

An Excerpt From: CANTRELL'S BRIDE

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Nathan studied the young woman seated on the wagon seat.

Damn. What had Neil been thinking?

He'd assumed from the list of requirements he'd given Neil his brother would send him an older woman like the governess they'd had growing up. Older, strict, unappealing. Certainly not this round-faced miss with the warm brown hair pulled back in a serviceable knot, flushed pink cheeks and excitement in her eyes.

Dammit, Neil.

His brother knew he wasn't in need of a wife for his own physical desire and he certainly wasn't ever falling for the foolishness others called love again. No, he'd learned his lesson the first time. Women—especially young, beautiful women—couldn't be trusted.

Nathan ground his thin cigar under his boot toe before stepping forward to offer a hand to the woman. She hesitated, a look of fear darkening the excitement he'd seen in her eyes. For a moment he thought she'd refuse him. Then something in her changed. Whatever frightened her—him or the new town—she shoved it aside, took a deep breath, sat a little straighter and put her hand in his.

"I'm Laura, Mr. Cantrell." She gave him a determined look as he helped her down from the wagon.

Standing on the ground she came only to the top of his shoulders and had to tilt her head back to look up at him. For a brief moment he was caught in the clear appraisal of her deep emerald eyes. A hint of roses, reminiscent of his mother's garden, wafted up to him.

A movement to his right caught his attention. He glanced around and stiffened. The townsfolk had stepped out of their businesses to watch.

Anger flared inside him. It wasn't idle curiosity that brought them out like rats searching for food. They wanted to

make his business fodder for their gossip mill once more.

Damn. He hated their scrutiny, had his fill of it while Kirsten lived and then again when he'd brought Rachel home. He needed to get out of here. He'd be damned if he'd discuss this situation with his new wife on the streets of Doverton.

Grasping his bride's elbow, he half hauled, half led her to his wagon.

"Mr. Cantrell." Her prim voice stopped him before he actually tossed her up onto the seat. "I think I can manage this myself, if you wish to get my belongings."

"Your belongings?" He released her and glanced back at Zeke's wagon where the old coot had unloaded two boxes.

"Yer wife done brought a few things with her, Nathan." A large carpetbag landed beside Laura's wooden boxes. Zeke leaned against the wagon's tailgate, grinning like an idiot.

Nathan glanced around the street. Everyone stood watching him to see if he'd accept Laura as his wife or send her packing. Getting a complete stranger to marry him in order to have someone to care for Rachel was a mistake. He never should've listened to Micah's crazy scheme.

With a look up at his wife, he saw her staring ahead, her back ramrod straight and her lower lip caught between her teeth. She knew everyone was watching them. Her quiet dignity doused his indignation.

Muttering an oath, Nathan hefted up the first of the boxes. *What the hell does she have in here? Bricks?* He nodded at Zeke. "Don't just stand there, help me get it all loaded."

The wiry mule skinner lifted the carpetbag and set it in the wagon. He walked around to the side where Laura sat. Nathan shoved a heavy crate onto the wagon as Zeke doffed his worn raccoon hat and offered his hand to Laura.

"Ma'am, it sure was a pleasure makin' yer acquaintance. You ever need anythin' at all, you just give old Zeke here a holler."

Without hesitation, Laura took his hand and shook it once. "You were a delight to travel with, Mr. Zeke. Your stories made the time pass quickly. Thank you for bringing me safely here." She settled a very sincere and tender smile on the old man. The smile lit up her eyes, softened her features and

transformed her face into beauty that struck Nathan so hard he nearly dropped the box he was lifting onto the wagon.

“Yer most welcome, ma’am.” The mule skinner’s weathered skin turned a deep red under his beard and he actually scuffed his boot in the dirt as if he were a smitten pup.

Recovered from his reaction to her smile, Nathan rolled his eyes and settled in the seat beside the woman. She had the old man blushing – great. He’d married another flirt. He flicked the reins and set the horses in motion. His new wife grabbed hold of the seat to keep from falling out. Zeke jumped out of the way.

Heading west out of town, Nathan stewed for the better part of the five-mile trip. No way was he keeping another flirt for a wife. His gut instincts told him she was nothing but trouble. But then, weren’t all women?

