

AMERICAN WONDERS COLLECTION ★ 2

# NOTHING SHORT OF WONDROUS

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REGINA SCOTT

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Regina Scott, *Nothing Short of Wonderous*  
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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To those we call family,  
especially Meryl, Kris, Marissa, Kathy, and Kelli,  
and to the Lord,  
who leads us to those  
who will love us for who we are.

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# 1

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■ YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, SEPTEMBER 1886 ■

What was it about men and danger? Did they all want to die?

Kate Tremaine leveled her rifle at the back of the stranger standing beside the rainbow-colored mud pots, a long, twisted branch in his hand. “Stop right there, mister. Drop the stick.”

Broad shoulders stiffened in his navy cavalry coat. Normally she had the utmost respect for the military, especially after seeing how Captain Harris had worked to protect Yellowstone since arriving last month. But she’d caught more than one of the horse soldiers a mite too close to the boiling geysers and heated paint pots. It wouldn’t do them or the park’s reputation any good if they were burned by the scalding water.

He tossed the stick off the geyser field and turned slowly, lemon-yellow stripe on his light-blue trousers flashing in the sunlight. Rather determined face—strong cheekbones, straight nose pointing to the firm line of his lips, square jaw. The only thing soft about him was the beginnings of a warm brown beard and mustache, a shade darker than the hair at his temples. That was about all she could see of his hair under his floppy, wide-brimmed dun hat with its crossed sabers in gold on the crown.

The cavalymen riding by her hotel every day were all looking scruffier. It couldn't be easy living out of nothing better than a white canvas tent. It wasn't easy keeping things clean and tidy in the hotel either. She and her staff were run ragged, and she still couldn't find time to fix all the things that seemed to go wrong at the least provocation. Occasionally she was tempted to hack off her thick black tresses rather than to keep taming them back in a braided bun behind her head. Perhaps dress in a buckskin coat and trousers instead of poplin and wool bodices and skirts that bespoke a prosperous hotel owner. Even those small changes might help give her more time.

The man in front of her nodded toward her Winchester. "Do you know how to use that?"

Why was it that a hint of a Boston twang was enough to set memories beckoning? She'd left that life behind. She was a different woman. The daughter of a cobbler and a milliner hadn't needed to know how to shoot a rifle, outlast a Yellowstone winter, or manage one of the busiest hotels in the park.

She aimed the rifle at his chest. "I sure do. Now, move away from those paint pots—straight forward. Right or left, and you'll boil those fancy boots right off your feet."

He glanced down at the ground. The knobby crust covered decades of mud that had bubbled up from the depths of the earth. Around them, spikes striped in lime, buttercup, rust, and rose smoked contentedly, the cough and murmur here and there telling of more mud spilling over. Her guests at the hotel found the paint pots fascinating. She did too, but she had to be constantly on guard that no one strayed onto the softer ground. She gave everyone a welcome speech, insisted on accompanying some of the oldest and youngest visitors, and did a sweep every morning and afternoon, just to be safe.

He picked his way forward, and she edged back until they both stood on the well-worn path to the hotel. The Geyser Gateway

Inn sat with its back to a stand of pine, clapboard sides a cheery yellow she had to repaint after every good storm. Toby had fallen in love with the place at first sight, and she hadn't been far behind. If her late husband hadn't gone out that night a year ago, he might have been waiting on the veranda even now.

But he would never have confronted people with a rifle. For Toby, life had been about boundless enthusiasm. She'd always been the practical one.

Her quarry today relaxed his stance, watching her. Now that he was closer, she could see that his eyes were a clear greenish brown, like a reflection in a mountain lake. They narrowed at her.

"What are you planning on doing?" he asked. "Arresting me or shooting me for dinner?"

Toby would have accompanied the question with a good-natured grin. This man didn't look as if he knew how to grin. Why did she have the urge to test that theory?

Kate made a show of looking him up and down. "I doubt you'd make much of a meal for my guests. Too much grit. And I generally turn game your size back into the wild to grow up a bit."

He grimaced. "Should I thank you for that?"

