



PRAIRIE SONG

A NOVEL

MONA HODGSON

PRAIRIE SONG

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PRAIRIE SONG

HEARTS SEEKING HOME
BOOK 1

MONA HODGSON



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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*In loving memory of
William Bert Gansberg,
my earthly father.
A man who had an infectious
sense of adventure.
Thanks, Dad!*



Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and
of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be
thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with
thee whithersoever thou goest.

—JOSHUA 1:9

1866, April

Anna Goben's bedchamber spun about her.

Hattie Pemberton, a friend from the Saint Charles quilting circle, stood behind her at the dressing table, weaving Anna's golden-brown hair into a loose chignon. A cord of hair hung on either side of Anna's face while Hattie worked on the back. Anna's stomach felt like it had taken in boarders with fluttering wings, and seeing herself in the mirror above the table wasn't helping matters. Closing her eyes, she gripped the wrought-iron handles on the bench as if she could brace herself against the wave of nausea. Was her sudden decision to marry Boney the reason for the jitters, or did all women feel sick to their stomach and lightheaded directly before they wed?

She'd probably feel less nervous if more of her quilting circle friends had been able to come, especially the married ones. Emilie and Maren had planned to attend the wedding, but then Emilie's father fell ill that morning and Caroline needed Maren's help in the dry goods store.

A twist of hair bounced free, tickling Anna's ear as Hattie's tender hand rested on her shoulder. Anna opened her eyes and made herself look in the mirror. Concern etched her friend's blue-gray eyes.

Hattie tipped her head, causing the wide brim of her yellow hat to bobble. "You look as if you've seen an apparition. You're nearly as white as the frame on the mirror. Are you feeling well?"

Anna slowly turned her head to the right, then just as deliberately to the left, all the while looking into the Hattie's reflection in the mirror. No, she was not all right. Nothing had been right since her brother's death. The void Dedrick's absence left in the family was wrong, and she'd been unable to make anything right since the letter from the Department of War arrived nearly a year and a half ago. She patted the hand on her shoulder. Her friend also knew about the high cost of the war. Hattie's brother had come home last year spared, but her father had died in battle in '63.

"Being ill on your wedding day is a serious problem, don't you think?" Hattie arched her thick eyebrows. "I should let your mother know."

"No need to make a fuss."

"But if you're ill, you should postpone the ceremony."

Anna sighed. Hattie knew a lot about life for her sixteen years, but her mother had little in common with Anna's. Bette Pemberton may be willing to postpone a wedding due to the jitters, but Mutter would have no such intention. Mutter's heart was set on this wedding, her mind made up. Anna regretted the day she'd mentioned Boney's surprising proposal and her refusal.

No, she couldn't postpone the ceremony. The sitting room brimmed with guests. According to Hattie's earlier report, Boney had spiffed up splendidly for the occasion. His boss, Garrett Cowlshaw, captain of the wagon caravan, stood with Boney and the pastor. And three of Boney's fellow trail hands were part of the crowd who had come to see them wed. She couldn't disappoint them. Most of all, she couldn't disappoint Boney.

Drawing in a deep breath, Anna released her grip on the bench and pressed the silk ribbon at her waist. "I'm feeling a bit nervous, is all." She nearly laughed at the absurdity of her understatement. She was far more than a tad or a smidge nervous. She hadn't expected to marry so soon after her eighteenth birthday. Ever, really. Not since Dedrick died, not now that she had to look after Mutter and Großvater.

But marriage to Boney would give her a life apart from them. Somewhat, anyway.

"Anna?" Hattie's voice brought her back to reality. "You're nervous about the ceremony?"

Nervous about all of it. The wedding *and* the marriage. Nervous about the

caravan of wagons that would take her and her family away from Saint Charles. She was six when Mutter moved them to the riverside Missouri town to live with Großvater. For twelve years, she'd called Saint Charles her home. Keeping her reservations to herself, Anna smoothed the lace collar on her dress.

"If you're having—"

"I'll be fine. I'm sure it's customary for a bride-to-be to feel anxious." Was she trying to reassure Hattie or herself? Anna couldn't say with certainty.

