his beating first. She forced down the fear and doubts that assailed her. Daddy would recover. She would take care of him, as she’d promised Mama.

She came over the hill, and her heart seemed to stop at the sight of a man kneeling over Daddy. Had the thieves come back to make sure he was dead? She set down her pail and lifted her rifle.

“Put your hands up and move away from him.” Her voice wavered, and fear hammered in her chest, so she leaned against the trunk of a giant evergreen to steady herself. “Do it now, mister, so I don’t have to shoot you.” She’d shot a coyote on the trail, but faced with killing a person, she wasn’t sure she could do it. But this villain didn’t have to know about her doubts.

Hands lifted, he stiffened and rose to his feet, turning slowly to face her. Lord, have mercy, how could a murdering thief be so well put together? Maybe twenty-three years old, he was tall and muscular and wore a broad-brimmed hat tilted back to reveal a tanned, clean-shaven complexion and pleasing features—the kind of face that always attracted the ladies and weakened their good sense.

But Mama hadn't raised a fool for a daughter. Even as Susanna's knees threatened to buckle, she gritted her teeth and considered what to do next, sparing a glance at Daddy before glaring again at the stranger. If he went for that gun at his side, would she be able to shoot him first?

"Put your gun down, daughter." Daddy croaked out a laugh and paid for it with a painful grimace. "This gentleman has come to help."

* * *

Nathaniel Northam wanted to laugh, but with that Winchester cocked and pointed at him, he didn't dare make the lady mad. My, she was a cute little thing, all bundled up in a man's bulky winter coat over her brown wool dress with blond curls peeking out from her straw bonnet. That turned-up nose just about couldn't get any higher, or those puckered lips look any more prim and prissy in her brave attempt to appear menacing. The gal had spunk, that was certain. Fortunately, the old man on the ground spoke out before she took that spunk too far and shot Nate.

Should he lift his hat in greeting or stay frozen with hands uplifted until her father's words got through to her? Lord, help me now. The Colonel will kill me if I get myself shot before I bring Mother's anniversary present home, not to mention my death would ruin that big anniversary shindig she's planning.

"To help?" The girl blinked those big blue eyes—at least they looked blue. He couldn't quite tell with her standing up there on that shady rise. To his relief, she lowered the gun, and those puckered lips spread into a pretty smile. "Oh, thank the Lord." Before he could offer to help, she hefted her bucket and hurried down the slope. "You can't imagine how I prayed all night long that the Lord would send help." She swept past him. "And here he is." She set down her bucket with a small splash and knelt beside the old man. "Oh, Daddy, it's going to be all right now. Help has come." She didn't seem to notice the absurdity of her own words.

Daddy? Once again, Nate withheld a grin. That genteel drawl in both of their voices and her way of addressing her father marked them as Southerners, as sure as the sun did shine. Oddly, a funny little tickle in his chest gave evidence that he found everything about the young lady entirely appealing, at least at first glance. Time would tell if there was more to her than beauty and spunk. That was, if they had more time together. Seeing the state her father was in, Nate was pretty certain they would. He'd never go off and leave a wounded man in the wilderness, not when he had the means to help.

"Ma'am?" He put his hands down but didn't doff his hat because she was facing her father and the gesture would be meaningless. "Maybe we ought to get your father up off the ground."

She looked up at him as if he were a two-headed heifer. Then her eyes widened with understanding. "Oh, mercy, yes. Of course."

"Zack." Nate called to his companion. "Get over here and help me."

The short, wiry cowhand jumped down from their low, canvas-covered wagon, secured their lead horses and hurried to Nate's side. "Yeah, boss?" Zack's gray hair stuck out in spikes from beneath his hat, and Nate wished he'd made the scruffy hand clean up a bit more before they started out this morning. But then he hadn't known they'd meet a lady on the trail.

"Let's get this man into his wagon." He wouldn't ask the young miss why she hadn't moved her father there, for it was obvious a little gal like her wouldn't be able to lift him, and the man was in no condition to move himself. But at least he was resting close enough to the brown prairie schooner for it to shield him from the wind, and he had plenty of blankets around him. "Hang on a minute. Let me check inside."

Moving aside the once-white canvas covering, he struggled to calm a belly roiling with anger over what he saw. Just about everything had been destroyed, from the smashed food crocks to the shattered water barrels to the broken trunks. Only a few tools and hardware remained hanging on the outside of the wagon box. Obviously, the thieves had been searching for money and no doubt had left this little family of homesteaders penniless. A strong sense of protectiveness swept through

Nate. God had sent him here and, like the Good Samaritan of Scripture, he would not refuse the assignment. If the Colonel got mad, Nate would just have to deal with him later.

He squatted beside the girl, his shoulder brushing hers, and a tiny tremor shot through him. He clamped down on such brutish sensations, which dishonored his mother and sister and all ladies. “Sir, if you’ll let me, I’ll divide my team, and we’ll pull your wagon down to the hotel in Alamosa. They can help you there. Would that be all right?”

He’d offer to take them to Fort Garland just down the road, but a Southerner probably wouldn’t like to recuperate among the Buffalo Soldiers stationed there, those soldiers being black and some of them former slaves. Nate ignored the pinch in his conscience suggesting his real motivation was to get better acquainted with this young lady.

“Obliged,” the man muttered, giving him a curt nod, but Nate took no offense. Clearly, the old fellow was in pain, and all of his responses would be brief.

“I’m Nate Northam, and this is Zack Wilson.” He tilted his head toward his cowhand.

The old man’s eyes widened, and his bruised jaw dropped. “Northam, you say?”

“Yessir.” Nate stood up. “You know the name?” His father, referred to as the Colonel even by his friends and some of his family, had a powerful reputation from the War Between the States. Maybe this man had met him on some battlefield.

He shook his head and grimaced, almost folding into himself. “No. No. Nothing.” He tried to extend his right hand, but it fell to his side. “Anders. Edward Anders.”

“Well, Mr. Anders—” Nate reached down and patted the limp hand “—you just give Zack and me a few minutes, and we’ll get things all fixed up.” Nate didn’t know how he managed to say all that without choking on the emotions welling up inside, especially with Miss Anders staring up at him as if he was some kind of hero. My, a man could get caught up in those blue eyes and that sweet smile. Those golden curls only added to her appeal. Nate cleared his throat and turned back to deal with the wagon.

Lord, what have You got me into this time?

* * *

Susanna forced her eyes away from Mr. Northam to focus on Daddy, her stomach twisting over his lie. This was so unlike Daddy. She understood why it wouldn’t be wise to let these strangers know they had money, but his insistence that they make this trip across the country under an assumed name continued to disturb her. And although Daddy had denied it, she could tell the man’s last name meant something to him. She wouldn’t press him to tell her, at least not until they were alone and maybe when he felt better.

“Daughter, where’s my coffee?” The artificial gruffness in his tone further encouraged Susanna. The earlier hopelessness he hadn’t quite been able to hide seemed to have disappeared with the arrival of these good men, that and the bright sun now warming the campsite.

While she poured water into the battered tin pot and checked the fire, her own mood remained wary. Not about the men, but about Daddy’s health. He always tried to put on a good front, so she would have to watch him carefully to keep him from overdoing.

“Miss?” Mr. Northam gave her an apologetic frown. “If it’s coffee you’re wanting, I have some in my wagon.”

She eyed him as his words sank in. Of course. Their coffee had been dumped on the ground along with their other supplies. Why hadn’t she realized it before? “That would be very kind of you, Mr. Northam.”

“Call me Nate, please. Out here, we younger folks mostly use first names.” He shrugged in an attractive way and gave her an appealing grin. “Of course, I won’t assume—”

“You may call me Susanna.” She could just hear Mama’s disapproving gasp at her agreement to such informality, especially when it was obvious from their speech that these men were Yankees. But this was not the South, where a strict code of manners ruled the day, accompanied by a strong

dose of hatred for all things Northern. She didn't doubt the people out west had a similar code, but maybe not quite as strict, as she'd noticed among the folks in the wagon train from St. Louis. Not once had she heard the war mentioned. Not once had any Southern traveler scowled at or refused to obey their Yankee wagon master, not even Daddy.

In any event, Mama had also taught her that a lady never treated other people as if she were better than they were, even if she was, for kindness never went out of fashion. Susanna hadn't yet figured out this cowboy's social status, but his older friend called him boss, and he had a commanding air about him, suggesting he was a landowner. Otherwise, she might have thought twice about granting him that first-name privilege. If he turned out not to be a gentleman, she could always withdraw her permission.

Nate returned from his wagon carrying a cast-iron kettle and coffeepot.

"Thank you." Susanna reached for the items, but he held them back.

"You look after your father." He gave her a brotherly wink. "I'll fix you some breakfast."

Her heart tilted into a playful mood. "Well, as I live and breathe." She shook her head in mock disbelief. "A man who cooks when there's a woman around."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled. "Out here, men have to learn to do a lot of things some folks call women's work." He placed the covered kettle over the fire and stirred up the flames. "Otherwise we'd starve and wear the same clothes for a month of Sundays."