Despite herself, Kate smiled. "No need. All part of the service at the Geyser Gateway."

He nodded toward the hotel. "You must be Mrs. Tremaine."

Now, who would have told him about her? She'd had a single conversation with his superior, who had graciously allowed her to keep her concession, for now. She hadn't been sure about Captain Harris when he'd ridden into the park at the head of Troop M, but she'd applauded when he'd ousted D.W. Wear, the superintendent from Washington. Wear had all but washed his hands when it came to protecting the game of the park, claiming too few men and too little time. What did he know about time? Had he ever tried running a hotel?

She lowered her rifle. "I'm Kate Tremaine. Who are you?"

He took off his hat, showing short-cropped brown hair streaked with gold, and inclined his head. "Lieutenant Will Prescott. I've been ordered to patrol this part of the park with my men."

So that was how Harris was going to manage the vast acreage. Since his arrival, his men had been busy battling the wildfires raging over parts of the park. Wear claimed they had been set by his enemies. She knew better, and she'd been watchful lest the same trouble start here. Having her own set of cavalymen patrolling the natural wonders might be useful, so long as they didn't blunder in where they shouldn't.

"Glad to have you," Kate said. "Feel free to stop by for dinner. But mind your step in the future. Do you have any idea how hot that mud is?"

"More than one hundred and fifty degrees," he said with a glance at the nearest bubbling paint pot, which helpfully belched out another cloud of steam. "At least that's what the guidebook claimed."

Kate snorted. "Guidebook? Which one did they give you? Wylie isn't too bad, though you have to watch his directions or you could end up going over the falls. Don't get me started on Dabney. That man hasn't moved off his sofa in thirty years, much less toured Yellowstone."

He knocked mud off the heel of his black boots. Most of the cavalry officers wore spurs, the silver or brass winking and rowels chiming as they walked. His boots were bare.

"I've noticed," he said. "It's not easy to find your way around here."

So her guests claimed. She had no trouble, but she'd lived here for four years, ever since Toby had convinced her to use the money her parents had left her to invest in the inn.

"Think of the plateau as a big circle," she advised him. She nodded toward the inn, where a group of her most recent guests had come out onto the wide veranda to gaze at the grandeur. "We sit

in the lower part of a basin filled with geysers, some twenty miles south of Mammoth Hot Springs and your commanding officer's tent city. South another five miles, and you'll reach Old Faithful, one of the biggest geysers in the park and the most reliable for timing. Directly east of us across the plateau is Yellowstone Lake and beyond that the Absaroka Range. To the north of it is the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. And all around you'll find crystal clear creeks, roaring rivers, and thundering falls."

"And grizzlies, buffalo, and scalding water," he added.

She wouldn't let him see the chill that went through her at the mention of the hump-backed bear. A stampeding herd of buffalo and the thermal dangers of the park could be avoided. No matter how carefully she moved, she was always aware a grizzly could be waiting around the bend. Danny might chafe under her restrictions, but she wasn't about to lose her son too.

"All that as well," she agreed. "And you fellows better start building cabins, because those canvas tents you brought will never see you through a Yellowstone winter."

Before he could answer, she felt it, the faintest of rumblings under her leather boots. She grabbed his arm with her free hand. "Move."

He frowned at her, more than six feet of muscle holding him in place. "Why?"

The rumble shook her legs. Didn't he feel it too? Kate tightened her grip and yanked. "Now!"

He stumbled forward, catching her in his arms and forcing the rifle away from them both. For one moment, their gazes touched, held, and something whooshed through her, like the pressure building under the earth. His eyes widened as if he'd felt it more surely than the rumbling beneath them.

Then Morning Geyser let loose.

The spray shot into the air, double the height of her two-story hotel. Water pattered down a few feet beyond them, hard enough



to splash fresh mud on his knee-high boots. She could hear the oohs and ahhs from her guests on the veranda.

The man holding her looked as awed. She thought she must too, but it wasn't the geyser's power that had shaken her. She'd been married for seven years, been a widow for one. Any romantic feelings had been buried with Toby's mangled body. God understood she had work to do, a son to raise, a park to protect. Why did this man make her wonder if there should be more?