"Customary, yes, but to the point of becoming ill?" Hattie lifted the loose curl at Anna's ear and returned to her task. "You and Boney have been good friends for many years."

Anna dipped her chin in a short nod. "Most of my way through school. The year before Boney left for the war, he played Joseph in the Christmas pageant, and I played Mary."

Hattie nodded, her hat brim bouncing again. "Friends, yes. But marriage, well, that's a lifelong commitment." She picked up the strands of hair she'd left hanging and began plaiting them.

Marriage hadn't been a lifelong commitment for Anna's parents. When she was a girl, her father had walked away and never looked back. Anna worried the seam in her muslin dress. Her friendship with Boney was largely based on the past, before the war. He had been her brother Dedrick's closest friend.

When Boney returned to Saint Charles a month ago with his condolences for the loss of her brother, she and Boney shared memories and commiserated over the damage the war had done. He witnessed its ill effects on her mother. In their subsequent visits, he said Anna deserved to have a better life, to be cared for instead of having to do all the caring. Then he up and proposed marriage.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Hattie asked.

Second thoughts? Third and fourth thoughts. She felt more like crawling under the bed than standing at Boney's side in front of the pastor. And the cacophony of voices from the other side of the door did nothing to bring her peace. Still, she couldn't change her mind now. Not with plans made and witnesses gathered. Not after the way she'd turned him down, then shown up at the men's camp with a change of mind.

Hattie tucked the tails of the loose braids into the chignon, then met Anna's gaze in the mirror. "Boney's return and proposal was a bit of a whirlwind.

And this wedding is quite sudden.” She lifted an eyebrow. “Are you marrying Boney for love?”

Swallowing the bitter lump in her throat, Anna nodded. Of course, she loved Boney. Everyone did. What wasn’t to love about him? He was generous and lighthearted. A hard worker. Not only was he a trail hand for the caravan of wagons that would depart Saint Charles next week, but he’d been helping Großvater ready their wagon for the trip. And Boney had loved Dedrick as a brother.

Anna’s breath caught. She loved Boney like a brother. Mutter’s prompting had influenced her, but it wasn’t what had persuaded her to change her mind and marry Boney. *Dedrick*. She’d been desperate to feel close to her brother. When she saw Boney standing in Großvater’s kitchen, she felt hope stir inside her. Boney helped her remember her brother.

But was that enough reason for her to marry him?

“Perhaps if you stood and rinsed your face.” Hattie glanced at the washstand in the corner.

Anna nodded. Her thoughts had been untangled. It was time she did the same for her insides. It would feel good to stretch a bit. She walked to the wooden stand. While Hattie tipped the pitcher and poured water into the bowl, Anna pulled her washcloth from its peg.

“Thank you.”

Hattie returned the pitcher to the shelf. “I only wish there was more I could do to help you.”

“You’ve helped more than you know.” More than Anna was ready to say. She still had a question to answer. Was having shared memories of her brother enough of a foundation on which to build a lifelong marriage?

Anna plunged the cloth into the cold water, then wrung out the excess. She’d just pressed the cool refreshment to her face when the door clicked open. She peered over the top of the cloth as Mutter swept into the room, swaying and swerving toward the washstand. Had she been drinking with guests in the house? A wave of heat burned Anna’s neck.

Dedrick may have been Anna’s motivation to accept Boney’s proposal, but Mutter had probably been his reason for asking. Boney thought he could save her from Mutter’s unquenchable grief.

Hattie closed the door and joined them at the bowl. "I just finished Anna's hair."

Mutter tugged at the wrinkled sleeves on her shirtwaist. "Anna, you've kept Mr. Hughes waiting long enough." The stench of whiskey hung in the air between them, taunting Anna.

Hattie sighed, her jaw tight. "Ma'am, Anna isn't feeling well."

Again ignoring Hattie, Mutter took the washcloth from Anna and dropped it into the bowl. The splash spotted Anna's pink skirt. "You're excited, is all."

