

A man with a beard, wearing a brown cowboy hat and a dark, fringed jacket, is riding a dark horse. The background is a scenic mountain landscape with rolling hills, evergreen trees, and distant mountains under a soft, hazy sky. The overall tone is warm and romantic.

COLORADO
COWBOYS
1

A COWBOY FOR KEEPS

JODY HEDLUND



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Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee:
he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.

—Psalm 55:22



A decorative flourish with symmetrical scrollwork and a central oval frame containing the chapter title.

CHAPTER 1

COLORADO TERRITORY AUGUST 1862

“Stop or we’ll shoot!” A dozen feet up Kenosha Pass, three robbers with flour sacks over their heads blocked the way, their revolvers outstretched.

Walking alongside the stagecoach, Greta Nilsson didn’t have to be told twice. She froze—all except her pulse, which sped to a thundering gallop.

Next to her, the Concord jerked to a halt.

“Come out and put your hands up where we can see ’em,” called the lanky robber at the center, peering through unevenly cut holes in his mask.

Greta raised her gloved hands and hoped they weren’t trembling. Likewise, the two gentlemen hiking near her wasted no time in obeying.

Before she’d left Illinois, everyone had warned her of the trouble she might encounter on the route to the west, including the growing problem of stagecoach robberies. Over the

past eight weeks of traveling, she'd braced herself for the possibility, had mentally rehearsed such an encounter and what she'd do.

But today, on the last day of the journey, she'd finally allowed herself to relax and believe that for once things might work out in her favor, that she hadn't made a big mistake in moving to Colorado.

Apparently, she'd assumed too much too soon.

At the rear of the stagecoach, several men had been pushing it the final distance to the top of the pass, and they now eased out into the open, their arms up. The driver sitting on his bench atop the stagecoach set the brake, then released the reins controlling the two teams of horses that had been straining to pull them up the mountain. He, too, cautiously lifted his hands.

She guessed, like her, the other passengers were well aware of the tales of murder and mayhem along the wilderness trails. And they weren't taking any chances either.

At least Astrid was inside the coach. After trekking uphill for the first hour, the little girl's poor lungs hadn't been able to handle the exertion. As much as Astrid had loathed returning to the bumpy conveyance, she'd been able to have a seat to herself since everyone else had gotten out to lighten the load.

Last time Greta had peeked through the open windows, her sister had been sprawled out asleep, and now Greta prayed the precocious child would stay that way.

The middle robber inched toward them, his revolver swinging in a wide arc. His leathery hands and dirt-encrusted fingernails contrasted with the ivory handle of his revolver. "Nobody move."

Morning sunlight filtered through the aspens, their white bark and green-gold leaves making the trail feel more open and airy than other parts of the mountainous road. A cool, dry breeze rattled the leaves, swishing like ladies' skirts brushing against grass.

Just minutes ago, Greta had been marveling at how different the dry and cooler climate was from northern Illinois, where oppressive humidity plagued the summers and made every chore feel like a burden. What she wouldn't give at this moment to be back there shucking corn or snapping beans, even if she was dripping with perspiration.

"Anyone left inside?" one of the other robbers asked.

"No," Greta said quickly. "Everyone's out."

Just then the stagecoach door inched open.

The lanky robber with the uneven eye slits swung his revolver toward the door and clicked the hammer.

"No!" Greta threw herself between the robber and the stagecoach, shoving against Astrid's strong push.

A short distance away beyond the trees, the mountainside overlooked the sprawling grasslands of South Park, nestled between the Front Range in the east and the Mosquito Range in the west. Their destination was within eyesight. If only it was also within shouting distance so they could call for help.

The bandit shifted the barrel's aim to Greta, his arm stiff, his fingers taut. "Woman, unless you want to find yourself eating a bullet, you'd best step aside and let that person out."

Inside, Astrid cried out in protest and once again attempted to open the door. But Greta flattened the full length of her body against it.

