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## Chapter 1

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Stormy did not realize the train had slowed until the conductor announced their arrival at Tanner. She folded her letter and placed it in an envelope.

Steam rolled from the engine as she and a group of passengers disembarked the train. The crowd dispersed, leaving Stormy standing alone clutching a bag in one hand and her letter in the other.

"Please, sir," she asked the stationmaster.

"Yes, ma'am, how may I help you?"

"Has a Doctor Anderson been here?"

"No, I don't recollect anyone by that name. Was he supposed to meet you?"

"Yes," Stormy muttered.

"Well, I wouldn't worry, ma'am. I don't think any man would forget a pretty little thing like you. He'll be along."

Disappointment washed over Stormy. "Oh... thank you."

"Wait a minute, ma'am, where do you need to go?"

"Solley's Springs."

"Solley's Springs, that's only a thirty-minute carriage ride.

You can rent a carriage at the livery and pay someone to drive it back."

"Thank you, sir." Stormy knew full well she would not take his advice. Although she had some money, she needed to be frugal or her money would soon run out.

"Oh, sir, one last question."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please, which direction is Solley's Springs?"

"East. Why you ask'n? You ain't planning to walk, er you?"

"No, sir, but I need to know which way to go once I rent a carriage," Stormy lied.

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"Darn, no canteen. How could I forget to bring water? Because you don't think of things like that," Stormy berated herself as she walked down the dusty road. "Stormy, you're just plain addle headed just like Pa always said. I don't know how long I've been walking or how far I need to go. Well, at least I have a dammed hat on. Maybe what brains I have left won't get burned up."

Stormy sat on a large rock by the side of the road. She needed a break to rest her body and think about her circumstances. Sweat trickled down her back as she wiped her forehead with the back of her gritty hand. Her parched throat burned with desire for a cool drink of water. She brushed her finger over her nose. "It's burning; I know it is. My skin always burns when I'm out in the sun too long," Stormy sighed, "the curse of a pale-faced redhead, I suppose."

Stormy gazed down the road, wondering how far she had traveled. She turned and squinted, barely making out a dark figure coming up the road toward her. Stormy rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision. As the object approached, she heard the rattling of a wagon and made out the form of a team of horses.

Fright danced in her stomach, but she shoved it down. The wagon stopped, stirring up a large dust cloud.

Stormy coughed as she breathed in the gritty air.

"Howdy, ma'am," said the gangly youth sitting on the wagon. "Whatcha doin' out here?"

"W-walking to Solley's Springs," Stormy mumbled.

The young blond-haired boy chuckled.

"Ma'am, it's a fer piece to Solley's. Why didn't you take a wagon?"

"Because I couldn't afford to rent one."

"Oh, well, ma'am, my name's Joe Sommers. I'm heading to Solley's, got a delivery for the general store. You can ride with me if'n you like. I-I promise," the boy placed his hand over his heart, "I'm a gentleman. I'm from Solley's. My pa owns the store." Joe's bright blue eyes twinkled as he smiled and held out his hand to help her up.

"A-all right." Stormy hesitated, then clasped his hand and climbed onto the wagon. Joe clucked at the team and the wagon creaked its way down the road. "Thank you, Joe," Stormy muttered.

"Glad to help, Miss..."

"Cooper, Stormy Cooper."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Cooper." Joe placed both reins in one hand and used his free hand to tip his hat. "There's water in the canteen under the seat; help yourself."

"Thank you." Stormy reached under the seat and found the canteen. She guzzled the fresh liquid, causing some water to dribble down her chin. She coughed.

"Slow down, Miss Cooper, ya gonna drown yourself."

"I guess I was thirstier than I thought." She smiled.

"So, ma'am, why you goin' to Solley's Springs?"

"I have a position there."

"A position?"

"A job."

"Oh. That's great. Whatcha gonna do?"

"I'm to be an assistant for Doctor Anderson."

"Doc Anderson? You gonna work for Anderson?"

Stormy noted the element of surprise and warning in his voice. "Yes, is there something wrong?"

Joe huffed. "Well, he ain't known to be the friendliest man around, but I gotta admit he is a fine doc."

"Well, Joe," Stormy gave a weak smile, "I'm not working for him cause he's friendly. I'm working for him because I need a job."

"I understand, ma'am, but you're brave if'n you can stay with him. If ya need anything, come to my pa's store, Sommer's General Store, and Ma and Pa will help you."

"Thank you, Joe, I will remember that if I need anything," Stormy mumbled.

She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead. *What have I gotten myself into?*