

Frontier Secrets

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LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Chapter One



Wyoming Territory, May 1888

This cannot be the grand frontier my uncle mentioned in his letters.

As Ellie Marshall stood inside the Fort Laramie general store, she peered through the grimy window. A mud-caked soldier rode through a sea of sludge, his horse's hooves making a sucking sound with every step. A passersby on foot plowed through the muck. Ellie looked down at herself. The same brownish-red that marked the military post also stained her violet traveling gown. Grimacing, she scrubbed at the half-dried blotches on her sleeve.

Soon this will be over. Not only the ordeal of filth, but the endless hours on mind-numbing trains, followed by a bone-jarring stagecoach ride from Cheyenne. At least she was on the last leg of her journey. She closed her eyes, trying to picture her uncle's description of his ranch—lush green grasses and rolling hills spread before majestic purple mountains. Compared to this barren wasteland, his home promised to be a haven. She couldn't wait to begin her new life there. For the

first few months, she planned to reacquaint herself with him, her closest family member. With his permission, she would practice medicine on his ranch. If not there, then someplace else. Regardless, grand new opportunities awaited—ones that would make all the difficulties of the journey worthwhile.

The shrill voice of Mrs. Rushton, a fellow passenger, punctured the low hum of conversation in the post. As the portly woman scolded her son, Ellie slipped out the door. She sought to escape them as well as a new passenger, Mr. Tesley, whom she had met the night before. Everyone within earshot knew the troubles the businessman had faced and recounted at top volume. His buggy had broken down and he was in a hurry to get to Casper. When he found his only travel option was the stagecoach, he let the whole post know the arrangement was not to his liking.

Standing by the store's entrance, Ellie surveyed the fort's rough log walls and primitive buildings. Beyond a massive barricade, tattered tepees dotted the hills. Try as she might, she couldn't reconcile the description of Fort Laramie she'd read about in travel brochures—an "oasis for travelers"—with the stark reality. Everywhere she looked, she saw filth, coarseness, degradation. The setting reminded her of the more unseemly areas of Chicago that she thought she had left behind.

A yell from across the yard startled her. Ellie turned to see the Deadwood stagecoach heading for the open gates. The heavy Concord vehicle with its eight-horse team creaked and jangled while travelers shouted farewells. By her count, fifteen men rode inside the coach or perched on top. Not only did the shotgun messenger tote a weapon, but so did a number of passengers. Because of outlaws?

Gulping, Ellie dabbed her forehead with gloved fingers. Though the stagecoach company downplayed the possibility of holdups, they made no promises of safe passage. Ahead of her awaited the less frequented road to Casper. Not only that, she'd be traveling in a smaller vehicle that looked like it had seen its best days a decade ago.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to more pleasant thoughts. Tonight, she hoped to reach Uncle Will's. Then this whole miserable journey would be a distant memory.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of her coach as it appeared from around the buildings. She squinted at the driver who held the horses to a walk. Who was he? Pete, the Irishman who'd brought them from Cheyenne, was not guiding the four-horse team. In his place sat a lean man, dressed in buckskins. Brown hair framed a tanned, clean-shaven face. He appeared to be more frontiersman than cowboy. Gazing ahead, he seemed oblivious to her gawking as he halted the stagecoach beside her.

While living back east, she had read about wild men who embraced their own values and boasted of no ties to society. Was he one of them? Her gaze strayed to the large, sheathed knife at his waist. He appeared to have stepped off an advertisement for Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.

When he looked her way, she gaped. He had the most startling blue eyes she had ever seen. They, and his impeccable tidiness, stood in stark contrast with his rough clothing and dangerous demeanor.

When his eyebrows rose, she felt her cheeks burn. "I—I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't mean to stare."

And yet, she had. Once again, Ellie failed to curb her natural curiosity, a fault that her father often censured.

"I just traveled from Chicago." She hoped her explanation excused her inquisitiveness. "And I've n-never before seen..."

A mountain man? Frontiersman? She could think of no polite description.

His lips twitched in what might be humor. Before he could answer, raised voices inside the general store drew her attention. Two men burst through the doorway. Pete, the redheaded driver, stalked out with Mr. Tesley trotting close behind.

