

NELLIE FROM NEWPORT

OPERATION BIG ROCK BRIDES - BOOK FIVE



NORA NOLAN



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Nora Nolan
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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

PROLOGUE



*BIG ROCK, WYOMING TERRITORY, MID TO LATE
1880S...*

*D*ear Philip,
We've done business now for nearly fifteen years. I started doing business with you because of recommendations from other ranchers, but I kept doing business with you because you came to be a trusted and good friend and I treasure that. Now I need help, big help. I have a couple of favors and among my circle of acquaintances upon whom I could call, you are uniquely qualified to help me with both of them. It's never been easy for me to ask for help, especially for help of this magnitude, but I'm afraid it's unavoidable now. I'm dying. I'm told I might only have a few weeks.

I need for you to come to Newport to liquidate my livestock and sell my ranch. It might be that other local ranchers would be interested, but I just haven't felt up to the task of talking to them about buying. I'm weak as a kitten and can't even remain standing for more than a few minutes before I have to sit or lie down.

I want you to keep a suitable amount from the proceeds for your

own efforts and put the remainder in an account for my daughter, Nellie. I trust your judgment.

As for Nellie, well, if you thought that last request was a big one, then you'll think this one's a doozy for sure. I would like for you to take her back to Big Rock and find her a husband. You've shared with me how the mail order bride business is flourishing in your town and how many good men there are who would like to find wives.

Several eligible men have moved away from here since that gold lode was found east of the Indian Territory. There are still some men around here, just a few, but I fear her chances of finding a suitable mate are slim. How shall I explain the reason for this? I can only suggest it's because they've met her already. My Nellie has been my prize, my absolute joy, for all these years, especially since her mother passed a few years ago. Now I realize I have done her no favors for letting her get away with doing whatever she wants and giving her whatever her heart desires.

It's taken a bit of persuasion and more time than I care to reveal, but Nellie has agreed to go to Big Rock upon my death and burial, provided you agree to help us in the manner I'm asking. It helped to persuade her somewhat when my own hands said they would not stay on to work if she were running the ranch.

Philip, please understand Nellie isn't a wild beast or even a contrary shrew, at least most of the time. She's quite a pretty girl but sometimes acts as though she's too well aware of it. Some might be of the opinion she's only aware of herself. Underneath it all, I see a sweet spirit inside her. It just needs to be coaxed out and polished up some. She might be in need of a bit of comeuppance. All right, truth be told, there's no 'might' to it. The girl needs the structure and discipline I've denied her all these years.

I do pray you'll find it within you to help me. I'll be completely ready to meet my maker if I know my daughter, the ranch hands and my stock are taken care of.

. . .

*SINCERELY YOURS,
Albert Lancaster*

PHILIP READ the letter as soon as he picked it up from the mail counter at the mercantile. He hadn't been expecting a letter from Al since he usually wired short messages. Philip and his wife, Bethie, discussed it outside in their wagon on the way across the street and down the block to the telegraph office. Bethie reread the letter as Philip went inside to send a wire to his friend.

WE'LL BE THERE in ten days on the 12th STOP We will take care of everything STOP Philip Hickam

PHILIP WAS ALREADY a successful livestock broker a few years prior when he met and married Bethie Benson in Big Rock and decided to live there permanently. His only relative, a cousin named Molly McBride, lived there and he wanted to be close to her. He and Bethie built up their own thriving ranch but he still was an active broker and was often called upon by struggling ranchers for consultation. He'd consulted with Al Lancaster several times over the years as Al expanded his operations.

CHAPTER 1



The Ladies' Aid Society attendees took their seats, some wondering why Bethie's husband had chosen to attend. When Harriet pounded her gavel twice for attention, the group all faced her inquisitively.

She smiled beatifically at them. Harriet always did love an audience. "You may notice we have a visitor this afternoon, and quite a handsome one I might add. Philip Hickam has just today been made aware of a young woman in need of a husband. Philip, I'll turn my podium over to you."

Philip stood and addressed the group. "I received a letter today from a dear friend of mine who has asked me to take care of some things for him. I believe the best way I can explain it is to just read the letter to you."

The group listened attentively and a few twitters arose here and there as Philip read the letter aloud. He looked up when he finished. "So, ladies, you now know as much as I know of this situation. I can tell you that Al Lancaster is a good man whom I consider to be a dear friend as well as business associate. I already wired him and told him that Bethie and I'll be there in twelve days. I hope while I'm gone you can put your thinking

caps on and come up with suitable matches for Nellie, at least tentative ones. You all heard what we're up against here."

Harriet stood to be heard. "We'll be looking, Philip, and I'll make it my own personal mission to spearhead the effort. I'll talk to the men. I trust she'll be your guest when she arrives?"

"Ah, yes, she will. She'll stay with us for as long as it takes to find her a spouse."

"I have to ask," Evie Glover said. "What if we don't find one for her?"

"I'll continue to be responsible for her. Bethie and I discussed that. We have that big spread and I might even build her a little house on it if she ends up not marrying. She will have a good deal of money in her own right, and if she becomes disillusioned with our town, it will be difficult to persuade her to stay. I will try, though, because of my promise to her father."

"I'm not worried about her wanting to leave," Molly McBride said, smiling at her cousin Philip. "Everyone who moves to this town loves it. The only people I know of who moved away had to because of a family situation."

"That's true," he said, also grinning, "but you heard the description of her. Who knows what she might do?"

"I suspect," Molly countered, "that Al's going to expect you to step up and free her of some of those bad habits."

Some of the other ladies chuckled at that, including Philip's wife.

Philip took a deep breath and flashed a smirk. "Bethie and I have talked about that, too. We both think I'm equal to the task."

"Well, I hope you can knock some of that behavior out of her before she arrives," Harriet said. "Even so, I think we need to look for a certain kind of prospective groom. He needs to be one who won't be afraid to be firm when it's warranted. I have a few in mind. Philip, give me your opinion. Do we need to make the men fully aware up front of what they might be up against?"

He considered that. "I would want to know, so yes. I can leave

this letter with you so they can read it themselves. Reading about her father's pain and concern might soften their opinion of her. Remind them that we don't know how long her father will linger. It might be several weeks, maybe even months, before she arrives. By that time, maybe I'll have had time to, as you said, knock some of that attitude away. Does anyone have any questions? We need to get home, get packed, and get the boys ready to stay with their cousins." He grinned at Molly.

Harriet stood again and walked to the podium. "No, Philip, you two go on. We've got it from here. You two have a safe trip now, you hear? Bring yourselves and that gal back to us, each in one piece, all right?" She smiled and blew a kiss toward Bethie.

"All right, then," Philip said. "Harriet, I'll wire you and keep you updated on Al's condition. That way you might have a better idea of the time frame we're dealing with."

The Hickams left and Harriet picked up another piece of paper. "We have another young woman who would like to come here and make a match. Let me tell you about her. Let's see here. Her name is Lily Holt and she's a schoolteacher. We need one of those, so let's see if we can find a man for her right here in town, closer to the schoolhouse than the outlying areas."