"Move on outta the way, woman," the robber said, louder and more irritably.

"It's her little sister." One of the other passengers moved to stand beside Greta, a middle-aged man who'd introduced himself as Landry Steele yesterday morning when they boarded the stagecoach in Denver. He'd spent the majority of the journey conversing with the other gentlemen. However, during the few brief interactions she'd had with him, he'd always been considerate.

"The girl is ill and is of no concern to you." Beneath the brim of Mr. Steele's bowler, he shot Greta an apologetic look, as though realizing she'd wanted to keep Astrid hidden away and out of the conflict.

"That so?" The gunman's revolver didn't waver. "If she's of no concern, then let her on out."

Greta pressed against the door harder. She hadn't brought Astrid all this distance to have her die at the hand of a robber. "She's only eight years old—"

"I'm nine," came Astrid's indignant voice.

"Allow her to come out," Mr. Steele said with a quiet urgency. "You don't want her to end up an orphan, do you?"

Astrid an orphan? Never in Greta's plans had she counted on dying before Astrid. The truth was, Astrid's days were numbered, and Greta hoped to lengthen and make them as pain-free as possible. But she couldn't do that if she let the robber kill her.

Swallowing hard, Greta stepped away from the stagecoach. The door flew open with a *bang*, and Astrid tumbled out. She landed with an *oomph* onto the grassy road but then bounded up as nimbly as a barn cat. Though the consumption had emaciated the girl so that she was thin and petite for her age, somehow she still retained a fresh and vibrant spirit that made up for her physical frailty.

Her big silver blue eyes, so much like Greta's, took in the

scene—the robbers, their guns, and all the passengers standing motionless with hands in the air. Astrid’s hair was also the same color as Greta’s, a golden brown now sun-streaked from so many days of neglecting her bonnet. Astrid had refused to allow Greta to plait her hair when they’d arisen at half past four in the morning for a hasty departure from the stagecoach station, and now it hung in tangled waves.

Even so, Astrid was the picture of perfection. She had dainty porcelain but beautiful features that drew attention everywhere she went. Greta had never considered herself to be a beauty, not like some of the other young women back home and certainly not like Astrid.

But too many people to recall during the journey west had exclaimed how much she and Astrid looked alike. The admiring glances and flattery had been strange but not unwelcome. At times, she wondered if maybe she was prettier than she’d realized, if maybe she’d been hasty in accepting the first mail-order bride proposal that came along.

Astrid took several steps in the direction of the closest robber. “Why are you wearing a sack over your head?”

“Astrid, come here this instant,” Greta whispered in her sternest tone.

The thief’s gaze darted over to the passengers, revealing a crooked, lazy eye that didn’t focus. “It’s what robbers do, kid.”

“W-e-l-l.” Astrid drew the word out and cocked her head. “It makes you look kinda silly, like a scarecrow.”

Greta lunged for Astrid, but the girl dodged away and skipped toward the robber.

His gun wavered, as though he was considering turning the weapon on Astrid.

“Astrid!” Horror rose in Greta’s throat, threatening to strangle her. “Don’t you dare go a step closer.”

Astrid halted and held out her hand. “Here’s some money, Mister. It’s mine, but you can have it since you need it more than me.”

The man’s lazy eye shifted to Astrid again. “Drop it on the ground.”

Astrid released a crumpled wad and a few coins. They bounced in the grass near the robber’s feet. “My sister has more—”

“No!” Greta couldn’t let these bandits discover her secret stash since she’d taken pains to sew the cash into the lining of her coat after the passengers had been warned not to carry valuables.

It was her jam money. Her earnings from picking and preserving the wild berries that grew on the farm. The accumulation of two years of working every spare minute.

Astrid turned her pretty eyes upon Greta. “They have to wear flour sacks instead of hats. Guess that means they need the money more than we do. Right, Mister?”

“Right, kid.” This time the robber’s voice hinted at amusement.

