

A STOP TOO FAR

by Liz Harris

Carter Town, Wyoming,

June, 1874

The train chugged noisily out of Carter Station leaving in its wake the pungent smell of hot metal and tar, and a solitary young woman wreathed in clouds of steam, a worn leather bag at her feet.

Biting her lip in anxiety, the woman looked both ways along the empty platform, wondering what best to do. She glanced behind her to the ticket office, but the agent had gone and there was no one there to give her advice. Turning back, she stared at the wide rutted track ahead of her that led from the station into the town.

The dirt track looked as dry and exhausted as she felt.

If only she hadn't fallen asleep on the train and missed her stop.

With no trains to take her back to Almond Stage until Monday morning, she was now going to be forced to pay for two nights' accommodation in a town that she'd never been to before, and that was some distance from where she ought to be.

Two nights she could ill afford!

Having paid for the ticket to Almond Stage out of the meagre sum she'd managed to save over the years by making small economies, and bought the few things she needed to take with her, there was a frighteningly small amount left over. Two nights in a hotel would use up most of that remaining money.

But she'd no choice. She was going to have to go into the town. And without delay—it was already late in the afternoon, and she was a woman alone in what was clearly a mining town.

Telling herself firmly to be strong, that this was a small set-back on the path to what could only be a better life, she brushed away the film of dust that had settled on the shoulders of the plain brown calico dress that was buttoned to the top with black buttons, slipped her rail ticket into her pocket, tucked her red hair firmly under her bonnet, picked up her bag and started walking up the track.

In front of her, a straggle of miners covered in coal-dust, who had crossed the rail track further down from where she'd been standing, were also making their way up the road. They'd be either looking for a saloon or returning to their homes, she thought as she trailed behind them, but keeping some distance back from them, and a wave of loneliness swept through her.

Followed by panic at the sudden reality of being so completely alone.

Until that day, she'd always been surrounded by family. Not that it was much of a family, which was why she'd finally left the only home she'd ever known, but there'd never been a time when she hadn't had people around her. Until now. And there'd never been a time until now when she'd had to think for herself as they'd always told her what to do, where to go.

Too much so, in fact, she'd frequently thought, bowed down by the weight of her many chores.

Keeping house for her lazy father and brother in the years since her mother had died had been a thankless task, but she'd always assumed that she couldn't do other than put up with being treated as their servant, and a maltreated servant at that.

Until the day her brother had taken his belt to her for burning the grits.

In that moment, she'd known that she'd had enough. Nothing could possibly be worse than the life she was living, and she'd made up her mind to leave at the very first opportunity of doing so.

In that frame of mind, several days later, when she'd seen the Winthrop family's advertisement for a housekeeper, she'd found a reason to go into town and had secretly applied for the job. The acceptance of her application had come back a week after that, and the next day, while her father and brother were still asleep, she'd crept from the house where she'd lived all her life, taken the wagon, driven it hard to the station, and boarded the train for Almond Stage without a goodbye to anyone.

But then things had gone very wrong.

Being desperately tired, she'd let herself give in to sleep and she'd missed her stop. And now she was in a strange place, some distance from where she should be, with no way of getting back to her destination for two days. By then, the Winthrop family might well have changed their minds about taking her on, given that she hadn't arrived when she should have done.

She'd no one but herself to blame for her predicament, she thought in despair as she walked up the pebble-strewn track, glancing at the sawn-wood shacks and wooden-framed stores that lined the boardwalks on either side, the pine lumber of which had gone grey with age, in the hope that she'd see a hotel among them.

A number of saddle horses were hitched to posts in front of the boardwalks, and also an occasional buggy, but there were few people walking around since the day was drawing to a close, and even fewer women, and she kept her eyes down on the ground as much as she could, not wanting to draw the attention of the miners whose shift had ended.

The loud raucous sound of men laughing and beer glasses breaking burst into the stillness that had been settling on to the late afternoon. Startled, she glanced up and saw that she was fast approaching a saloon. The miners she'd been trailing had just pushed open the saloon's swing doors and were disappearing inside.