"But this is happening so fast," Anna said. "I don't—"

"Nonsense." Mutter yanked a towel from its peg and studied her. "You still look a little pale, but a brisk walk across the continent will cure that." She pressed the towel into Anna's hand. "Now dry your face and follow me."

It wasn't how she looked that concerned Anna, but how she felt about this marriage. But that wasn't something Mutter cared to concern herself with.

Anna fell into line behind Mutter, taking slow steps toward the door. The jitters were threatening to topple her when she felt Hattie's hand on her arm.

With one hand on the doorknob, Mutter grabbed Anna's hand, pulling her arm from Hattie's grip. "This isn't the time for lollygagging."



Caleb Reger watched the bride's mother disappear through a side door. He stood beside a bookcase in the corner of the Gobens' sitting room, formulating a list of other things he'd rather be doing. Should be doing. So far, he'd come up with fifteen—inspecting wagons, checking the dry goods store for supplies, studying *Horn's Overland Guide*, washing his socks... One week from today, the Boones Lick Company of wagons would roll out of Saint Charles, headed west. He should've stayed back at camp with Isaac. He didn't need to be here. It wasn't as if the boss were getting hitched. But Garrett Cowlshaw and four of his five hands *were* here. And one of them was about to make a big mistake.

A man didn't take a job on a wagon train then get married right before the long, taxing journey. Boney Hughes had seemed so levelheaded until Miss

Goben showed up at their camp last Friday. The poor fellow hadn't been thinking clearly for days now. And neither was the boss, to be standing up for Boney in the ceremony. Made no sense at all.

The two men stood in front of the hearth, deep in conversation. It wasn't too late for Garrett to talk some sense into Boney. Caleb shook his head. His father would never have agreed to officiate the ceremony. Nor would Reverend Reger have conducted a wedding without a proper courtship and permission from the parents involved. Where he came from, folks didn't marry inside a house. Weddings were sacred rites, deserving nothing less than the sanctity of God's church. Nothing about this felt right.

"You been to a wedding before?" Tiny scrubbed his smooth cheek with a hand the size of a grizzly claw.

"My sister's."

"They take long?"

"They can. Especially if the bride's fussy."

"Your sister, was she fussy?"

Caleb shook his head. "Her ceremony was said and done in less than twenty minutes." Caleb glanced toward the closed door where he presumed the bride was readying herself. Thus far, Miss Goben wasn't quick about it. She had near to twelve folks stuffed into a room with seating for five, mostly men. Among them were Otto Goben, the bride's grandfather, Charles Pemberton, who had come with his sister, and Frank Marble, the other trail hand present. Three children crowded around Mrs. Brantenberg and a Mrs. Rafferty, who wasn't going on the caravan.

Another five minutes passed before the bride's mother reopened the side door and stepped into the room.

"Good." Tiny's attempt at a whisper was a wasted effort. "Looks like it'll be over soon."

Caleb nodded, hoping Tiny was right.

Hand in hand with her daughter, the older woman nodded toward Otto. He pulled his mandolin from a side table and started playing an upbeat rhythm. Then she turned expectantly to her daughter.

Without moving into the room, Miss Goben stared at Boney. The color drained from her face. She looked frozen in place as she motioned for Boney to come to her.

Boney left Garrett's side and walked to Miss Goben.

When the music stopped, the bride's mother swept faded brown hair from her face. "Keep playing, Vater."

When Otto resumed the melody, the mother jerked her attention back to the bride and groom. "This isn't—"

Boney raised his hand, one finger lifted. "We need a moment, ma'am."

"But—"

Ignoring the mother, Boney held his arm out to Miss Goben. When she laid her hand on his jacket sleeve, he escorted her out the front door. The bride's mother wasn't the only one left with wide eyes and a slack jaw. Caleb closed his mouth. Miss Hattie Pemberton took quick steps to her brother Charles's side.

Tiny attempted another whisper. "And this? What's this?"

"Unusual."

"Think she went cold on him?"

"May have." Miss Goben was proving to be as fickle as spring weather. She'd told Boney no one minute then shown up at camp with a change of mind, as if playing with a man's heart were an acceptable sport.