In spite of herself, Susanna laughed, and it felt good clear down to her toes. For the first time since she'd returned from the creek the night before, she thought everything might indeed be all right.

"Of course," Nate continued, "you understand that the ladies sometimes have to take on men's work, too." He sent her another teasing wink. "Milking cows, plowing fields, breaking horses, that sort of thing. If you're out here to homestead, you have that to look forward to."

"Well, I never," she huffed, turning away to hide a grin. "The very idea." This was getting entirely too silly. She'd just met this man. But how could she stop when their teasing back and forth encouraged her so much? Should she tell Nate that Daddy was a prospector, not a homesteader?

Nate saved her from the dilemma. "Go look after your father." His soft tone and gentle touch on her arm made her pulse skip in an entirely different way. "I'll bring you something to eat before you know it."

Not trusting herself to answer, she went to tend Daddy, only to discover him watching the whole thing. He said nothing, and his mild expression, marred only by an occasional wince, held no censure. With his strong sense of discernment, he would warn her if her behavior was improper or if Nate did not appear to be a gentleman.

In a short while, Nate brought them each a tin cup of steaming coffee and then a tin plate of beans and bacon, with a wedge of corn bread on the side. Susanna had been eating beans all across the prairies and mountains of this wide land, but never had they tasted so good. Even Daddy grunted his approval. Susanna struggled not to eat too large a portion, but the desire to make up for missing last night's supper almost overwhelmed her. Fortunately, Mr. Northam—Nate—had busied himself dividing his team between the two wagons and had no idea how much she devoured.

In just over an hour, the horses were hitched up and ready to roll. Even the campsite had been cleaned up and the fire doused. Nate and Zack lifted Daddy into the cleaned-up schooner, and Susanna tucked him in. They made him as comfortable as possible on his canvas cot, supplementing the torn ticking and reclaimed straw with evergreen branches and providing pillows from their own bedrolls. Susanna climbed in beside him and settled back to endure the ride. In spite of the bumpy trail and an occasional groan from Daddy, she managed to drift off into a light slumber.

* * *

Once Nate's two-horse team got over the initial surprise of pulling the extra weight, they settled into a slow, steady pace. He wouldn't have tried this arrangement if they were on the east side of the mountain pass, because it took all four horses to make it up the many inclines. But the worst of the

trip was over, and the valley floor was just another two hundred yards or so downhill. If all went well, they could make half of the journey today and arrive home tomorrow.

Following behind the prairie schooner, he waved away the dust it stirred up, at last resorting to tying on a kerchief over his nose and mouth. Had he made the right decision to tell Zack to drive the schooner? If he were up there right now, maybe he could learn more about Susanna and her father. But the Colonel would be angry enough over this arrangement, so Nate had chosen to drive this specially rigged wagon with its irreplaceable cargo. If anything happened to Mother's anniversary gift, he would need to take the blame, not Zack. What was he thinking? If anything went wrong, the Colonel would blame him regardless of whose fault it was.

As the morning wore on, the sun beat down on Nate's back, so he shed his light woolen jacket. A quarter mile north of the trail, the Denver and Rio Grande train sped along on its daily run, sending up a stream of black smoke that draped behind the engine like mourning crepe.

Up ahead, Susanna poked her head out the back of the schooner and honored him with a wave and a smile. He didn't fault her for her response to his teasing at the campsite, even though they'd just met and hadn't really been properly introduced. Once again, if there was a fault, it was his. From the state her father was in, he figured they both needed all the encouragement they could get. He'd always found that humor lightened a person's load. Fortunately, just like his sister, Susanna cheered up when she was teased and gave back a bit of it herself. Besides, teasing her kept his thoughts in the right place.

He wouldn't put too much into her friendly waves and smiles. After all, she was likely motivated by gratitude. Of course, that didn't keep Nate from hoping to further their acquaintance. They would arrive in Alamosa by midmorning tomorrow and there part company. Somehow he had to figure out a way to have a nice long chat with the young lady to find out whether they had any interests in common. Once he got home, the Colonel would keep him busy for the rest of the summer, and he wouldn't risk his father's anger by coming back for a visit unless he had a good enough reason.

He blew out a sigh of frustration, and his kerchief fluttered in front of his face. Thoughts of his father's controlling ways never failed to ruin his day, and humor rarely worked to cheer him up. The Colonel had it in his mind that Nate would be marrying Maisie Eberly from the ranch next to theirs as soon as she turned eighteen. While Maisie was a nice girl, he'd never felt a desire to court her, nor had she shown any interest in him. The Colonel didn't seem to think that mattered, nor did any of Nate's other opinions.

A familiar anger stirred in his chest. One of these days he would find the courage to take a stand against his father's control, even if it meant he had to leave home and give up his share of the ranch. He didn't like the idea of leaving the land he'd worked so hard to cultivate, the community he'd helped to build, but a man could only take so much and still call himself a man. He would make his decision by mid-July, when the whole community would gather for his parents' anniversary party.

As if a boulder had come to rest inside him, setting that deadline sat heavy on his soul. But what other choice did he have?

[Chapter Two](#)

"What do you put into these beans to make them taste so good?" Taking a ladylike bite, Susanna leaned back against the wagon wheel to savor it. Nate had provided a stool for her so she didn't have to sit on the ground, making this meal all the more pleasant. With Daddy fed and taken care of, she could finally eat her own supper—beans again, but wonderfully mouthwatering.

"Now, don't go asking about my cooking, young lady." Seated on the ground, his back against a bedroll, his long legs stretched out in front of him, Nate spoke in that teasing tone so much like her brother's. "Angela—she's our cook and housekeeper—would tan my hide if I gave away any of her secrets."

"Humph." Susanna sniffed with a bit of artificial pique. "As if I didn't have a few secret recipes of my own." Not many, but enough to impress folks back home, especially at church dinners. Like

Nate's family, hers had employed a housekeeper who'd taught her some basic cooking skills, which had come in handy on this journey. But she wouldn't mention that they'd had servants, for that would reveal their financial status.

"I'm sure you have some very fine recipes." He chuckled and shoveled in another bite.

On the other side of the campfire, Zack whittled on a stick, his empty plate beside him. He stretched and yawned, then took himself off toward the horses grazing nearby.

Susanna busied herself with finishing her meal before sitting back to relax. After a long, hot afternoon of riding into the sun, they sat facing the trail they had just traversed, taking refuge on the shady side of the prairie schooner. Now as the sun went down behind them, it cast a deep purple hue over the eastern range bordering the San Luis Valley.

"What a wondrous sight," she murmured. "We have our beautiful Appalachian Mountains back home, but these are so much higher. They're truly awe-inspiring."

"They are indeed." Nate pointed his fork toward the tallest peak, which still wore a snowy white crown from last winter's snow. "That's Mount Blanca, and the whole eastern range is called Sangre de Cristo."

"Sangre de Cristo. That's Spanish, isn't it?"

"Yep. Just about every place around here has a Spanish name because Spaniards were the first Europeans to settle here." Nate's soft gaze toward the east bespoke a love of the scene. "Sangre de Cristo means blood of Christ, an allusion to that deep, rich color."

"Ah." Agreeable warmth filled her. She'd never dreamed she could enjoy the companionship of a Yankee man this way. But Nate hadn't said or done anything that was even slightly improper. "Those Spaniards were people of faith."

"At least the old padre who named these mountains was." He shot a curious glance her way. "And you?"

His question confused her for only a moment. "Oh, yes. My mama always said that after all the South suffered in the war, she didn't know how anyone could go on without the Lord." She instantly regretted bringing up the devastating conflict that had shaped her entire life. But Nate didn't bat an eye, so she hurried on. "I made my decision to follow Christ when I was nine years old, and He's never let me down." His understanding smile invited her to echo his question. "And you?"

"Yep, around that same age. Ten, actually." He stared off as if remembering. "When the Colonel came home safely from the war in answer to our prayers." A frown briefly creased his brow, though Susanna could not guess why. "Of course, lots of fathers came home badly wounded or didn't come home at all. But at ten, I was only concerned about my own. As time went on, praying and trusting God became as natural as breathing." He grunted out a laugh. "Now, don't get the idea I see myself as somebody special. Just the opposite, because I need the Lord's help all the time to do the right thing."

Susanna's heart warmed at his guileless confession. "I believe we all do, Nate." She'd watched Daddy's faith dip after Mama's death, but as they headed west, he seemed to grow more encouraged. Although she would never understand his urge to go digging for silver, anything that gave him a reason to live had her approval, even if she had to be dragged along on his quest. Even if she had to wait to see her own dreams come true. She supposed parents were always a mystery to their children. "Do you always call your father the Colonel?"

"Yep, just like everybody else." Nate grimaced. "If you ever meet him, you'll understand why."

"He's that intimidating?" Susanna knew many former military officers, Daddy included, but they were Southern gentlemen and never made a lady feel uncomfortable. Maybe Northern officers didn't have the same good manners. They'd certainly treated the South badly.

