

*Love Finds an
Outlaw Preview*

SMALL-TOWN BRIDES

DIANA LESIRE BRANDMEYER

DKD BOOKS

For Pastor Randy and his wife, Jean

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CHAPTER ONE

THE STRING QUARTET MARY Owen's father had hired for her small birthday dinner played in the background. The receiving line thinned to a few more single men waiting for an introduction.

She'd been pleasant to each of them, asking a question to judge their excitement for adventure. None would go west, even to visit, and one thought riding the trolley thrilling. She planned on repeating the responses to her father in the morning. Proving that she had indeed attempted to find someone interesting enough to consider marrying.

"William Crossen."

Her father shook the man's hand.

"My father is a friend of Mr. Wagner."

"Yes, he told me you might be attending. Let me introduce you to my daughter, Miss Owen."

"Charmed, Mr.—"

"Wy— William Crossen, Miss Owen."

"Thank you, I've met so many for the first time tonight. Tell me, what do you think about traveling to Africa?"

"I haven't considered it. Are you planning a trip?"

His eyebrows scrunched. He didn't care for her question. She almost sighed but held back. One more handsome gentleman, but not one who would gallop beside her up a mountain or blaze trails through a forest. "Not at the moment, but asking questions helps me remember to whom I've spoken."

Attending and trying, as her father requested, to find someone she might marry was the only way he'd allow her to go with Aunt Cora on a small adventure. Even now, she had yet to see the tickets. She would get them at breakfast if Father felt she held up her end of this event.

And she had. The gloves riding her arms up to her elbows begged to be unbuttoned, slid off, and tucked away. The dress, a breathtaking wonder Father ordered from Paris for her, held her tight at the waist. Did Queen Victoria feel like this? Bound to responsibility with cloth and silk?

Would her mother, if she had lived, understand how much Mary wanted to be like Aunt Cora? Or would Mother have trained Mary to be like her, a lady at all times, content in the life she lived?

Aunt Cora, her father's sister, bounced in and out of Mary's life with her exciting travel tales and trunks full of exotic trinkets and clothing. Her spinster life intrigued Mary.

"All you need is one, Mo." Father whispered in her ear, startling her. "Marry, and you'll be taken care of forever."

"You promised not to call me that." Mo, the nickname he used when trying to get her to follow his chosen path, his clear intention tonight. He'd combined the initials of her first and last names to get it when she fussed about not having a middle name like her friends. The problem arose when she wanted to go in a different direction from his. And she did.

"I sense you are not present in your mind tonight. Why is it so difficult for you to think of being married? I'm to blame for not giving you another mother."

"Father, you say that, and yet you aren't married. Perhaps marriage isn't as wonderful as you wish me to believe."

"What you don't remember is the joy I shared with your mother. That is what I wish for you, dearest. I haven't found another who could outshine her. It wouldn't be fair to marry someone I couldn't love as much as my dear wife."

"Maybe that is my problem as well. You've made your marriage to Mother sound so perfect that I want the same. I want to love someone who loves adventure and doesn't intend for me to wed, live, and die in the same home. He isn't in this room. I wonder if he exists."

“You promised me after this trip, this adventure, you will accept someone.” He gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “You will understand so much more when you have children, the need to protect them.”

She met his eyes, surprised to see a bit of moisture in the corners. “I said I would try. Please, can we enjoy my birthday together? I dislike being at odds with you. Especially as you will be leaving for New York in a few days and I will be off on my grand adventure.”

“You need to take care of Aunt Cora as well. That’s why I’m letting you go. I’m afraid she’ll skip meals and something will happen to her. Well, that’s not a cheerful thought, nor is this evening turning out the way I’d hoped. We should have held this at home, with your friends.”

“I see them often enough. Besides, it feels as if you’ve already paraded every marriageable male back home and in Topeka in front of me.”

“And none of them, not even one, interested you a little, Mo?” Her father led her to the dining room.

“None, Father. They were all content to stay where they were, none of them expressed a desire to see the world. And shallow. It’s all about how they will work in the family business. If I become a missionary nun, at least I’ll go places and work with God.”

“You could work with a husband, help him in his career by making sure his home is run in a timely and efficient manner.”