Will Prescott watched as the woman with midnight black hair pulled out of his embrace and tightened her grip on her gun. Wasn't there some myth about a goddess of the hunt, protecting the animals and forests? Even her practical fitted blue bodice and wide skirts couldn't quite erase the image from his mind. But more important was her ability to predict the geyser's eruption. It was well known Old Faithful was reliable. He doubted this one was.

"How did you know?" he asked.

Her misty gray eyes looked as heated as the spray that had just erupted feet away from them. "You live in a place long enough, you learn things about it. But if you don't stay away from the hot springs, you won't live long enough to learn."

He couldn't argue. He'd been part of the cavalry for more than ten years, most of them out in Indian Territory. Yellowstone was like nothing he'd ever seen, marvel after marvel. Small wonder the first trappers and explorers to tell of encountering the place hadn't been believed.

Much like Captain Harris hadn't been believed when he'd asked for scouts.

"We must protect millions of acres," he'd written to Washington. "I have three experienced guides ready to help. We can't cover so much territory quickly without them."

The answer had been swift. “Pay is authorized for one guide. Your men must learn the country.”

Will had been here more than a fortnight, and he still got lost riding between the outposts. Captain Harris had stationed details at six locations, the most popular tourist stops like the Lower Geyser Basin. If Will was to protect his portion of the park, much less his men, he had to do better.

Of course, he’d been telling himself that for the last eight years, ever since he’d made the gravest error of his life.

He shook away the ugly memory. It had been a long, hard climb back to lieutenant from where he’d been justly demoted. He had a job to do now, and he intended to do it.

“I wasn’t trying to steam myself into pudding,” he told Mrs. Tremaine as they headed for her hotel. It was a welcoming place with green shutters on the windows and a covered porch wrapping around three sides. With the nights growing colder, he envied her the building’s warmth. “I was riding by and saw someone throwing sticks into the paint pots.”

She pulled up short. “Who?”

He pitied the fellow if he met her and her rifle with that fiery look in her eyes. “I only caught a glimpse before he ran off. Tall man, top hat, black coat too fancy for out here.”

“Ponsonby,” she said. “He’s staying at the hotel. Came with a group from New York yesterday. I’ll speak to him.”

He eyed the rifle cradled so casually against her. “Armed?”

She grinned. “If necessary.”

His mouth felt odd, and it was a moment before he realized why. The muscles of his face were rusty. How long had it been since he’d smiled?

He forced his gaze away from her to the hotel. His horse was tied to the hitching post in front, the sorrel mare unaffected by the other horses around her. Bess was a good cavalry horse—the sound of gunfire didn’t trouble her, those powerful legs could push her

into a full run in a matter of seconds, and she could sustain that pace for nearly a half hour without tiring. Now her ears twitched as if she heard him coming.

Or maybe she was as intrigued by the woman at his side as he was.

Once more, he pushed away his thoughts. He had much to atone for before he could be called a gentleman again. Sometimes he feared even God couldn't forgive what he'd done. He was fortunate the Army had been willing to let him start over.

Though it appeared as if Mrs. Tremaine might have to start over as well. Up close, he could see that the hotel needed work. A few of those jaunty shutters hung crookedly, as if bent by a strong wind, and the porch steps were sagging as three gentlemen and their ladies traipsed down them. It couldn't be easy managing a busy hotel, especially for a widow.

Bess raised her head as the front door banged open, and a tow-headed youngster dashed out onto the porch.

“Ma!”

Correction: a widow with child. The hotel owner drew up as the boy clambered down the steps. A slender lad about seven with wide eyes and a stub of a nose, he hitched up his short trousers as he skidded to a stop in front of Will and Mrs. Tremaine. “Can I show Mr. Ponsonby our special spot?”

Mrs. Tremaine glanced at Will before gathering her skirts with her free hand and crouching before her son. “What did we agree on, Danny?”