"You could say that." Nate stood and took her empty plate, setting both of them in a metal pail.

"I'll wash the dishes." She rose and brushed dust and twigs from her skirt.

“Nope.” Nate held up a hand. “You go see to your father. Maybe you can light a lamp and read to him. I’m sure he’d like to have his mind on something other than...” He shrugged, a charming gesture that conveyed sympathy and understanding.

“Thank you. I’ll do that.” Tears stung Susanna’s eyes, but she managed to keep her voice steady. “We’ve been reading Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* on our journey. Fortunately, those thieves weren’t interested in stealing books. I’m sure hearing another chapter will take his mind off his pain.” How kind and thoughtful this man was. Not at all like the Yankee carpetbaggers she’d learned to distrust and avoid. But she quickly shut the door on the warm feelings trying to invade her heart. Mama would turn over in her grave if Susanna even considered finding a Yankee attractive.

“*Bleak House*. That’s a good book. My folks sent me back east for a year at Harvard, and that’s where I first read Dickens’s works.”

So Nate had an education and liked to read good books. Now she had something to discuss with him, something that would keep her thoughts off how handsome he was.

She climbed into the back of the wagon to find Daddy staring at her with a slight grin on his dear bruised face. Heat flooded her cheeks. Had he been listening through the canvas to her conversation with Nate? She searched her memory for anything that might have sounded improper but came up with a clear conscience. Why had she worried? Probably because Nate was a Yankee, and Daddy had always said nothing good ever came out of any Yankee. But here he lay with more mischief than censure in his eyes.

“What are you up to?” She would get the upper hand before he could say anything.

He chuckled, then coughed, then grimaced and groaned.

“Oh, dearest, don’t laugh.” She knelt beside him. “Zack said you probably have some broken ribs and should try not to laugh or cough.” She eased him up and gave him a drink of water from a canteen. “Would you like for me to read to you?”

He gave a brief nod. “First take this.” He handed her a wrinkled, sealed envelope from the broken remnants of their traveling desk.

“What on earth?” She accepted it only to discover its unusual weight. “Is this one of our gold pieces in here?”

“Shh.” He gently clasped her free hand and whispered, “Tomorrow when we reach that hotel, slip this to the manager—before Northam speaks to him, if you can. And don’t say anything about it to these cowboys.”

“What?” Her mind could conceive of no sensible reason for Daddy’s request.

“Shh!” He glanced toward the back opening of the wagon. “Just do as I ask, daughter.” He patted her hand. “Will you?”

Susanna swallowed hard. In all her born days, she’d never seen Daddy do anything dishonest. Back home in the dry-goods store, he’d always taken a loss rather than offend a customer. Surely, she could obey this simple order. “Yes, sir, I will.”

But an odd foreboding crept into her heart and kept her awake far into the night.

* * *

After breakfast the next morning, Nate and Zack hitched up the teams and prepared to head out. As he had several times a day since leaving Pueblo, Nate checked the cargo in his wagon, lifting a silent prayer that they could get it home without any difficulty. So far they’d managed, but they still had the river to cross.

He’d just replaced the canvas cover when Susanna approached and stared up at him with those pretty blue eyes. Without her coat, she appeared much thinner, the mark of most people who had crossed the prairies. This little gal could use a regular diet of steak and potatoes so she could put some meat on those bones.

“Would it be rude of me to ask what’s in your wagon?”

He couldn't imagine thinking she was rude. Nor could he imagine denying her any request. He loosened the ropes but paused before lifting the canvas covering. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Pretty much."

Her impish grin tickled his insides and made him chuckle. Whoa. He really needed to get a handle on these wayward feelings. "Well..." He drawled out the word. "I guess I'll trust you, anyway." He pulled the canvas back a few feet to reveal one of the four crates. "It's a gift for my mother. My folks will be celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and the whole community plans to take part in the festivities." Tucked around and between the crates were supplies that he'd bought to divert Mother's attention from the real purpose of his trip. "If the Colonel has any say about it, it'll be the biggest party ever given in the San Luis Valley."

Instead of being impressed, Susanna pursed her plump lips into a silly pout. "You're giving her wooden boxes?" She slid him a sideways glance. "Now, you know I'm going to ask what's inside them."

He laughed out loud. "All right, then, Miss Curious." For the first time in his life, he understood how Samson must have felt when Delilah kept wheedling him to learn the secret of his strength. "It's china. The Colonel had it imported from England." Imagining the joy Mother would feel when she received it come July, Nate felt a kick of anticipation. "Wedgwood," he added for effect, though why he was trying to impress Susanna, he didn't know. "Of course, Mother thinks her present is the new addition to the house."

The wonderment brightening her pretty face gave him the answer, for he had a hard time tamping down the strong urge to give her whatever she wanted. What was wrong with him? They'd just met yesterday. He didn't really know all that much about her. All he knew was that no other lady had ever affected him this way. Certainly not Maisie, who was more like a sister than someone he wanted to court. Not that he wanted to court Susanna, either. Until he settled some serious matters within himself, he couldn't in good conscience court anyone.

"Wedgwood china all the way from England." She breathed out the words in an awe-filled tone, and her blue eyes rounded with unabashed curiosity. "How on earth did you get it here?"

"Let me see, now. Across an ocean." He held up his hands and ticked off on his fingers the legs of the journey this valuable cargo had taken. "Around through the Gulf, up the Mississippi, then the Missouri River to Westport, Kansas. A freight company hauled it over the Santa Fe Trail to Pueblo. They were accompanied by replacement soldiers headed to New Mexico, courtesy of the Colonel's old army friends, so they arrived without incident." He paused to take a breath and to consider whether or not to tell her everything. She probably didn't need to know that the freight drivers had unloaded the cargo at the fort and had taken off for the gold fields outside Denver. Their desertion had meant the Colonel had to send Nate to bring the china home. It also heightened his father's already deep hatred of prospectors.

"And you met them in Pueblo." Susanna grasped the important parts of the story, meaning he didn't have to include the unpleasant side. "Well, Mr. Nate Northam, it remains to be seen whether your Colonel has that intimidating presence we spoke of last night, but I already like him for going to so much trouble to get his wife such a fine gift as this." Her approving smile further melted Nate's insides. "Tell me, how do you keep it from breaking?" She raised herself up on tiptoes and peered down into the wagon bed. "I see. The boxes are suspended on rope webbing." She reached in and pressed down on the ropes, testing their flexibility. "That must keep them from bouncing around as the wagon goes over bumps." She gave him another admiring glance. "Why, Mr. Northam, how extremely clever of you."

Nate lifted his chin and returned a playful smirk. "Clever indeed, if I do say so myself." Even the Colonel had been impressed by his invention. In truth, he'd given a nod and a grunt, the nearest thing to praise he ever dished out to Nate.

“No more compliments for you.” She wagged a finger at him and clucked like a scolding schoolmarm. “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

“Ouch. Guess I’d better repent of my pride.” He shuddered comically. “We aren’t safely home yet, and I sure don’t want any destruction to fall on Mother’s china.”

Sobering, she touched his hand, sending a pleasant spark up his arm. “I believe God cares about these things, Nate, so I’ll be praying all goes well for the rest of your journey.”

That promise refocused his emotions, and he placed a hand over hers. “I’ll pray the same for you, Susanna. Seems to me you’ve already had enough things go wrong.”

Her eyes brightened with moisture, and his heart warmed. He was doing the right thing to help her and her father, of that he felt certain.

Within two hours, they met their first test of those prayers when they reached the banks of the Rio Grande. Alamosa lay just across the shallow but rapidly flowing river, causing a mixture of emotions in Nate’s chest. Soon he would have to say goodbye to Susanna and her father, but first they all had to get across the wide waters. Both would be challenges.

“I don’t know, boss.” Zack gripped the reins to keep the restless horses from bolting into the water or shying away from it. “Looks like we might need help.”

“Maybe.” Standing beside the prairie schooner, Nate surveyed the scene. “Let’s use all four horses to get this wagon across. Then we can bring them back across for mine.” He didn’t like the idea of leaving the china unguarded, even though the other wagon would be in view at all times. But they had no choice.

“Can I help with anything?” Susanna poked her head through the front opening of the schooner and peered over Zack’s shoulder at Nate. Her gaze dropped to the river, and her eyes widened. “Oh, my. That must be the Rio Grande River. Not quite the Mississippi, but no easy crossing, I’d guess.”

“No, ma’am. It’s a good forty feet across these days because of runoff from the mountains.” Nate hated to think of the punishing ride her father would have if they took the usual mode of getting to the other side. “How is Mr. Anders doing?”

She disappeared behind the canvas for a moment, then reappeared. “He says not to mind him, just do whatever you have to do.” Her usually smooth forehead was creased with concern.

“What do you think?” He could at least give her a chance to decide.

“Do whatever you must.” A steely look narrowed her eyes and tightened her jaw. “That’s what our wagon master said more than once on the trip out here.”