Her heart racing, she hurried across to the boardwalk on the opposite side from the saloon, and hastened her steps, anxious to put the saloon behind her as quickly as possible. A woman on her own should avoid such places, especially in a mining town, where men drank heavily at the end of a day's hard labour under the ground. She must make sure of being off the street before darkness fell.

To her tremendous relief, she saw a hotel ahead of her, and she hurried towards it.

Pushing the door open, she found herself in a small entrance hall. A dimly lit corridor faced her, with a counter to its right. There was a room on her left, the door to which was slightly ajar, and through the gap, she saw tables set for dinner. The sight of them made her realise how hungry she was.

A jangling noise came from the end of the corridor, and she turned to look along the corridor. A tall, lean man was coming towards her with an easy gait, a bunch of keys attached to a ring that hung from a leather belt slung low on his hips. She saw him register her presence, hesitate a moment, and then go and stand behind the counter.

'I guess you want a room,' he said, and he smiled.

She caught her breath. The deep blue eyes staring at her were set in the face of the finest-looking man she'd ever seen. Her stomach lurched, and she felt herself go red.

'How much a night?' she managed to ask.

'Two dollars. And two bits extra if you want me to bring you hot water.'

She sighed inwardly. Her money would run to two nights, but not to much more. And certainly not to food.

'Two nights, please, with hot water tonight.'

'Will you want dinner both nights?'

She threw a quick glance of longing towards the dining room, but shook her head.

'Just breakfast tomorrow.'

Sensing him follow her gaze, she turned back and signed the ledger he'd pushed towards her.

'Dinner comes with the room if you stay two nights,' he said. 'I should've made that clear.'

She smiled in embarrassment. 'Thank you, but I don't need charity. I won't take what I haven't earned or can't pay for.'

He nodded. 'I can respect that, ma'am. May I ask why you've come to Carter Town?'

She explained that she'd missed her station and there wasn't a train until Monday to take her back to Almond Stage. She added that she'd taken a post as housekeeper for the Winthrop family. 'Do you know them?' she finished by asking.

'I know of them, ma'am.' He paused. 'I reckon they're not an easy family, or so people say.'

'Nor was mine, which is why I left. I was so desperate to leave that if I hadn't seen the Winthrops' advertisement, I'd have answered one of the many requests in the newspaper for a woman to go west and live with a man as his wife.' She blushed more deeply. 'I don't know what you and your wife must think of people like me, willing to move into the home of someone they don't know, but—'

'My wife died four years ago. Like me, she'd sympathise with anyone so unhappy that takin' up with strangers was better than what they had.'

'Thank you,' she said quietly.

'A fresh start can be good,' he said. 'I'm soon to have one, too. Five years ago, I staked a claim for a homestead on good ranchin' land, and I'll be leaving Carter Town before the year is out to work my land. It's what my wife and I had wanted to do for a real long time, and I'm gonna be makin' her dream come true and mine. But I've long accepted that I'll be

doing it alone. But I should stop talking. You must be tired. I'll show you to your room, and then I'll bring you your hot water.'

Having finished her bath and not wanting to go to bed at so early an hour, and especially not when she was feeling as hungry as she was, she put her brown dress back on and started to cross the room to a chair beside the window. As she passed the door, she was surprised to see that a piece of paper had been pushed underneath. Frowning in puzzlement, she picked it up, and unfolded it.

'Would you have answered the following advertisement, I'm wondering?' the note began.

'Wanted, a bride for a first-time homesteader. Must have red hair, green eyes and a real beautiful smile. Must be prepared to be loved every day for the rest of her life. And if she thought she might be able to give some love back, well that would be a mighty welcome thing.'

Your dinner is outside your room, ma'am. But if you would have applied for this post, please don't eat it alone, but come and eat with me tonight. Joshua Stone.'

Trembling with joy, she clutched the paper to her chest as she tried to steady herself.

Then her heart beating fast, she put the letter into her pocket on top of the train ticket, pinched her cheeks with her fingers, took a deep breath, opened the door, picked up the tray and walked along the corridor to happiness.