He glanced at the woman beside him. She sat stiffly, looking off to the side. The only clue the town’s rudeness had upset her was the way she clutched at the wagon seat with one hand and fingered a locket hanging on a chain against her coat.

She sure was a quiet one. Totally unlike Kirsten.

From the moment they’d met, Kirsten chatted and flirted with him until she had him married to her and her hands on his money. He’d done anything she wanted, loved her with all his heart and given her every dime he had. It was never enough.

Now he knew better than to trust a woman with anything – even one that appeared different from his she-bitch first wife.

The team turned the bend in the road just below his farm.

“Is that your home?”

Instinctively Nathan bristled. He’d heard those exact words before. His farm might not resemble a Southern plantation, but it was all his and he was damn proud of it. He turned to inform the woman at his side just that.

The words died on his lips.

Instead of sneering with a look of disdain as Kirsten had when she’d first seen his farm, Laura’s face softened with the same smile she’d given Zeke. Again it struck him how much it transformed her looks. It wasn’t a flirty smile. No, it appeared

to come from her heart. Focused on his home, she seemed to drink in the sight before her—just like he had the first time he rode into the valley nestled between several mountain peaks.

He stopped the team for a moment to admire the picture his home presented. The sight never failed to please him. The road led down between pastures fenced by logs to the white clapboard house. Now in the middle of winter, it nearly blended into the snow except for the dark roof and windows. Other dark shapes dotted the landscape. The chicken coop, outhouse and lower barn spread out in a crescent shape within walking distance of the house. In the upper fields stood a second barn for housing grain and cattle throughout the winter.

Behind the house, far enough to prevent flooding from the spring runoff, the creek cut a meandering path through the evergreens farther down the valley to join other creeks that fed into the South Platte River.

“It’s lovely,” Laura whispered.

Her awed appreciation at his home eased some of the tension humming through him. Nathan started the team up the narrow lane to the house. He drove around back and stopped the wagon next to the porch. While he hopped off his side, Laura scrambled to lower herself down before he could help her.

For some reason, it bothered him that she wouldn’t want his help. It couldn’t be that he’d enjoyed her nearness when he helped her from Zeke’s wagon.

“Come on inside and warm up.” He held open the kitchen door and allowed her to pass into the house first. The scent of roses again. How did she smell like roses in the middle of winter?

Nathan followed her inside, going to the wood-burning stove. He stoked up the fire then stood and studied her under that hooded gaze of his. Finally he stalked to the door. “It should get warm enough for you to take off your coat in a few minutes. I need to see to the animals, then I’ll be back to talk.”

Laura caught the tobacco scent from the cigar as he passed. A shiver of awareness ran over her body, followed by a

moment of apprehension. Never in her life had she been this alone with a man. Given his surly greeting, she wondered if she'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

As the door closed behind him her shoulders slumped. Things weren't going as well as she'd hoped. On the cross-country trip, she'd prayed Mr. Cantrell would accept her, if not with open arms, then at least with gratitude for her help. What if the trip had been for naught?

After setting her carpetbag on the table, she moved around the stark kitchen. The windows were bare, the walls painted white. No decorations of any kind hung anywhere. Opening the cupboards, she found chaos among the dishes and cookware, as if someone had just thrown them inside and slammed the doors shut. A layer of dust covered most of the shelves. She glanced down at the floor. It had been swept recently, but she doubted it had seen the use of a mop in some time.

Through the window she watched her husband drive the team of horses and wagon between the barn's wide doors. He closed the doors and disappeared behind them. She might as well look about the rest of the downstairs.

The hallway led to the front parlor. Here a small settee and two wingback chairs sat beneath dust-covered sheets. Two end tables that hadn't seen dusting in years flanked the chairs. The mantle clock's hands stood in idle disuse. Otherwise the windows had no curtains and the room was as empty as the kitchen.

Shaking her head, Laura closed the door and returned to the kitchen. Were the bedrooms as bleak? She didn't dare go upstairs to find out until she'd been invited.

The kitchen had warmed considerably so she removed her coat and both the sweaters she'd needed for warmth during the wagon trip over the pass. She laid them on the back of a ladder-back kitchen chair and sat at the table to consider her situation.

Mr. Cantrell might not want her as his wife, but he certainly needed her, even if he didn't know it yet.