The thieves made quick work of emptying the locked box next to the driver and then divested each of the passengers of anything of value. Within a few minutes they ran off into the woods with their loot.

Greta stood with the others, surveying their belongings strewn over the grass surrounding the stagecoach. Astrid had lost interest in the robbers and was intent on picking a bouquet of wildflowers.

“We got lucky.” The driver broke the silence, his voice

shaky as he closed the now-empty box next to him. “Last time the Crooked-Eye Gang struck, they killed three men—”

Mr. Steele cut off the driver with a glare and a curt nod toward Astrid.

The driver clamped his mouth closed, and everyone set to work repacking their bags and trunks.

Greta fingered the frayed coat hem. Although Phineas Hallock, her intended, had informed her he had plenty of money since he was part owner of a gold mine, she couldn’t keep dismay from weighing upon her.

She’d corresponded with Phineas by letter on several occasions last year, and she sensed in him genuine kindness, especially since he’d so readily agreed to take care of Astrid. He also made all the arrangements for the trip, including paying for their fare.

Though the small daguerreotype he’d sent in his last letter the previous autumn had shown him to be a plain-looking and somewhat older man, his face held a look of integrity as well as honesty. Maybe he wasn’t handsome or young, but that didn’t matter. What she needed was a husband who was reliable, dependable, and able to provide for her and Astrid.

Besides, after making up her mind, Greta had wanted to move as quickly as possible to get Astrid to the healing air of the Rockies. Why waste time corresponding with other men when Phineas had been so eager and ready to help her?

Maybe she’d acted rashly. But what was done, was done. She was on her way to marry Phineas. She would, in fact, wed him by the day’s end.

Still, she blinked back tears. All of her savings was gone. If only Astrid knew how to obey better. If only the little girl had a real mother and father to raise her. Instead, she was

stuck with a mere half sister who clearly didn't know how to keep her in line.

Greta sat back on her heels and watched the young girl with a mixture of frustration and helplessness.

"Don't be too hard on her." Mr. Steele bent next to Greta and retrieved a shiny leather shoe.

"She's a handful."

"She saved us from meeting our Maker today."

"She did?"

The gentleman removed his bowler and smoothed back his dark hair, which had hints of gray at his temples and streaking his long sideburns and mustache. "The gang leader liked her and showed mercy on us as a result."

Mercy? Each of the passengers had lost everything of value. But she supposed that was better than losing their lives.

"I have a son about Astrid's age." Mr. Steele replaced his hat, watching Astrid wistfully.

"You must be looking forward to seeing him when we arrive in Fairplay."

He focused on the child a moment longer, his expression filled with sadness. "Unfortunately, I won't be seeing him anytime soon. He lives in New York with his mother."

"I'm sorry." Greta didn't know what else to say.

Mr. Steele shook his head, as if by doing so he could shake away his morose thoughts. "Tell me again why you're moving to Fairplay."

Greta hadn't told him anything yet, since he hadn't asked. But she wouldn't be so impolite as to say so. Instead, she gave him the rehearsed line she'd spouted to everyone else who'd wanted to know. "My fiancé lives in Fairplay, and I'm traveling there to marry him."

“Your fiancé? Is that so?” Mr. Steele’s eyes lit with interest. “May I ask who the lucky fellow is? I’m mayor and have gotten to know many men in the area.”

All the misgivings she’d had since agreeing to marry Phineas soared. What if she’d made a mistake in coming west and agreeing to marry a stranger? What if he wasn’t who he had claimed to be? What if he mistreated Astrid?

Just as quickly as the doubts assailed her, she tossed them aside. If Phineas wasn’t the man he’d portrayed in his letters, then she’d have no obligation to stay with him. In fact, perhaps Mr. Steele would be able to advise her regarding the true nature of Phineas’s character. Then if her fiancé had any glaring faults, she’d be well aware of them before arriving in Fairplay.