“Father, you can’t be saying that as if you mean it. If you felt a wife’s role crucial to a man’s career, you would have remarried despite your declaration of how much you loved my mother.”

“Maybe tonight will be different.”

Topeka, Kansas was worlds away from her life in St. Louis. In a few days, she would be on a train with Aunt Cora. Sent away again, but this time by her own choice.



Wyatt recognized the glassy look in Miss Owen’s eyes. Had she met too many people? Or perhaps, like him, she wanted to be elsewhere? At least being a male, he had more choices than to be paraded in front of wealthy men seeking a wife.

Potted plants hugged the corners along with a few women who seemed to wear a cloak of invisibility that kept most suitors from seeing them. Was it intentional? Could there be women who didn't want to marry? According to his father, all women were meant to marry. But then his father was brought up in a different time. Still, tonight's attendance by so many available women made him think things might not have changed. It could be a story, but not one that he would be willing to write. Articles like that did not build a career.

The question Miss Owen asked him about Africa intrigued him, as it was far from the usual conversations he'd had in receiving lines.

Maybe he'd find a story here if he stuck it out through the evening.



Mary's heels felt the bite of the too-tight tapestry shoes. They matched the green in her dress, and she'd been so sure they would loosen as the night went on. Her mistake now had her sitting alone next to a potted tree. Her shoulders relaxed as she took in the occupants of the room, the unmarried women huddled together, chirping like birds, probably hoping one of the eligibles would single them out. Hiding by the tree worked to her advantage.

“—leaving Sunday on the Pueblo Excursion train.” A male voice with a touch of excitement continued. “Should be quite the adventure.”

She caught the words and held them close. Did Father have anything to do with this?

CHAPTER TWO

AS MARY APPROACHED THE dining room the next morning, Aunt Cora's voice drifted down the hall. When she heard her name, she paused to listen.

"If you don't let Mary go, you'll drive her to the jungles in Africa."

"Why would you think that, Cora?"

"Have you not paid any attention to your daughter these past two years? She reads those missionary magazines over and over."

"It's a passing fancy. Saving the world is nothing more than a fantasy. Once she marries and has children of her own—"

Mary wanted to rush in and explain that it wasn't a childhood dream, but she held back.

"What if she doesn't?"

"Last night she might have met someone. I saw her chatting with a few men who would make decent husbands."

"By your standards. What if she wants to marry for love? Have you ever asked her?"

"Nonsense. We've discussed her need to marry. Love hasn't come into the conversation. She doesn't have to live the way you do, Cora."

"Brother, that's incorrect and you know it. You know why I chose this life. You might as well put her on a ship to Africa tomorrow if you aren't going to let her go with me on this excursion."

"Cora—"

“No, I don’t want to hear your excuses. When a telegram arrives saying she has been eaten by cannibals or lost her leg because of a snake bite, remember you could have prevented it.”

Cannibals! Mary covered her mouth.



Squaring her shoulders and preparing for battle, Mary entered the dining room. Aunt Cora sat across from Father.

“We didn’t wait for you, dear. We thought you might sleep in this morning after last night’s event.”

“The pancakes and sausage are quite good, Mo.” Her father pushed back in his chair. “I’ve had a few too many.”

Mary filled her plate from the buffet. She had to go on this trip. If she built on what Aunt Cora said about being a missionary, it might sway her father.

At the table, her father stood and pulled out her chair. “Your aunt and I were discussing the trip.”

“Yes, Father?” She sat and put her napkin in her lap. “I did what you asked. I met every male in Topeka last night.”

“Did you find any that you’d care to see again?” He picked up his coffee cup and drank.

“There were so many, and they all seemed the same. Boring. Not one took me seriously when I asked about going west or liking adventure.”

“That’s good. It means they were stable, good providers. They won’t be wandering off, leaving their family to fend for themselves.” He set the cup on the saucer. The coffee sloshed, breaching the rim.

“You’ve taught me how to shoot, Father. I think I can take care of myself. If I don’t marry, I won’t have to protect a family.” She sliced through the pancake and then stabbed it with her fork. He wasn’t going to let her go with Aunt Cora.