Her courage continued to impress him. Leaving her behind would be all the more difficult in a couple of hours. Maybe he could make it easier with more teasing. “By the way, it’s just Rio Grande.”

“I beg your pardon?” Her cute little grin appeared.

“You said Rio Grande River. That’s like saying Big River River.”

She laughed in her musical, ladylike way. “Spanish, of course.”

“Yep.” He could see her mood growing lighter. “And if you really want to get it right, it’s Rio Grande del Norte.” He used his best Spanish inflections, as Angela had taught him. “Great River of the North.”

Susanna put the back of one hand against her forehead in a dramatic pose. “Mercy, mercy. How can little ol’ me evah learn all of that?” Her sweet drawl oozed over him like warm honey.

“Poor little thing.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “I have no idea.”

Zack coughed softly, shaking Nate loose from his foolish teasing.

“All right. Let’s get this done.”

He drove his wagon into the shade of some cottonwoods, then unhitched the two horses and joined them to the team in front of the schooner. Like old friends glad to be together again, the horses nickered and tossed their heads as much as their harnesses permitted.

Nate considered carrying Mr. Anders across the water on foot, but it wouldn't do for the old man to get wet, even in this hot weather. Instead, he instructed Susanna to cushion her father as best she could, then brace him for the crossing.

Taking the reins himself, with Zack beside him to help as needed, he circled the schooner around and away from the water to give the horses a running start. Then he slapped the reins and cried, "Hyah!"

His team didn't let him down. They gamely leaped into their harnesses, built up speed and plunged into the water, their momentum more than matching the current as they angled downriver to conquer the forty-foot expanse. The water covered the wagon's axles but did not breach the box. With a final lunge, the lead horses emerged from the river, then the second pair, at last pulling the wagon onto dry, solid ground. All four animals shook their manes and whinnied almost as if they'd enjoyed the bath.

But Nate had felt every rock and tree branch submerged under the water's surface; he'd heard every clatter of the contents of the prairie schooner, along with a yip or two from Susanna and her father. Now to go back and get his wagon. The prospect made his chest tighten with trepidation.

He'd conveyed Mother's china this far without mishap, but the Great River of the North might just put an end to that. He found it impossible to please the Colonel with his good, hard work, so there was no telling what his father would do if Nate let the china get damaged.

[Chapter Three](#)

Susanna's pulse finally slowed enough for her to step down from the prairie schooner. Before climbing out, she checked on Daddy, only to find he'd fared better on the crossing than she had because of the thick padding Nate had put in his bed. Shaking out her wobbly legs, she approached Nate and Zack, who were unhitching the horses so they could go back across for Nate's wagon.

A sudden protectiveness for Mrs. Northam's anniversary gift stirred within her. No matter that she'd never met the lady. If she'd reared this kind gentleman, Susanna already liked her.

"Surely, you don't plan to bring the china across the river that same way." She posted her fists at her waist for emphasis. "Every plate and cup and bowl will be broken." Maybe there was even some crystal glassware in the crates, and that most certainly would not survive no matter how well it was nestled into the straw packing.

Nate shoved his hat back, revealing the tan line on his forehead and giving him a charmingly boyish appearance. He looked down his straight, narrow nose at her. "I suppose you think I haven't thought of that." His tone held a hint of annoyance, but his green eyes held their usual teasing glint. "You have a better idea, Miss Smarty?"

"Humph." She crossed her arms and tapped one foot on the ground. "As a matter of fact, I do." Sliding her gaze northward along the river, she pointed toward the raised railroad trestle. "Have you ever heard of a little thing called a train?" She shook her head. "I can't imagine why you didn't just have the crates shipped that way over the mountains."

Now serious, Nate frowned. "The Colonel didn't trust them to show due care, especially over La Veta Pass. Sometimes trains jump track or run into fallen trees." His tone suggested he didn't quite agree with his father. "He didn't want to risk it."

At the mention of railroad tragedies, Susanna could think only of the stories she'd heard all her life. Sherman's army destroyed the Confederacy's entire rail line, digging up the tracks and wrapping them around trees, burning train stations and cutting telegraph wires. Maybe Colonel Northam participated in that same kind of destruction somewhere in the South. She shook off the memory and forced her thoughts to Mrs. Northam's certain appreciation of her husband's extraordinary gift. After all, Northern ladies hadn't participated in the war, and surely nice things meant as much to them as they did to Southern ladies.

"Maybe he wouldn't mind just for the crossing?" She lifted her eyebrows with the question and smiled at Nate.

He glanced between the bridge and her, and his Adam's apple bobbed. This man liked her, she could tell. But she wouldn't play with him, as she had some of the boys back home. Southern boys understood and even expected flirtation. Yankee boys might get the wrong idea if she behaved as she had back home, and so far their teasing had fallen short of real flirting.

"I wouldn't have you disobey your daddy, Nate, but isn't the most important thing getting the china safely to your mother? That would honor both of them most of all, wouldn't it?"

He grinned in his boyish way. "Yes." He eyed Zack. "Let's unhitch Henry." He nodded toward one of the lead horses. "I'll ride up the tracks a ways and flag down the train to see if they'll carry it over for us."

"It'll cost you, boss."

Nate shrugged. "Broken china will cost me a lot more."

* * *

The moment Nate rode away, Susanna heard her father's faint call. Zack gave her a worried look as he helped her climb into the rear of the prairie schooner.

"I'm sure he's all right," she whispered as she gave the cowboy a nod of appreciation. Then she ducked inside. "Yes, Daddy?" She knelt beside him and brushed the back of her hand over his cheek. "You're hot. How do you feel?"

"Don't worry about me, sweet pea." A glint in his eye contradicted the set of his jaw. "While Northam's gone, you walk on up to that hotel and give that note to the desk clerk."

"What? Now?" She retrieved the envelope from beneath her tattered bedding. "Daddy, please tell me what this is all about."

"Now, daughter, you've never been one to question me." He fumed briefly. "Oh, very well. I'm not partial to being laid up in some hotel in a tent city where no one knows or cares about us. I want that proprietor to turn us away. Then Northam won't have any choice but to take us on to his place." He coughed, then held his ribs and groaned with pain. When he recovered, he gave her an apologetic grimace. "Out here in this wild country, it's hard for a man to be so helpless he can't even take care of his own daughter. I trust Northam. He'll do the right thing by us, he and his family."

Susanna studied him for several moments. He'd slept fitfully last night, and no doubt the river crossing had been hard on him. Maybe he wasn't in his right mind. But that didn't give her an excuse for disobeying him. Still, he had never asked her to do anything this close to lying in all her born days. Unless she counted his changing their last name and pretending to be poor. She still hadn't reconciled herself to those ideas.

"Will you go?" He tried to sit up. "If you won't, I will."

"Shh." She gently pushed him back down. "You rest, dearest. I'll do as you asked." Her stomach tightening, she climbed out of the wagon and tied on her bonnet. "Zack, please tell Mr. Northam I'll be on up the road arranging tea and sandwiches for all of us." At least that part wouldn't be a lie.

* * *

Nate emerged from the hotel scratching his head over the manager's refusal to take in Mr. Anders. He thought everybody out here in the West knew that when decent folks suffered terrible losses, other good men needed to help them out. But Nate's offer of up-front payment and his promise to return in a day or two to check on them were rebuffed. Even mentioning his father had no effect because the man was new to the area and didn't know the Colonel's position in their burgeoning community to the west.

Granted, the one-story wooden hotel wasn't much to look at, but it was serviceable. New in late May when Nate and Zack had come through the tent city of Alamosa on their way to Pueblo, it already had a well-worn appearance. Like the other premade wooden structures lining the main street, the six-or seven-room establishment had been transported by train one room at a time and set up in haste. No doubt something more substantial would soon be needed to house the many travelers riding the newly laid Denver and Rio Grande railroad line, which would soon extend both south and west.

Nate glanced across the dusty, rutted street and snorted in disgust. Of course, they'd brought in a building for a saloon to keep the railroad workers happy. There would be none of that over in his as-yet-unnamed community. The Colonel always made it clear up front to everyone who came to his settlement that no liquor would ever be allowed there. Apparently, the founders of Alamosa didn't feel the same way. Even now in midmorning, several disreputable-looking men loitered outside the swinging doors, their posture indicating they'd already had a few drinks. Nate couldn't help but think Mr. Anders and Susanna would have been better off in Fort Garland, Buffalo Soldiers notwithstanding. But he couldn't take them back there now.

Nor could he put off delivering the bad news about the hotel to Mr. Anders. Peering into the back of the prairie schooner, he waited until his eyes adjusted to the dimness before speaking.

"Everything all right, Nate?" the old man croaked.

"Yes, sir. No, sir. I mean—" He couldn't manage to say the words. "Is Susanna back from getting her tea?" Foolish question. Obviously, she wasn't in the wagon. "Maybe I'd better go check on her."