Five minutes later, Boney slipped in through the front door, his jacket open and his face long. Tugging his string tie loose, he spoke in whispers to Otto Goben. The bride's mother fought to get a word in edgewise until her father was finally able to silence her. Boney then spoke to Garrett and the pastor before facing the small crowd.

Pressing his felt hat to his chest, he cleared his throat. "Thank you all for coming to share in mine and Anna's...uh, merriment. While we regret any hardship we have caused you in joining us, Miss Goben and I have decided not to wed."

Murmurs swept across the room until a door creaked at the back of the house and the bride's mother marched out of the room.

Caleb followed Boney and the other hands out the front door.

When they reached the hitching rail, Frank slapped his misshapen felt hat on his thigh and looked at Boney. "When I saw you talkin' to her at that first wagon train meeting, I figured she was trouble. A young woman like that alone at a town meeting? Just ain't right."

Boney shook his head and took off toward camp. Poor fellow expected to

be wed and spending the night with his bride. Now, like the rest of them, he was stuck with a bunch of trail hands.

Caleb hadn't remembered seeing Anna Goben at the town meeting. But she was unforgettable now. And Frank was right—she was trouble. Boney was a good man. A better man than deserved having to do Miss Goben's dirty work, having to stand in front of everyone with his heart broken, or at the least his pride wounded. And now the young woman would be traveling west with them.

Unless she planned to back out of the trip too. Wouldn't hurt Caleb's feelings any, if she did.



Mutter stood in Anna's bedchamber, her fists planted on her hips and her face tight. "Everyone's gone. Including your grandfather."

Anna drew in a fortifying breath. "I didn't intend—"

"I never figured you for bein' so careless, Anna Mae. Men like Boney don't grow on trees like apples, you know."

"I'm only eighteen, Mutter. I hardly think my decision not to marry Boney means I will live my life as a spinster."

"Time passes faster than you think." A shadow crossed Mutter's face. "You just passed up your best chance to escape your life here."

Anna moistened her lips, giving herself time to think. What was she to say to that? "Boney and I are good friends, nothing more."

"Friendship is a stronger foundation for a marriage than most. If your father and I had been friends...well, things might have turned out differently." Shaking her head, Mutter stared at Anna with steely eyes. "You careless fool!" She spun toward the door and slammed it shut behind her.

Defying her weak knees, Anna stepped out of the pink dress and hung it in the wardrobe, her mind hanging on every memory of the past hour. When she'd said she couldn't go through with the ceremony, Boney said he understood her decision. He even looked a bit relieved when she said his proposal meant the world to her but it would be wrong for her to marry him. His gracious acceptance of her last-minute decision had settled her stomach. She'd felt peace about not getting married today.

Until Mutter stormed into the kitchen and followed her to the bedchamber.

And when Hattie refused to even attempt to convince Anna to go through with the ceremony, Mutter pitched a fit and sent Hattie home.

Anna pulled her worn calico dress from the wardrobe. A good and honorable man, Boney had seen to the announcement himself. He didn't make her face his buddies or her mother in front of the crowd.

Sighing, she slid the dress over her head. Nothing had changed for her, except that she'd added insult to injury and wasted everyone's time. Her only hope for seeing Mutter or Großvater stand on their own two feet again lay in her family's journey west. The adventure of being active, out in nature, and interacting with other people had to be what would make the difference for Mutter. To make her the strong one again. Anna couldn't bear seeing them withdraw from life—and from her—much longer.

Anna perched on the bench at the dressing table and laced her boots. Mutter was wrong—she hadn't made a stupid mistake calling off the wedding. She and Boney didn't love each other in a romantic way, and Hattie was right to remind her that it mattered. It wasn't fair to Boney that she marry him because of Dedrick, or because she was tired of being the only strong, responsible family member.

Pots and pans clanged on the other side of the wall. The bean kettle. Was that where Mutter had stashed her latest bottle? Her fingers trembling, Anna looped the buttons down the front of her dress. She pulled a shawl from the wardrobe then ventured out into the sitting room. The scent of working men lingered along with the extra chairs they'd gathered for the wedding guests. Mutter had apparently found her consolation and settled into her bed with it.