"This arrangement is preposterous. Unacceptable." The weasel-like passenger threw one hand in the air.

What was Mr. Tesley's problem now? Last night, he had subjected Ellie and everyone within hearing about his importance. Because of his efforts—apparently his alone—Wyoming Territory would soon join the union.

The two men stopped next to Ellie.

Pete waved toward the stagecoach. "He's the best coach gun from Missouri to California. I need him for this leg of the trip."

"You can't be serious. Isn't anyone else available?"

"No. Rhett is it."

Rhett? Ellie peered at the man still in the driver's seat.

"I don't care what name he goes by," Mr. Tesley growled, "I recognized him the moment I saw him."

"From where?" Pete glowered. "What're you saying?"

"I always figured his kind would show up again. No telling what kind of skullduggery he's been up to."

"He's no outlaw."

“Y’sure?” Under his breath, the businessman muttered, “He’s got outlaw blood.”

Outlaw? Ellie stared up at the man in question. The stagecoach company would not have hired a criminal, would they? Unlikely. She adjusted the tie on her bonnet. No doubt Mr. Tesley was merely fabricating yet another reason to voice discontent.

Glancing her way, the businessman chomped his gray mustache with his lower teeth. He stepped closer to the driver. “Surely you are capable of handling any problem we may encounter. Without *this* man’s assistance.”

The Irishman’s chin jutted. “Oh, so now you’re *not* afraid of holdups.”

“I’m...of course, I...” Stammering, he waved in Ellie’s direction. “Mind you, it’s not for my sake I bring this to your attention.”

She stifled a snort.

Appearing pious, the businessman steepled his fingers. “We must think of the safety of all the passengers.”

Ellie clenched one fist. Was he trying to use her to justify his own bad behavior?

“I *am*.” Pete’s tone grew stern. “That’s why we need Rhett. He can shoot the eye out of a—” He stopped when he caught Ellie’s gaze. “Out of—of a knotty pine fence post.”

She pressed her lips together to hide a grin.

“I don’t care.” Mr. Tesley crossed his arms.

“You don’t seem to understand.” Pete drew himself up. “Ever since gold was discovered in the Black Hills, outlaws roam the trails. But with Rhett along, we’ve not had—”

“Do you think it wise to frighten the womenfolk with such talk?” Mr. Tesley fairly screeched.

“Excuse me.” Ellie raised her voice. The two men swiveled toward her. “Let it be clear that I have every confidence in our driver and his companion. I can only speak for myself, but this particular *womanfolk* isn’t frightened.”

Pete glowered at Mr. Tesley. “Frankly, I don’t think it’s the *women* who’re scared.”

As the businessman sputtered, the other two passengers—Mrs. Rushton and her son—emerged from the store. Eyes wide, the stout woman glanced between them. “Is something wrong?” Her hand clamped on the boy’s shoulder.

“Not at all, Mrs. Rushton.” Pete opened the coach’s door. “The sooner you get settled, the sooner we can be on our way. We’re already behind schedule.”

“I don’t care what you say, I am *not* riding with that—that...” Mr. Tesley pointed at Rhett and mumbled an inexcusable term.

Ellie’s ears buzzed.

“Suit yourself.” Pete straightened with a jerk. “Ladies?”

Chin quivering, Mrs. Rushton drew back and yanked her son closer.

Pete turned to her, hand extended. “Miss Elinor?”

Beyond him, she caught sight of Rhett’s narrowed eyes. Was Mr. Tesley’s accusations true about this man being an outlaw? Or at least related to one? Heart pounding, Ellie clenched her handbag.

Then she straightened her shoulders as she dismissed Mr. Tesley’s outrageous claim. Why drive a stagecoach when one could merely hold it up? She wasn’t going to condemn a man based on nothing more than Mr. Tesley’s suspicions and insinuations.

Gathering her skirts, she took Pete’s helping hand.

After she climbed aboard, she fought to speak in an even tone. "I saved the best seat for you, Mrs. Rushton. Does Nicholas want to sit by me or at your side?"