"You do that, son." Mr. Anders lay back with a groan.

His belly twisting, Nate turned back to the hotel just as Susanna came up the street carrying a tray laden with a teapot and sandwiches.

"I finally found some refreshments at a cute little tent café down the road." She tilted her head prettily in that direction. "I brought enough for everybody." She held the tray out to Zack, who was eyeing the food like a hungry bear. "Help yourself."

"Much obliged, miss." He tore off one leather glove and snatched up a sandwich with his grimy paw. "A mighty welcome change from all them beans."

At the sight of his dirty hand, Nate cringed, but Susanna didn't seem to notice. Or chose to ignore it, as any lady would.

"Did they give us a room?" Her expression revealed a hint of conflict, almost as if she hoped they hadn't.

Once again, that feeling of protectiveness welled up inside Nate, and his concerns vanished. He knew what he had to do. "No, ma'am, but don't you worry your pretty head about it. It's just a few more hours to my ranch. We'll put you up until your father recuperates."

With some effort, he willed away his anxieties about the Colonel. Mother was hospitality itself, and she would more than make up for his father's reaction. If worse came to worst, Nate could always take the Colonel aside and point out that Susanna was the one who insisted he take the china over the river by train. Otherwise, Nate would tell him, he wouldn't have dared come home, because all the dishes would doubtless have been broken coming across the river's rough bottom in the fast-flowing current. That should convince the Colonel she and her father deserved some help.

For Nate's part, he was grateful for the Denver and Rio Grande engineer and conductor, who had been more than obliging. Once they'd learned the shipment was for the Colonel, they'd ordered their own men to give a hand. And once they'd learned it was imported china, the other men couldn't have been more careful. Seemed every one of them understood a man wanting to do something nice for his mother. When all was said and done, Nate couldn't have been more pleased, and it had only cost him ten dollars for the lot of them.

Nor could he say he was disappointed when the hotel manager turned Mr. Anders away. After all, Nate had wanted more time with Susanna. Now he had it. The Colonel might have ideas about him marrying Maisie Eberly, but he could never feel the attraction for his longtime friend that he already felt after only two days with Susanna.

* * *

As they resumed their journey, Susanna noticed how pleased Nate seemed. In spite of the brisk wind whipping up all kinds of dust, he'd left off his kerchief and kept smiling her way. It was plain

as the nose on his handsome face that he didn't mind his Good Samaritan role, and she kept thanking the Lord for his kindness.

She really shouldn't be hanging out the back of the wagon, but she couldn't help herself, even with all that dust threatening to choke her. Many weeks ago, she'd resigned herself to landscapes far different from the verdant fields and forests of Georgia. When they had viewed a large area of the San Luis Valley from the mountain pass, she had observed vast expanses of green and several broad lakes glistening in the sunlight. But the valley floor had some stretches of desertlike land, as well, and she wondered how anyone could expect to farm it successfully.

Thank the Lord that Daddy had chosen to be a prospector instead of a homesteader. He was far too old to till unbroken sod, and even his prospecting was more of a hobby than an occupation, at least in her mind. After all, they had enough money to live on. If they hit hard times, Edward would send more. Once Daddy was back on his feet, she'd let him have his fun searching for silver and gold for a little while. Let him find a silver nugget or two, and then she would persuade him to take her back home to Marietta.

Being in the company of a kind, compassionate, educated man like Nate reminded her of her yearning to find a good Southern gentleman to marry, someone with whom she could build a home and family in the hometown she loved so much, among the friends she'd known all her life. For now, however, she must set aside those longings and take care of Daddy. She whispered a prayer that the Lord would tell Mama she was keeping her promise.

At last the dust won out, and she pulled her head back inside the schooner and closed the flap. Daddy was bearing up quite well, although he still had moments of incoherence and slept fitfully when he did manage to sleep. She prayed there would be a doctor near Nate's ranch who could help him.

By midafternoon, they had reached a small settlement of several houses, some buildings and a white clapboard church with a high steeple. Nate had said they would take time to stretch their legs and water the horses before going on, and now he hurried to help Susanna out of the wagon.

"Shall we get a bite to eat?" He waved a hand toward another white clapboard building, this one with a sign over the door that read Williams's Café. "Those sandwiches didn't last me very long, and it's a few hours until supper at the ranch."

A sudden nervous flutter in Susanna's stomach extinguished her appetite. Supper at the ranch meant at last meeting that intimidating Union colonel. Would he still be fighting the war, as most Southerners were, if only with words? Habitual animosity filled her chest, but she wouldn't let on to Nate.

"Maybe a piece of pie, if they have some." She nodded her head toward the wagon. "I think it would be good for Daddy, too." As Nate tipped his hat and started toward the building, she touched his arm.

His eyes widened with apparent surprise as he turned back. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Do you suppose there's someplace where I could, um, well...?" She shook her brown skirt, and dust flew in every direction. "I would like to be a bit more presentable before I meet your mother." And especially your father. Maybe he would take more kindly to them if they didn't look so bedraggled.

"Now, don't worry about that." Nate grinned. "I'm sure she'll understand that you've been on the road." He glanced toward the building. "But I'll see what I can do."

Mrs. Williams, the café owner, could not have been more accommodating. It seemed that the Northam name held much more power in this unnamed settlement than it did in Alamosa. Miss Pam, as she asked to be called, had a permanent smile etched in the lines of her slender face. She appeared to be around fifty years old, and her warm brown eyes exuded maternal kindness as she invited Susanna into her own quarters at the back of the café.

"Charlie—he's my husband—he'll see what your pa needs." Miss Pam set a pitcher of warm water on her mahogany washstand. "You go ahead and clean up. Is that your fresh dress?"

“Yes, ma’am.” Susanna held up the one dress the thieves had managed to overlook in their destruction. They’d stolen her favorite pink calico, so this green print would have to do.

“It’s a pretty one.” Miss Pam gave Susanna a critical look up and down, her gaze stopping at her hair. “Do you have a brush?”

“No, ma’am.” She tried hard not to sigh, but a little huff escaped her. Almost everything she depended upon to make herself look presentable was gone or ruined.

Miss Pam gave her a sympathetic smile. She reached into her bureau drawer and retrieved a boar-hair brush with a tortoiseshell back, holding it out to Susanna. “You take my spare one.”

“Oh, my.” Her heart warmed at this woman’s generosity. While Susanna could afford to buy her own if she found a mercantile nearby, it seemed best to accept the brush and pay Miss Pam back later. “Thank you.”

While she helped Susanna brush her hair and fasten the back buttons on her dress, Miss Pam chatted about the big anniversary party coming up in July. “Out here, we’re always looking for something to celebrate, but this one is going to be special. Colonel and Mrs. Northam have done so much for this community, bringing in a preacher and building a church, just generally taking care of everybody. The Colonel says he has a doctor arriving next month. Too bad he’s not already here for your pa, but Charlie’s pretty good at tending injuries, being a former mountain man. You know how they have to be self-sufficient living out in the mountains by themselves the way they do.”

Not giving Susanna a chance to comment, she went on to list various ways Nate’s parents had helped folks. Every word and tone suggested only respect and affection for the Northams, especially lauding the Colonel’s leadership, but that still did not diminish Susanna’s apprehensions about meeting the man.

In less than an hour, Susanna felt sufficiently refreshed, and Miss Pam’s husband had taken care of Daddy. Charlie offered his expert opinion that Daddy’s left leg was indeed broken, as were several of his ribs. He made a splint for the leg, wrapped torn sheets around Daddy’s ribs and gave him a dose of medicine to ease the pain. Nate told Susanna that while the community awaited the doctor’s arrival, Charlie was often called upon to help folks out.

After they had enjoyed some of Miss Pam’s delicious gooseberry pie with a splash of thick fresh cream over the top, they headed south. Unable to bear riding inside the schooner another minute, Susanna sat beside Zack on the driver’s bench watching the beautiful green landscape dotted with occasional farmhouses nestled among the trees.

In less than an hour, the two wagons passed under a majestic stone archway emblazoned with an intricate cattle brand and the name Four Stones Ranch. A long drive between two fenced pastures took them toward the two-story white ranch house built on a stone foundation. To one side were a giant red barn and numerous outbuildings. Susanna noticed the addition Nate had mentioned, also two-storied, on the north end of the main structure. A wide brook ran some fifty yards from the house, and young elm and cottonwood trees grew in clusters around the property.

Nostalgia swept through Susanna at the sight of the beautiful ranch. Back home, magnolias would be in bloom, and maybe a few spring gardenias would still be filling the air with their lovely perfume. Catching a whiff of roses, she searched without success for the source of the fragrance.

As if someone had blown a trumpet to announce their coming, several people poured forth from the barn, while a solitary man emerged from the house.

Nate jumped down from the wagon and gave instructions to his cowhands, who took charge of his wagon and drove it toward the barn. Then he turned toward the other man.