This was the last place Anna wanted to be. Großvater had the right idea in leaving the house.

Willing herself to step lightly, Anna slipped out the front door and down the steps. A chilling breeze alerted her to the clouds gathering across the Missouri River. She tugged her shawl tight and took quick steps down the hill toward Heinrich's Dry Goods and Grocery. She preferred to be the one who gave her quilting circle sisters an explanation of her last-minute decision.

When Emilie Heinrich, now Emilie McFarland, wasn't busy with her courses at Lindenwood Female College, she helped her father in his store. Maren Wainwright had also recently wed and given up her job at the store, but she'd agreed to help out during the rush to provision wagons for the grand

departure next week. Anna's widowed friend Caroline was also in Mr. Heinrich's employ. At least until next Tuesday, when she would join the westbound caravan, employed as a nanny for the Kamden family.

At the bottom of the hill, Anna turned right on Main Street and paused for a moment outside the millinery. She'd lost count of the number of hats she'd designed, created, and sold to the proprietor. That and candle sales to Mr. Heinrich had been what had kept her family afloat this past year and a half. She'd make sure to stop at the millinery another day this week to say good-bye. Right now, she was on a mission.

At the next corner, Anna crossed the street and walked the cobblestone sidewalk in front of the Old Capitol Building that housed Johann Heinrich's Dry Goods and Grocery. This time she had no candles to deliver and no shopping list to fulfill, only a desperate need to see the smiles of her friends.



When an ache gripped Garrett Cowlshaw's bad knee, he instinctively bent to rub his leg.

"You okay, Boss?" Caleb, one of his five trail hands, pushed his derby back on his head.

Garrett straightened. "Yeah. Thanks." The pain easing, he let out a long breath. "Leg just had to remind me it's there."

Caleb pulled a flour sack from the pile. "How many did you say we needed?"

Garrett glanced at the shopping list in his hand. "That and one more should do it. Came for blankets and beads, but, well, Boney still has other things on his mind, and I was coming to the store anyway."

After a quick nod, Caleb added the flour sack to the wheelbarrow they were using to collect supplies. "You suppose he'll be any less distracted, now that the wedding's been called off?"

Garrett shrugged. "I expect so. And he won't have a dithering wife to contend with."

Caleb opened his mouth to speak but looked past Garrett instead, his eyes widening.

"Pardon me?" The familiar voice tensed Garrett's shoulders.

How long had she been there? He hesitated to face her, but turned around anyway. The widow Caroline Milburn pinned him with a fiery gaze, her eyes as green as spring grass. She'd heard him. When he and Caleb had come into the store, Caroline must have been concealed behind the counter in a huddle of customers. Now she stood before him looking like a scorned schoolmarm.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Garrett removed his slouch hat. "Mrs. Milburn." He pointed the hat at his trail hand. "You know Caleb Reger?"

"We've met. Yes."

"Mrs. Milburn." Caleb gave her a polite nod, unable to draw her attention.

How was it that the redhead could appear so becoming in a simple work dress and a smudged shopkeeper's apron?

She crossed her arms. Her chin jutted out. "*Dithering wife*, Mr. Cowlshaw?"

He should've known the widow wouldn't let his statement go without a strong rebuke.

"I wouldn't have been surprised to learn you might allow such mockery among your ranks." Her shoulders squared. "But you, Mr. Cowlshaw, purported to be a Southern gentleman—I wouldn't expect such disrespect to fly from your mouth. Whoever the woman, I'm sure she doesn't deserve your harsh judgment."

Garrett let out a huff. "It was a private conversation, ma'am."

"In a very public place."

He couldn't argue with that, but... "You were not privy to the whole of the conversation."

Caroline Milburn tipped her face toward the ceiling, her jaw set. "I simply misunderstood your meaning?"

"Probably not. Only the context in which I said it."

She glanced at the clock above the counter. "The wedding?" She uncrossed her arms, her eyes widening. "You were talking about Anna?"