Likely the six-year-old would hang out the window despite his mother's protests. The only thing that had captured his attention for more than a few minutes was Ellie's watch. However, she allowed him to merely look at it since he had already broken his mother's brooch.

"I wanna sit by Miss Ellie." Nicholas wrenched from Mrs. Rushton's hold and bounded into the stagecoach. With obvious reluctance, she followed.

"I'm sending a telegram. To complain." Mr. Tesley shook his fist. "This very minute."

"Suit yourself." After securing the door, Pete climbed on top. In moments, Mr. Tesley's bags and trunk flew off the stagecoach and thudded to the boardwalk.

"You haven't heard the last of—"

"Hee-aw." Pete's call rang through the fort. With a lurch, they were on their way.

As the stagecoach settled into a rocking motion, Rhett braced his feet against the floorboards. They were well away from Fort Laramie and deep in the grassy plains. His fingers tightened around the company-issued shotgun as he kept a sharp lookout. In the many runs he'd made across Wyoming Territory, they'd experienced no trouble. Regardless, Rhett remained alert. Easy marks were what criminals preferred.

Outlaws like my father and uncles.

Nearly two decades ago, their band had terrorized this area. Thanks to the bravery of Rhett's mother, the two of them had escaped the group's evil clutches. Only after lawmen and locals had put the Walker Gang per-

manently out of business had it been safe for Rhett and his mother to return to the area.

Unfortunate that Mr. Tesley recognized him earlier that morning. Ma always claimed Rhett looked like his father. That fact might have been proven today.

“What ballad are ya in the mood for?” Pete’s question broke into his thoughts.

Rhett chuckled. “You pick. You know I like ’em all.”

Though gifted with a fine voice, Pete preferred to whistle instead of sing. His impressive repertoire ranged from ditties and theater tunes to the realistic cries of animals.

Pete began to hum, before he settled on a favorite and switched to whistling. His anchor mustache and beard bristled outwardly as the volume increased. Although he claimed the music calmed the horses, it also signaled that all was well.

The day promised to be neither too hot nor too cold, a pleasant change after recent rains. Though the short-cut Pete had chosen was less traveled, it lacked some of the hazards of the more frequented thoroughfare—dangerous deep ruts and washed-out areas that would slow their journey.

Rhett’s mind drifted from the road conditions to the pretty blonde inside the stagecoach. The cut of her plush wrap, embroidered skirt and fancy bonnet proved Miss Elinor, as Pete had called her, was a lady. She had traveled a fair piece, evidenced by the weariness on her face and by her dust-covered gown. Yet despite her fatigue, she had maintained her manners, speaking courteously to all, including him and Pete. Most passengers merely ignored them.

And she wasn’t afraid.

Miss Elinor had not seemed troubled by Tesley’s

comments. The slightest accusation that he was connected to outlaws would have had most passengers refusing to ride the stagecoach with him. Not her. She had studied him as though weighing truth from fiction. A pleasant change.

As the day grew warmer, Rhett peeled off his leather jacket. In his sleeveless shirt, he enjoyed the warmth on his arms. This was his seventh run from Fort Laramie to Casper. He had done other routes as well, but this was his favorite. Over the last three months, he had learned the road and the drill.

After intervals of heavy rain, the sun had baked the ground into hard ruts over the past several days. Occasionally the coach jerked when its wheels caught in a deep furrow, but Pete always succeeded in urging the horses to break free. Despite the occasional rough patch, the ride grew more pleasant as the afternoon peaked. As Rhett peered into the vast and brilliant blue sky, his heart swelled in gratefulness.

Thank You, Father God, for steady work. And for this friend named Pete.

Rhett considered how to pray about his encounter with Mr. Tesley. Although they'd never met before that very morning, the suspicion on Tesley's face was one Rhett was quick to recognize. Enough time had passed that few seemed to connect him to the outlaws of decades past—but one person raising a fuss could ruin his reputation for good. Had the businessman known his father? They would be of a similar age—if Rhett's father still lived.

The shuddering stagecoach snapped his attention back to the present. The momentary vibration ceased. That was no rut.