An older version of Nate, and just as tall as his son, the dark-haired Colonel exuded authority before he even spoke a word. Susanna could hardly breathe as she listened to Nate’s brief explanation for the presence of the prairie schooner and its inhabitants. All the while, the older man glared at her through narrowed eyes. No one had ever looked at her with such disdain, perhaps even hostility. Yet she didn’t dare reveal her own bitter feelings against this Union officer. Maybe it was just those

feelings speaking to her mind, but he looked like someone who would chase women and children from their plantation house and burn it to the ground.

“So I thought they would make a fine addition to our community, Colonel.” Nate sounded a little breathless, and from the way his right hand twitched, Susanna thought he might salute his formidable father. “Being homesteaders, that is.”

The Colonel walked to the back of the schooner and threw open the flap, then returned to face Nate, eyeing his son with obvious disgust. “What’s the matter with you, boy? These are no homesteaders. Where’s their furniture? Where are their clothes? All I see is a pickax and two gold pans. Can’t you tell a money-grubbing prospector when you see one?”

Chapter Four

Nate saw the hurt in Susanna’s eyes and the way she cringed almost as if she’d been slapped. He ground his teeth as protectiveness once again roared into his chest. He had long ago learned that arguing with the Colonel was a useless exercise, but he’d never tried to beat some sense into the man. His hands ceased their nervous twitching and bunched into involuntary fists as if they wanted to do that very thing. Only by hooking his thumbs over his gun belt did Nate manage to control the impulse. How would he ever learn to control his temper when his father continued to rile him this way?

“Nathaniel!” Mother bustled out of the house and down the front steps, her fuzzy brown hair streaked with flour and her white cotton apron stained with jam. “You’re home at last.”

At the sight of her, Nate’s anger softened, replaced by the joy her presence always brought him. Spreading his arms, he welcomed her eager embrace. “Mother.” He held her tight and savored the aroma of fresh-baked bread that clung to her like perfume. Her nicely rounded form reminded him of Susanna’s need to put on a few healthy pounds. But if the Colonel had his way, the Anders family wouldn’t be enjoying any steaks at the Four Stones Ranch.

Mother leaned back and brushed a flour-covered hand over his cheek. “Angela and I have been baking all day, but I didn’t know when to have her cook your favorite— Oh! What’s this?” She broke away and moved toward the prairie schooner. “Why, Nate, you’ve brought us a guest.” She glanced at the Colonel. “Frank, help this young lady down so we can be properly introduced.”

Nate gulped back a laugh. His father never tolerated so much as a grin when Mother took charge this way.

“Of course, my dear.” His face a mask, the Colonel stepped over to the wagon and held out his hand. “Miss?” Even his offer sounded like an order.

Susanna eyed him with confusion, then gave Nate a questioning look. He returned a short nod, hoping she would accept the Colonel’s curt invitation. With a graceful elegance Nate hadn’t known she possessed, she lifted her chin like a duchess, then rose and stepped to the edge of the driver’s box to place her hand in his father’s.

“Thank you, sir.” Her posture stiff, her voice coldly polite, she permitted him to assist her to the ground beside Mother.

Nate usually waited to be addressed by his father. This time, however, he approached the little group and said, “Mother, Colonel, may I present Miss Susanna Anders? Miss Anders, Colonel and Mrs. Northam.”

Her expression filled with warmth and hospitality, Mother gripped Susanna’s hands. “Welcome, Miss Anders. Do come in the house. Supper will be ready shortly, and I’m sure you would welcome a chance to—” She started to usher Susanna toward the house, but the young lady gently resisted and turned back toward the wagon.

“Thank you, ma’am, but my daddy requires my attention.”

“Oh.” Mother didn’t bat an eyelid. “Another guest. Is he ill?” She shot a look at the Colonel. “Frank, my dear, don’t just stand there. We must help these people.”

The Colonel also didn’t bat an eyelid. “Of course, my dear.” His expression unchanged, he once again walked to the back of the wagon. “Nate, get over here and help me.”

Nate had to turn away and regain his composure before obeying. Mother and the Colonel rarely did battle, but when they did, Mother never lost.

* * *

Susanna threw dignity aside and pulled down the tailgate so she could scramble into the back of the schooner. Finding Daddy sound asleep, she lifted a prayer of thanks he hadn't heard that awful Colonel's rude words. Daddy wasn't the slightest bit money-grubbing. He didn't need to be because he already had plenty of money. And what on earth was wrong with being a prospector? Suddenly, camping beside the road they had just traveled seemed a better idea than accepting the hospitality of this Yankee family.

"Dearest." She gently touched Daddy's cheek. "We're here at Nate's house." Only by thinking of it as Nate's could she consider going inside.

"Hmm?" Daddy raised a bruised hand and swept it over his eyes. That medicine Mr. Williams had given him had probably muddled his thinking. He inhaled deeply, then winced. "What?"

Susanna glanced at the three Northams, who were peering into the wagon with varied expressions. She decided to ignore the pity in Nate's eyes and the hostility in his father's, and concentrate on the warm concern beaming from Mrs. Northam's sweet, round face.

As if the older woman realized how the situation appeared from Susanna's viewpoint, she gave Nate a little shove. "Go on inside, son. Tell Angela to get your bed ready. We'll put Mr. Anders in your room. Then come back and help your father."

"Yes, ma'am." He disappeared, and the thumps of his hurried footsteps resounded through the canvas walls of the wagon.

Daddy caught sight of their hosts and tried to rise. "Help me up, daughter. I should greet our company."

A faint growl sounded in the Colonel's throat, and Susanna gulped back sharp words, while Mrs. Northam shushed her husband. As she helped Daddy to a sitting position, Susanna gave a little laugh that sounded a bit too high and a bit too nervous in her own ears. "Actually, dearest, we are the company."

As if he finally grasped the situation, Daddy's eyes cleared. "Ah, yes, of course." He nodded toward the Yankee couple.

Susanna briefly considered presenting Daddy to them, as would be proper, since they were the hosts, but something inside her refused to comply. After all, the prairie schooner was her and Daddy's home. "Daddy, may I present Mrs. Northam and Colonel Northam?"

If he noticed her breach of etiquette, he didn't indicate it. "How do, ma'am, sir?" He leaned into Susanna's shoulder. "Edward Anders."

"We're pleased to meet you, Mr. Anders," Mrs. Northam said. "You just rest a minute, and Nate will be back to help you inside." She looked up at her husband and raised one eyebrow.

The Colonel cleared his throat and pursed his lips. His wife elbowed him in the ribs. "So you met up with horse thieves, did you, Anders?"

Daddy coughed out a wry laugh and grimaced. "Indeed we did. Took most of our belongings and supplies and did their best not to leave a witness." He patted Susanna's hand. "The good Lord protected my daughter, as she was off fetching water when they came."

"Oh, my." Mrs. Northam's eyes reddened. "Praise the Lord."

"That I do, ma'am. That I do."

Slightly out of breath, Nate appeared once again beside his parents. "Angela was waiting by the door. She'll have my room ready by the time we get there."

"I don't want to put you out, Nate," Daddy said.

"Not at all, sir. I—" Mrs. Northam began.

"They won't be here long," the Colonel said. "I'm sure Anders is anxious to get on his way to the silver fields." He waved Nate toward the wagon. "Get on in there and help him out."

Instead of the instant obedience Susanna expected to see, Nate fisted his hands at his waist. “He’ll need to recuperate for quite a while before he goes anyplace. And they’ll need another team of horses.” His father started to respond, but Nate hurried on. “We need Mr. Anders to give us a good description of those horse thieves so we can put the word out to everybody. They’re a threat to the whole valley. If they get away with what they did, all sorts of criminals will think—”

“You think I don’t know that?” The Colonel silenced Nate with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Now, let’s get this done.”

Despite her outrage over the Colonel’s behavior, Susanna could not fail to be impressed by his and Nate’s strength as they lifted Daddy’s cot from the prairie schooner and carried it toward the house. Daddy was not a small man, so they set him down and summoned two men—she guessed they were called cowboys—to help carry the invalid up to the second floor of the house. Susanna didn’t have time to notice much as they entered and climbed the stairs, but what she did see impressed her with its beauty and grandeur, much like the mountains surrounding this high valley. While she wouldn’t call it a mansion, it certainly was an imposing domicile.

Within ten minutes, Daddy was resting in a charmingly masculine room, where guns and antlers decorated the walls, and pine furniture and woven rag rugs contributed to the rustic atmosphere. Above Nate’s handsome pine secretary, a glassed-in bookcase held several leather-bound books. Susanna didn’t take time to read the titles, but she longed to know what he read besides Dickens.

“And now for you, Miss Anders.” Mrs. Northam took Susanna’s arm and led her down the hallway to another bedroom very different from Nate’s. Frilly white curtains fluttered in the breeze wafting through the two windows. A pink-and-blue patchwork quilt covered the four-poster bed, and a blue velvet overstuffed chair sat nearby on a patch of carpet. The scent of roses filled the air, although none were in the cut-glass vase on the bedside table. “This is our daughter Rosamond’s room. When she returns from her friend’s house, she’ll be pleased to learn she has a roommate. Maisie’s coming with her to spend the night, but we can bring in an extra mattress.”