The boy shuffled his feet, gaze on the dusty soil. “Our special spot is just for us.” He spoke in a singsong voice as if repeating what he'd heard many times before. “But he likes buffalo.”

“Lots of people like buffalo,” his mother countered. “In stew, with their heads mounted on walls, with their hides spread on floors.”

Her son's eyes grew wider, his face paler, with each word. “Mr. Ponsonby isn't like that.”

A man who threw sticks into mud pots, just to see what might happen, probably wasn't the sort to protect other parts of nature. Mrs. Tremaine must have thought the same, for she rose and patted her son's shoulder. "You leave Mr. Ponsonby to me. Have you finished your chores?"

His sigh was heavy. "Yes. I helped Pansy empty the chamber pots, scrubbed the kitchen floor, and cleaned out the salon hearth."

That was a lot of work for one morning, especially for a boy his size. His mother merely nodded. "Thank you. I expect Caleb could use some help chopping wood."

He made a face. "Caleb always needs help chopping wood."

The frustration in the boy's voice pulled at Will. His mother too, for she sighed. "I know, Danny. There's a lot of work to be done, but we have guests."

He glanced up at Will. "Another one?"

He could almost see the weight on the child's shoulders. He knew the feeling. He'd had to care for a mother grown weary from work after his father had died in the Civil War. How many times had he glanced out the window at other boys playing? He'd run off to join the military as soon as he was old enough. That wasn't the last time he'd think only of himself. But not anymore.

He saluted the boy. "Lieutenant Prescott, reporting for duty, sir."

The boy giggled. By the way Mrs. Tremaine smiled, she could do with hearing the sweet sound more often.

"I'm not a sir," Danny said. "Ma is."

He could well believe Mrs. Tremaine warranted a salute as well as she turned his way, face coloring. "I think your business here is done, Lieutenant."

He ought to agree. He'd been riding by when he'd spotted Ponsonby out among the paint pots. The rest of his men were setting up their tents to the north, near the Fire Hole Hotel. He never liked it when he couldn't see them, though this batch was handpicked and ought to be trustworthy. But an audacious idea had presented

itself. He shouldn't trust it either, but it might help him, his men, Mrs. Tremaine, and her son.

"I heard a rumor about the huckleberry pie at this establishment," he said. "I'd be neglecting my duty if I didn't try a slice."

"Our cook Alberta makes good pie," Danny agreed. He tugged on his mother's arm. "We should give him a piece. He's sort of a guest."

Mrs. Tremaine readjusted the rifle under her arm. He'd have given a lot to know what was going on in her mind as she glanced from him to her son and back again.

"Go tell Alberta to cut a slice," she finally told the boy.

His eyes lit. "A big slice?"

Her mouth turned up. "A big slice."

"For me too?"

She laughed. "For you too. But you must save me a bite."

"Deal." He turned and ran for the hotel.

Kate Tremaine leveled her gaze on Will again, deadlier than the rifle she'd pointed at him earlier. "All right, Lieutenant. What do you want?"

He'd never been known for charm, but he had to try.

"You obviously care about this park," he told her, "or you wouldn't have come after me. If I'm to protect this part of Yellowstone, I need a guide."

"Plenty of men will hire on for that," she allowed. "I could recommend some."

"I'm not authorized to hire anyone," Will explained. "I need a volunteer."

She shook her head. "With winter coming soon? No one has time to work for free."

"What about pay in kind?" he pressed. "I do a favor for them, they do a favor for me."

She wiggled her lips a moment. "Most men out here don't much approve of favors. That's why they came West—for the independence."

Most men, but maybe not one woman. “But you have a hotel that must need work,” he replied. “As you said, winter’s coming.”

She bristled. He held her gaze, willing her to realize the truth of his statement. If she let him help, her son could be a boy again, and Will might find a little peace. The good Lord knew he needed that.

He stuck out his hand. “Deal?”

She stared at it, mouth once more working. He could almost feel the pride, distrust, and need colliding inside her. Finally, she took his hand, and her touch ricocheted up his arm to his heart.

“Deal,” she said.

And Will could only wonder what he’d just gotten himself into.