"We were there, ma'am." Caleb raked his hair. "But it didn't happen."

"I don't understand. Anna said—"

"She got cold feet and called it off." Caleb took a step back as he spoke.

She shifted her gaze to Garrett. "Thus earning your reproach."

Unable to resist the opportunity for rebuttal, he offered her a slight smile. "Dithering, as in wavering. Indecisive. That fits Miss Goben where Boney

Hughes is concerned, for she's done nothing but change her mind. I simply stated that he is better off not marrying a woman who is not sure of the union, wouldn't you agree?"

Her mouth pursed in a frown, she looked at their wheelbarrow. "Flour. Did you need help finding something else?" she asked, her voice icy.

"Actually, I was wondering about Johann. I heard he'd had another of his spells this morning. How is he?"

Caroline looked at a closed door at the back of the store. "He's resting upstairs. His daughter, Emilie, and the doctor are with him."

"Please tell him we asked after him and offered our best."

She gave him a curt nod. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"There was something else."

Her chin dipped as she glared up at him. "Well?"

"I ordered blankets."

"Red ones?"

"Yes, ma'am." Her narrow-eyed frown told him he was fortunate she didn't have a ruler in her hand, for his knuckles would've surely received a good rapping.

"They're in one of those casks." Caroline pointed toward the crates and barrels along the back wall.

Garrett nodded. "Thank you." He took a step toward her. "Just one more thing."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows arched.

"We're leaving one week from today—the Boone's Lick Wagon Train Company."

"Yes, I know. Thus the rush on supplies."

He nodded, working the brim of his hat. "It's going to be a difficult journey."

"You made that point in your speeches at the meetings. Hard work. Illness. Hostiles."

"And you'll be traveling with a Scottish family you don't really know, with traditions and foods you're not accustomed to. Carrying tremendous responsibilities."

"You don't think I can eat haggis or handle the Kamden children?"

Garrett kept those doubts to himself. "I wish you'd reconsider and remain in Saint Charles with your own family."

Her shoulders went back again. "You should know by now, Mr. Cowlshaw, that I am not a dithering or wavering woman. Nor am I indecisive."

"You indeed are not."

Sighing, she glanced at the counter where Maren Wainwright held up a cast-iron skillet. "I must help with the other customers."

"Of course." He returned his hat to his head. "Thank you."

She gave them each a sharp nod and walked away.

Garrett grabbed the handles on the barrow a little too forcefully and wheeled it to the back wall.

Caleb lifted a few crate lids and sacks, then turned toward him. "The widow certainly had you doing a dance."

"Never mind that." He let go of the cart and took the crate lid from Caleb. "As Boney found out today, women are complicated."

"Yes." His trail hand sighed. "They are."

"You have a story to tell?"

Caleb shook his head. "We weren't talking about me."

They never were. The young man was as tightlipped as a catfish about himself. In the employment interview, Garrett had asked Caleb about his family and involvement in the war. Caleb was just as mute on those topics as he was about his love life. A hesitancy Garrett shared. He would carry his own secrets on the road west.

"Found the blankets." Caleb lifted a sack from the crate. "We all have bedrolls. Expecting a freeze out on the prairie in July and August, are you?"

Garrett chuckled. "We'll be wishin' for a chill in the air." He shook his head. "They're trading materials for the Indians. They like blankets and beads. A little something I learned on my first run west." While Caleb added the blankets to the cart and closed the barrel, Garrett glanced toward the rack of spice tins where Caroline Milburn now helped a customer, red curls dangling at her neck. So much for trying to get on her good side, or at the very least not aggravate her.

"Boss?"

"Uh-huh."

"Does the widow know you stare at her?"

Jerking his gaze from the counter, Garrett met the younger man's grin. "I wasn't. I don't." He scrubbed his whiskered chin. "I might have been thinking. Have a lot on my mind."

The grin still planted on his face, Caleb held his hands up in mock surrender. "I don't care if you stare at her, Boss."

She would care.

"Just don't get all atwitter and propose marriage to her."

Garrett laughed. "No chance of that. Mrs. Milburn and I would have to at least like each other before that could happen."