She cast a sideways glance at the other passengers, who were in the finishing stages of stowing their belongings and were thankfully heedless of the conversation. “I haven’t actually met my intended.”

Mr. Steele, in the process of picking up another shoe, paused.

“We’ve written to each other.”

He straightened and gave her his full attention. “You wouldn’t happen to be Phineas Hallock’s mail-order bride, would you?”

Something in his tone made the skin at the back of her neck prickle with unease. “Yes, Mr. Hallock is my fiancé. Do you know him?”

The gentleman shook his head, his features creasing. “I knew him well. He was a good man.”

Her heart began to patter fast and hard. “Knew?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Nilsson. Phineas Hallock is dead.”

“The mine owner Phineas Hallock, originally from Connecticut?”

“Yes, he left for California last October. Said he was traveling there to purchase supplies for his new bride and that he planned to be back by late spring. When the thawing came and he didn’t return, we all thought he was delayed. Until a body was discovered on Hoosier Pass.”

“His body?”

“As far as we can tell, after so many months of being exposed to the elements . . .”

She stared at Mr. Steele, but somehow he faded from her vision. All she could see was the black-and-white photograph of Phineas.

In his last letter, he’d mentioned his trip to California and his excitement over picking out additional furniture and items for their home. He expressed his desire to have the newly built house well-stocked and ready for her arrival. She hadn’t heard from him since and assumed he hadn’t had the opportunity to send further correspondence. Even if he had, mail delivery via the Pony Express and stagecoach wasn’t reliable. Letters were sometimes lost or stolen.

Besides, she’d been busy preparing for the trip, sewing clothes for Astrid and her, packing their belongings, and saying good-byes. She’d never in her wildest imagination believed Phineas Hallock hadn’t written again because he was dead.

He was dead.

She swayed, her vision growing fuzzy.

Mr. Steele’s grip on her elbow steadied her. “I’m truly sorry, Miss Nilsson.”

With a deep breath, she tried to bring the world back into

focus. The sunlight streaming through the aspen branches above splashed across her face as though to wake her from a nightmare.

The man she'd come west to marry was dead. Every penny of her savings had just been stolen. What would she do now? How could she, a lone woman with a sick child, survive in the wilderness knowing no one and having nothing?



CHAPTER

2

The cold barrel of a revolver jammed into back of Wyatt McQuaid's neck and stopped him short in the middle of Fairplay's dusty Main Street.

"Quit stealing my business." The voice—and the sour body odor—behind Wyatt belonged to only one man: Roper Brawley.

"I ain't stealing your business—"

"Jansen's steers were mine." Brawley dug the steel into Wyatt's flesh, bumping and loosening his hat so it tumbled to the street.

Against the black felt, the chalky line from dried sweat was all too visible and encrusted along the brim with dust, grease, and mud spots. The center was dented where a heifer had recently trampled it. And the hatband of braided horse-hair hung loose.

Even if his hat wasn't pretty, it was still his pride and joy. And he wouldn't stand for anyone knocking it from his head.

With a jab backward, Wyatt elbowed Brawley's stomach, forcing the man to double over. With the pressure gone, Wyatt spun, latched on to Brawley's gun arm, and slammed

it down hard against his knee, giving Brawley little choice but to release the revolver.

The weapon flew several feet, landing in the gravel, far enough away that Brawley couldn't easily reach it.

"This here is a free country." Wyatt swiped up his hat and situated it on his head. Although the sun was on its evening hike down to Sheep and Horseshoe Mountains, the rays were still strong and hot. "The miners can sell their oxen to anyone in the blazes they want to."

Nursing his stomach, Brawley straightened. A black patch covered a missing eye but couldn't hide the thin, white scars scattered across his cheek—wounds he'd gotten fighting Indians. "Me and my men were here in South Park first."

That was debatable. Wyatt had arrived in the summer of 1860 and tried gold mining like thousands of other prospectors. After scraping by and managing to pan only enough nuggets and gold dust to fill his pockets, he'd tried his luck at something different—ranching.