“You’re so very kind, ma’am.” Susanna’s eyes stung. Would these other girls truly welcome her? Would Rosamond be like her mother or more like her inhospitable father?

Sudden weariness filled her, and she eyed the feather bed with longing. As if reading Susanna’s mind, Mrs. Northam gave her a brief hug.

“Why don’t you lie down? I’ll send our girl Rita up to wake you when it’s time to eat.”

“How can we ever thank you?” And how could she think any evil of this sweet Yankee lady?

* * *

“I will speak to you in my office, Nate. Now.” The Colonel didn’t grant Mr. Anders so much as the courtesy of a parting word, but strode from the room toward the front staircase. The two cowhands followed after him.

Nate gritted his teeth as he watched his father leave. Pasting on a more pleasant expression, he turned to the bed where Mr. Anders lay, his gaze on Nate.

“You get some rest, sir.” Nate bent forward to adjust the quilt. “If you need anything—”

“You’ve done a lot, young man.” The look of approval in his eyes caused a stirring in Nate’s chest. How would it feel if his father looked at him that way? “You’re a true Good Samaritan, just like the Good Book says.”

Nate cleared his throat. He wanted to say aw, shucks, like his youngest brother might. Instead, he offered, “Don’t mention it, sir. I’m glad to help. We all are.”

Mr. Anders coughed out a laugh, then grimaced and clutched his ribs. “I wouldn’t say all, son, but I’ll let it go at that.”

Nate took his leave, shutting the door behind him and offering a prayer for the old man’s recovery. At the top of the stairs, he hesitated. The Colonel had ordered him down to his office, but Nate couldn’t just go off and leave Susanna. He walked to Rosamond’s room and tapped on the door just as Mother swung it open.

“Nate.” She reached up to give him another welcoming hug. “Oh, it’s so good to have you back home. I miss you so much when you make these long trips for supplies. I don’t know why your father can’t just send some of the hired men.” She cast a quick look at Susanna, and her eyebrows arched briefly. She opened and shut her mouth as though she had started to ask him something, then changed her mind. Instead, she patted his cheek. “I’m going downstairs to finish helping Angela and Rita with the baking. Then we’ll prepare supper. You may stand right here in the doorway and speak to Miss Anders for two minutes. Then I expect to hear your boots on the downstairs floor fifteen seconds after that.”

Nate pursed his lips to suppress a grin. “Mother, Susanna and I have been out on the trail together for two days, with her father looking on the whole time. You don’t have to worry about any improper behavior.”

“Susanna, is it?” Mother looked at her. “And I suppose you call him Nate?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Susanna returned a sweet smile. “That is, if you don’t mind.”

“Hmm.” Mother got a speculative gleam in her eyes. “No, dear, not at all.” She swept past Nate, wearing a soft grin and watching him the whole time as she headed for the back stairs that led to her kitchen.

All of a sudden, the kerchief around Nate’s neck seemed awfully tight. Mother often teased him about girls. It seemed to him that was what most mothers did to their sons. But she’d never said anything so bold in front of a young lady.

“I hope you don’t mind her.” He leaned against the doorjamb, crossed his arms and offered Susanna an apologetic grimace.

“Not at all.” She untied her bonnet and hung it on the back of Rosamond’s desk chair. “She’s very kind and hospitable.” Now serious, she leveled a steady gaze on him. “I’m afraid your father is not quite so pleased to have us as guests.” Biting her lower lip, she stared out the window. “Maybe we should go back to the café. It seems Mr. and Mrs. Williams would be—”

“No.” Nate spoke more sharply than he intended, and she blinked. “I mean, they’re the salt of the earth, but they run their place without help, so it might be a burden for them. We have servants and cowhands and a big family.” He rolled his hat in his hands. “Besides, I feel it’s my responsibility to see that your father gets back on his feet.” That thought had just come to him. Yet hadn’t the biblical Good Samaritan taken responsibility for the beaten merchant even after taking him to the inn? Nate knew he could do no less.

Susanna’s blue eyes were rimmed with tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

He barked out a laugh that didn’t sound quite as cheerful as he intended. “I do. We’re having steak for supper, and I can’t wait to bite into a big juicy one.”

Smiling again, she laughed, too. “You mean no beans?”

“Nathaniel Northam!” The Colonel’s voice thundered up the staircase.

Nate gave an artificial shudder. She didn’t need to know how much he was truly quaking inside over his father’s angry summons.

“That’s right. No beans.”

Her soft feminine laughter followed him all the way down the stairs, and he barely had time to wipe the grin off his face before stepping into the Colonel’s office for his scolding—undeserved but nonetheless expected.

Chapter Five

Susanna’s laughter died away, and with it her good feelings. Unless she’d missed something, Nate didn’t deserve to be yelled at or scolded like a mischievous boy. In her opinion, it was that Yankee colonel who needed a scolding, and she would be glad to give it to him. He had a noble, good-hearted son, and yet he was beating him down for no good reason.

She’d noticed the difference in Nate the minute they arrived at the ranch. For two days, she’d watched a capable, authoritative, helpful man take care of business. But the moment his father stepped

out the front door, Nate became an awkward servant trying without success to please an implacable master.

An uncomfortable sensation stirred in her stomach. Back home in Georgia, it wasn't just the carpetbaggers who mistreated people. She'd seen for herself how some Southerners treated their former slaves as if no war had happened, as if no Emancipation Proclamation had freed them. She was thankful Daddy and Mama got rid of the plantation and moved to town. There they didn't have to deal with such things as getting enough people to work in the cotton fields, work they'd always done as slaves but now had to be paid for. The house servants Susanna's parents had employed received a salary and were well treated. She'd never heard Daddy or Mama speak to a servant like the Colonel spoke to his own son. The Southern man she married would need to understand she expected no less for their servants.

Weariness once again overtook her. She untied and slipped off her walking boots and lay on the bed, but could not sleep. Despite Nate's being a Yankee, she must somehow find a way to pay him back for his kindness. Even knowing the trouble he would get into with his father, he had saved Daddy and her from untold grief, perhaps even death. That was worthy of a reward of some kind. But what could she do? The Northams were obviously wealthy ranchers, so he didn't need any material repayment. All she could do was pray and let the Lord work things out.

Her eyelids grew heavy, but she managed to whisper a prayer for Nate to make it through his current scolding without too much difficulty. Even if he was a Yankee...

* * *

"Did you check the entire shipment before you loaded it up?" The Colonel stood behind his large oak desk, bracing himself on his fists as he leaned forward in a threatening pose. With him standing, Nate didn't dare sit down, no matter how weary he was from his travels. "Every plate? Every cup?"

An unfamiliar thread of assurance wove briefly through Nate's chest, just before the more familiar anger roared up and closed his throat. Of course he'd checked the shipment before loading it onto the wagon. How stupid did the Colonel think he was that he would have the horses haul home a broken cargo? But a bitter retort never got him anyplace, so he said, "Yessir. Everything was in perfect condition." He made sure he spoke loudly, clearly and respectfully so his father wouldn't have further cause to yell.

Yet he couldn't leave it at that. "It was a good thing Miss Anders was with us."

Snorting, the Colonel straightened and stared at him as if surprised he would offer additional information without being asked.

Nate hurried on. "When we got to the river, she suggested that we take it over on the train. I mean, the water was fast, and when we took their wagon through first, we drove over a lot of rocks and branches. So I flagged down the train and—"

"And you needed someone else to suggest that obvious solution?"

Nate stepped back, and the heel of his boot hit a chair. Somehow he managed not to lose his balance. "W-well, you had it brought by wagon all the way from Westport because you didn't trust the trains, so, no, sir, I didn't think of it."

Again, the Colonel snorted out his disgust, although Nate had no idea what had him so riled. His father ran a hand across his jaw and sat in his leather-covered desk chair. "Now, about those people—"

"Yessir." Nate still wouldn't sit until invited to do so, but the ache in his legs didn't help his temper. "Those people. I know for a fact that you couldn't have driven on past them any more than I could." Where had he gotten the courage to say that? "And you would have been ashamed of me for not stopping to help."

The Colonel's eyes narrowed. "That didn't mean you had to bring them home to burden your mother. You should have left them in Alamosa."

Nate explained the situation at the hotel. “Even your name didn’t affect the proprietor.” He offered a sheepish grin.

The Colonel didn’t react. “Just make sure your mother doesn’t have extra work. And make sure they leave as soon as possible. That Anders fellow seems like the kind of lazy Southerner who will sit around expecting people to wait on him like his slaves used to do.”

Nate wouldn’t ask how he knew whether Anders had kept slaves. Not everyone in the South had. But his father often spoke disdainfully of Southerners, as if they were all the same, all except Reverend Thomas, the preacher he’d brought from Virginia.