"You're telling me you don't like her?" Caleb's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"She doesn't like me."

"Because you can't help putting your foot in your mouth?"

Garrett sobered in a memory. "First, because of my uniform." To avoid looking at her, he glanced at the shopping list: *coffee, sugar*.

"Same uniform I wore."

"But you didn't step into her path wearing gray trousers and kepi while she waited for word on her missing husband, a Union colonel."

A shadow darkened Caleb's eyes.

"She was with her sister, two nieces, a nephew, and stranded by a broken wagon wheel when I happened upon them." He remembered seeing the accusation and pain in her eyes, and shook his head as if it could set the memory free. "You would've thought I had horns and carried a pitchfork."

"For a lot of folks, we did."

One particular Thursday last fall crowded Garrett's mind. He'd stood before Caroline Milburn, holding a letter from the Department of War concerning Colonel Milburn. He *was* the devil that day. Garrett gripped the cart handles and looked over his shoulder at Caleb. "I might stare at the widow now and again, but that's the extent. Let's leave it at that."

"Whatever you say, Boss."

Garrett wheeled the cart toward the front of the store. All he did was irritate Caroline Milburn, reminding her of the life she'd never have. He needed to avoid her. A difficult task with her bent on going west with the caravan, thanks to Ian and Rhoda Kamden giving her the means to do so.

He shook his head. He'd best concentrate on his own affairs and the task

at hand. "Let's finish the shopping and get back to camp. You get two sacks of coffee. I'll find the sugar."

Caleb nodded and walked toward the mounds of burlap sacks against one wall.

Garrett had just reached for the sack of sugar when he saw Anna Goben outside the front window. Had she looked in through the window, the young woman probably would have turned around. He would have, had it been him. Instead Miss Goben opened the door and stepped inside. A breeze fluttered the paper sign above the coffee sacks.

Caleb lifted the sack he held to one shoulder. He raised the collar on his coat and looked up. The sack fell to the plank floor, spilling a handful of coffee beans and scenting the chilled air. He glared at Anna. "What are you doing here?"

Miss Goben's eyes widened like an antelope staring down a gun barrel. "Pardon me?"

That seemed the phrase of the day, at least from any women they encountered. Garrett quickly joined Caleb. "Hello, Miss Goben." He doffed his slouch hat and Caleb bent to scoop up the runaway coffee beans.

"Mr. Cowlshaw." Her jaw tight, she looked around him to the counter where Maren Wainwright took money from a customer. "Have you heard how Mr. Heinrich is faring?"

"I was told he is resting upstairs. His daughter is with him."

She nodded.

Caleb stood. One hand gripped the sack while the other cupped coffee beans. "The dry goods store doesn't seem a likely place for you to do your gloating."

She squared her shoulders, her chin jutting. "You, sir, are a man of ill-formed suppositions."

Garrett knew he should scold Caleb for his rudeness but put his effort into hiding the smile that tugged at his lips. He wasn't one to talk, having had a similar conversation with Caroline Milburn just moments earlier.

"Are you still planning to go west with your mother and grandfather?" Caleb asked her.

"I am. Do you have a problem with that, Mr.—"

“Reger. Caleb Reger.” He arched his eyebrows. “I don’t have a problem with it, but my good friend Boney might.”

“Your *good* friend?” As if surprised she’d said it aloud, Miss Goben looked at Garrett. “Pardon me.”

Garrett nodded and brushed the brim of his hat. He and Caleb both watched Miss Goben walk toward the widow Caroline Milburn, then he looked at Caleb. “You’re not the one staring now, are you?”

“At her? No sir. She’s trouble.”

Garrett smiled. His exact sentiments concerning Mrs. Milburn.

Hmm. Miss Goben would be a distraction for at least two of his hands. Perhaps it was time he pay her grandfather a visit to question his plans to go west.



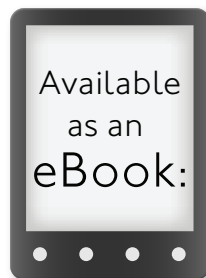
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