With the passing of the Homestead Act earlier in the year, he'd been one of the first to file an application and pay the registration fee at the land office in Denver. He'd gotten himself the one hundred sixty acres allowed under President Lincoln's new legislation fair and square.

His pasturelands spread out to the southeast of Fairplay. Wyatt had spent the spring and summer laboring from sunup to sundown, building a house and a barn on his claim. He and Judd had buckled down and made the place livable for both man and beast. And over recent weeks, he'd started adding more steers to his small herd.

And now, Roper Brawley was determined to keep him from succeeding.

Brawley crossed his arms and nodded at several cowhands loitering outside Cabinet Billiard Hall. At their boss's signal, they sauntered toward Wyatt, their spurs jangling, their hands resting on the handles of their six-shooters tucked into their holsters.

Wyatt made eye contact with Judd, who stood next to the livery guarding the two bone-thin steers Wyatt had just purchased. The white-haired man limped forward too. He didn't reach for his Colts—didn't have to. Judd was the fastest gunslinger in the Rockies. He could shoot iron quicker than the twitch of a cow's tail.

Fortunately, Brawley and his men knew it. They stopped a dozen paces away, feet spread, hands at the ready.

Brawley spit a stream of tobacco into the street, then wiped his sleeve across his mouth. "This place ain't big enough for the two of us, McQuaid."

"If that's the way you feel, then I guess you oughta be moving on."

"You're the one needing to move on." Brawley's bottom lip rounded out from the chew stuffed inside, and his thin, scraggly beard and mustache were stained with the juice. Brawley probably wasn't much older than Wyatt's own twenty-three years, but his lean, leathery face and somber eyes spoke of hardships that had aged him too soon.

"Come on now, Brawley." Wyatt attempted to dredge up some empathy for the man. After all, he knew a bit about hardships himself. "This land here in South Park can handle more than one ranch. Let's aim to live in peace—"

"Peace?" Brawley scoffed. "You buying up all the cattle and leaving me with none ain't aiming for peace."

Wyatt almost snorted but held himself back. Brawley had

things backward. He was the one buying up the weak and worn-out oxen as rapidly as the miners and teamsters came over the passes.

The rumbling of wheels and the pounding of hooves from the northeast end of town cut off their discussion. *Discussion* was too kind a word for Brawley's attempt to intimidate Wyatt into leaving. It wasn't the first time the rancher had made threats, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

As the stagecoach rolled closer, the clatter and dust rose higher. Brawley bent and retrieved his revolver and then headed toward his men. Across the street, Judd watched with unswerving intensity, his bushy white eyebrows narrowed and his white mustache pursed until the men disappeared into the billiard hall. Once they were gone, Judd tipped the brim of his hat at Wyatt before he shuffled back toward the newly purchased steers.

Wyatt rolled his shoulders and tried to release the tension. At the rate he was going, he'd never make enough profit to send for his ma and siblings. Even if he could help his family with the costs of traveling to Colorado, how would he support them once they arrived?

What he needed to do was purchase a herd of purebred Shorthorns from the breeder he'd met in Missouri during his days transporting livestock for Russell, Majors, & Waddell. Beeves like that would thrive on the buffalo grass, wheat grass, and moss sage.

He peered beyond the buildings that lined the street to the grassy plains that spread out to the distant Tarryall mountain range in the east. Since the grass was endless and free, he'd have no trouble fattening up the cattle for butchering.

The miners always had a hankering for beef, tiring easily of the fish they caught in local streams or the canned goods they bought for exorbitant prices.

In fact, if Wyatt could purchase a big enough herd of Shorthorns and start his own breeding, he'd be able to send a stream of beef to the markets in the east. Eventually, he might make enough from sales to buy up more of the surrounding land and expand his ranch.