The Colonel snatched up the packing list for the china and thrust it toward Nate. “The first time your mother goes out visiting, you check the shipment again to make sure nothing broke on the way from Pueblo. If it did, I may be able to get a replacement from San Francisco by the time our party rolls around.” He waved a dismissive hand. “I expect you back to work on the new addition before dawn tomorrow. Anders and his daughter may get to sit around, but you’re back on the job.”

Nate started to say he’d been on the job during this whole trip to Pueblo, but his father slapped the paper back on the desk, causing him to jump.

“And don’t be getting any ideas about that Anders girl. Maisie Eberly will turn eighteen in a few weeks, and George and I expect an announcement from the two of you right after her birthday.” The Colonel pulled out a ledger and opened it, scanning the pages as if prospecting for gold, effectively dismissing Nate.

He stared at the top of his father’s head. No, he would not be getting any ideas about the lovely Miss Susanna Anders, not her or anybody. He had too many things to work out in his life before taking on a wife or even a sweetheart, not the least of which was whether or not he would keep working like a slave for his father. And he certainly wouldn’t be proposing to Maisie. It wasn’t fair to either one of them. But George Eberly was as domineering as the Colonel, so avoiding marriage could turn out to be the hardest thing Nate—and Maisie—had ever done.

* * *

“I’m so grateful to you for sharing your room with me.” Rested after her nap, Susanna sat in the blue velvet bedroom chair while Rosamond Northam and her friend Maisie Eberly sat side by side on the bed. Dark-haired and green-eyed like her brother, Rosamond had her father’s lean face and her mother’s sweet smile. “I’ll try real hard not to put you out.” She’d never had to share a room and had no idea how this girl would react to such an intrusion.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. We’ll have a good time.” Rosamond nudged her friend. “Won’t we, Maisie?”

“You bet we will.” Maisie giggled, and her curly red hair bounced as she nodded her agreement. “Just like the Three Musketeers.” She leaned toward Susanna. “Have you read Dumas’s book?”

Caught up in the younger girl’s merriment, Susanna offered a more ladylike laugh. “Yes, but I’m a little rusty with my swordplay.” She searched her mind for specific scenes from the exciting tale. “And I doubt we’ll find any queens to rescue.”

“Maybe just a cowboy or two.” The girls giggled and bounced and put their heads together in a familiar way. Despite their differing coloring and features, they were like two peas in a pod.

Susanna’s heart warmed. What nice young ladies, although at sixteen and seventeen, they still had some growing up to do. She had no doubt Mrs. Northam was responsible for any measure of decorum her daughter displayed, but the way they had noisily run up the front staircase a while ago revealed that both of them also possessed a bit of Colorado wildness. Someone should establish a finishing school out here. They would probably find many students among ranchers’ daughters. Of course, Susanna would never correct them, for that in itself would be a dreadful breach of etiquette. All she could do was set an example of refined behavior.

A soft knock on the door interrupted their merriment, and a dark-eyed girl of perhaps fourteen poked her head in the door. “Miss Rosamond, Mrs. Northam requests your presence in the kitchen.”

“Thank you, Rita. Tell her we’ll be down soon. And bring us some hot water and towels so we can wash up.”

“Yes, miss.”

Rita disappeared, and the other two girls continued their discussion of musketeers and scheming cardinals, comparing them to the cowboys they knew. Although they mentioned several names, giggling all the while, not once did they say anything about Nate. Susanna couldn’t imagine why she had even thought about that. Clearly, Maisie was too young to be interested in him, at least romantically.

Those few moments revealed much to Susanna. While the Colonel was stern to the point of rudeness, his family was more lighthearted. Further, she was glad to see they treated their servants with courtesy. But she guessed that Rosamond, being the only daughter, was a little bit spoiled. Susanna had never failed to go immediately when her parents called. Indeed, she would gladly answer Mama’s summons once again.

She thrust away the grief that tried to engulf her. She couldn’t go back to those days, and until she could get Daddy back to Marietta, she must learn to live as a pioneer woman, whatever that meant. Although she was about two or three years older than these girls, she would open her heart and let them teach her. And maybe she could teach them something in return.

* * *

With Maisie on one side of him and Rosamond on the other, Nate could hardly enjoy his steak for all of their chatter and giggling. In contrast, Susanna sat across from him eating her supper with the grace of a duchess. Funny, that was the second time he’d thought of her in that way, yet he’d never even met a duchess. He must have read about one in a book. The thought made him grin. He’d enjoyed their brief chat about books while they were on the trail. Maybe they’d have a chance to do it again.

Guilt wove through him. The Colonel would probably do all he could to keep Nate away from Susanna. He glanced toward the end of the table. His father, watching him with an inscrutable look, bent his head toward Maisie. Nate groaned inwardly. She was a sweet little gal, but still just a child, despite being almost eighteen. How could the Colonel think she was ready for marriage? In Nate’s opinion, the way she and Rosamond acted was just plain silly, something that had never bothered him before, but now got on his nerves.

Rebellion kicked up inside him. He looked at Susanna again, determined to talk to her rather than Maisie, and his rebellion turned to—jealousy? Chatting with his middle brother, Rand, on one side and his youngest brother, Tolley, on the other, she hadn’t even glanced across the table at him except to give him a smile and a nod before the Colonel said grace and they all sat down.

Rand was yammering on about something, bragging, really. Until this moment, Nate hadn’t given a second thought to a match between the two of them. Even at twenty, his younger brother was about as grown-up as his sister and her friend. Yet here was Rand obviously trying to impress Susanna with some tale about how cattle brands were designed, of all things. As if a refined young lady wanted to hear about that. Yet she focused on him and responded with interest, even including Tolley in the conversation.

Tolley’s beaming response earned Susanna another surge of Nate’s admiration. Hardly anybody paid attention to fifteen-year-old Tolley, and the boy had begun to show signs of rebellion. Nate was worried but had no idea how to help him.

“But Nate wouldn’t want to do that, would you, Nate?” Maisie elbowed him in the ribs and laughed in her schoolgirl way.

“Uh, what?” He glanced at Rosamond, silently quizzing her with a raised eyebrow. Fortunately, she sat adjacent to Mother’s place at the end of the table nearest the kitchen door, so the Colonel couldn’t see his confusion.

“Of course he would.” Rosamond gave him a furtive wink, then leaned around him to address Maisie. “Who else would escort us up into the hills to get flowers for our flower beds?” She lifted her

coffee cup and saluted her friend. “Mother agrees with our idea. Columbinas will make a beautiful addition to our garden. Being native to Colorado, they sure won’t take as much work as Mother’s roses. We can fetch home enough to fill that new garden patch, and they’ll be all rooted and growing by the anniversary party.”

Her foolish chatter gave him all the information he needed, and he offered his sister a grateful nudge. “Girls, I hate to disappoint you, but I’m afraid the Colonel needs me here at the ranch. I can’t run off for a picnic when this house has a two-story addition I need to finish.” He shot a glance at his father, expecting his agreement, but the Colonel’s expression was surprisingly agreeable.

“I believe a day trip to acquire some columbinas for your mother would be a fine idea.” He served himself another helping of mashed potatoes and ladled on a large portion of beef gravy. “You three youngsters can go tomorrow. Ride horseback instead of taking a wagon, and you’ll be back in time for milking.” He dug into his supper as if that settled the matter.

The girls chirped like baby birds as they made plans for the upcoming day trip, but Nate could only stare across the table at Susanna in dismay. No wonder the Colonel gave his permission for such a trivial excursion, for it would force him into Maisie’s company. Nate should invite Susanna along, not only for good manners but also so he would have some intelligent conversation along the way. But if she didn’t know how to ride like his sister and Maisie, he’d be stuck with two chattering magpies for a whole day.

* * *

Susanna had learned in finishing school that a lady didn’t talk across the table but rather engaged in conversation with those seated beside her. In this case, it wasn’t too difficult. Rand was almost as funny as Nate, and he could spin a yarn nearly as well as her own brother back home. But the quieter Tolley touched her heart. His sad brown eyes made her think of a puppy pleading for approval, and when she turned her attention to him, he all but jumped around in happy little circles. A glance across the table from time to time gave her a new perspective on Nate. Those girls were making him dizzy with their back-and-forth chatter, but he took it in good spirits, another admirable quality.

She was surprised that Colonel Northam said very little beyond blessing the food and telling poor Nate that he had to take the girls out to pick flowers. If she wasn’t so worried about Daddy, she would hint that she’d like to go with them, as she hadn’t ridden a horse since they left Marietta four months ago. The girls had been quick to welcome her into their friendship, and she could almost see herself feeling at home here for as long as she had to stay in Colorado.

A glance at the Colonel canceled those thoughts. He was glowering at her as if she were some sort of bug that needed to be squashed. Her own uncharitable thoughts back toward him crowded out all of her good feelings. She and Daddy would never be welcomed even as temporary guests in this community. This Yankee colonel had not ceased to make that very clear to her.

Oh, she couldn’t wait for Daddy to get back on his feet so she could take him home where they belonged.

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