The trouble was, he didn't have a tail feather left, not after pouring every penny of his savings into the start-up costs of his place. He could hardly afford the worn-out oxen that newcomers were practically giving away. Besides, he couldn't rely on that supply forever, especially with Brawley's hackles rising every time Wyatt made a purchase.

As the stage rolled to a jerking halt in front of the Fairplay Hotel, Wyatt expelled a pent-up breath. What he needed was an investor, a partner who'd be willing to help him build up his herd.

The gold mines in the mountains surrounding South Park had made millionaires out of numerous men. Would any of them be willing to invest in his ranch?

Wyatt scanned the buildings lining Fairplay, most having the typical false storefronts that made the businesses appear bigger and more significant to draw men in. Set at the center of the flat grasslands along the intersection of Beaver Creek and the South Platte, Fairplay had earned its name from its first prospectors who'd vowed that their mining camp would be different from the others in the area, that they'd operate with integrity and fairness.

Although the town had its share of taverns and dance halls, it was a shade tamer than some of the other colorful

mining towns that had sprung up in the area, towns like Buckskin Joe and Tarryall.

Of all the mining towns Wyatt had lived in and visited, he liked Fairplay best, mainly because he liked and respected the men who ran it.

Men like Landry Steele . . .

Steele stepped down from the stagecoach, wearing his usual dark suit coat, vest, and matching trousers. He turned around and offered his hand to a woman in the stagecoach door.

The woman accepted the help descending. The brim of her bonnet hid her face, but from the litheness of her movements and the womanliness of her form, she was awful young to be Steele's wife. In a blue dress, the woman was also too plainly attired to be Steele's fancy eastern wife. Besides, Steele had yammered on more than once about his wife refusing to live in the Wild West.

As the woman planted both feet on the ground, Steele reached up to the doorway again and, this time, offered his hand to a little girl.

Wyatt couldn't contain his surprise and released a low whistle. Maybe Steele's wife had decided to come west with their child after all, although hadn't Steele talked about a son, not a daughter?

The girl bounded down, her bonnet pushed back, revealing long, loose hair the color of a newborn fawn. Petite and pretty, the child smiled her thanks to Steele before skipping away.

"Astrid, stay close." The woman spun after the child and revealed her face. Her hair was the same light brown as the child's, and her features were just as pretty but fuller and slightly rounder.

Astrid didn't heed her mother and frisked away from the stagecoach in the direction of Simpkin's General Store.

"Astrid, please." The woman grabbed a fistful of her skirt and picked up her pace, then cast a glance over her shoulder at Steele.

Steele smiled and waved her on. "Go and explore. You know where to find me."

She nodded, her expression emanating gratefulness, before she hustled after her child.

Stroking his mustache, Steele watched the young woman until she disappeared into the store behind the little girl.

Wyatt needed to stop staring, but his curiosity got the better of him. If this woman wasn't Steele's wife, then who was she? Couldn't be his mistress. Steele had never struck Wyatt as the type of man who'd cheat on his wife, no matter how much he had a hankering for a woman.

As if sensing the scrutiny, Steele's gaze swung to Wyatt, where he still stood in the middle of the road. Steele touched the brim of his bowler in greeting.

Wyatt repeated the action.

"Don't look at me like that, McQuaid," Steele called.

"Like what?" Blast it all. Why hadn't he walked away before Steele had caught him staring?

"Like I'm doing something I shouldn't be."

"She ain't your wife, is she?"

"No, of course not." Steele huffed.

"I took you for a God-fearing man who took his marriage vows seriously."

"And I am."

"Then what are you doing with a pretty lady like that?" Wyatt glanced at the dusty window of the general store

but couldn't see inside past the grime to the woman in question.

Steele pressed his lips together and crossed toward him. "Do you think she's pretty?"

Wyatt hadn't seen her long, but it had been enough to know she was a real beauty. "A man'd have to be blind not to think so."

Steele halted in front of him. The dust from the journey lightened the black of his suit coat to a charcoal gray. "Good. Then I want you to marry her."