“Brother, this is nothing more than a quick trip to the Colorado Territory. Let her go so she can see what adventure is about.” Aunt Cora placed her hands in her lap. “Mary, you’ll consider your father’s request. On this trip, will you think about the men your father pre-

sented to you, what they can offer you, and give your father an answer when we return?”

Her pancake swelled in her mouth. She chewed. She could do this, take the trip and decide later. She nodded.

“That’s the best I can hope for, then. Mo, you may go, but you must take care of your aunt. Truly, this is the real reason I can give for acquiescing to your request. Your aunt must eat often or, as you know, she passes out.”

“Really, Brother, I am quite capable of feeding myself.”

“But if something was to go wrong—”

“I promise to take care of her, Father.”

His shoulders sagged. “Then I will allow this trip.” He reached into his suit pocket and withdrew the train tickets. He set them on the table. “I’m not fond of this idea, but if you promise to consider marriage when you return, you have my blessing.”

Mary’s heels bounced against the carpet. Should she run to her father and hug him? She stilled her feet. She wasn’t a little girl anymore. He needed to see that. “Thank you, Father. I will do as you ask.” Then, before he could change his mind, she reached over, grabbed the tickets, and placed them in her lap.

“It’s going to be a grand adventure, Aunt Cora.”



Wyatt Crossen leaned against the edge of the pocket door of his father’s office after dinner. He crossed his arms waiting for his father to criticize his choices.

When his mother excused herself for the evening and his father suggested they go into the library for a discussion, he knew his father would issue another demand concerning his life.

His father sat in the largest chair by the fireplace. “Come, sit.”

With heavy feet, he made his way to the smaller chair, his mother’s. Did it make her feel as unequal as it did him?

“It’s time you find a wife.”

And there it was, the biggest demand of all.

“I’m not ready. I can’t support a family on my wages.”

“You could if you worked for me.” His father tapped the armrest.

“We’ve been through this argument. I want to write, not work with numbers in a ledger. It’s important to me to make my own way in this world.” He regretted his words, knowing they would open a sore that refused to heal.

“Are you saying I didn’t?” His father pounded his fingers against the wood.

“No, Father. Without you, the business would have failed, but the difference is you wanted to work in the shipping business. My heart doesn’t lie there.” And it never would. If only he could make his father understand. “Was there ever a time you wanted to do something else?”

“I did what was expected of me. My heart never strayed.”

His father stared past him. Was he lying? “Never?”

“It’s bad enough you work for that paper, but to refuse to marry is unacceptable. This family needs an heir. You are the only son. Do you understand it is your duty to provide one?” His father’s cheeks flushed, cranberry red next to his white beard.

“Father—” Wyatt leaned forward, gripping the armrests.

“I’m not finished. No one in this family has worked with his hands since your great-great-grandfather bought the shipping company. You are too much like your mother’s family, living life through God, letting Him direct all your actions.” He punctuated his words with a wave of his hand. “Well, son, that will not get you where you need to be in this life. Just look at them. Preachers and farmers. That’s all they will ever be.”

Wyatt disagreed. Perhaps his father hadn’t worked with his hands, but those before him had. His grandfather told him stories about sailing on the ships, what it was like to be on the ocean in a storm, and in a country where English wasn’t spoken. As for letting God direct his actions, that wasn’t going to change.

“I sent you to the Wagners’ last week. Did you find at least one woman you could imagine being married to?”

“I went because you requested it, but again, Father, I will marry someone I love, a woman God made for me to be my helpmate.” Miss Owen had surprised him with her question about Africa, but she was from a Trenton and would return there. Besides, he’d be off in a few days himself. It did seem as if God placed interesting women in his path but then swept them away before he could pursue them.

“Pure foolishness. But realize you and any children you sire will be penniless if you don’t marry this year.”

“That may be, but I won’t dishonor God by making a mockery out of one of His sacraments. I trust He will provide what my family will need.”

“What about ‘Honor your father?’” Father fisted his fingers and pounded the armrest.

“That’s what I did this past Saturday evening by attending the Wagners’ function. Along with that, I write under the pen name Wyatt Cross, as you insisted, in addition to a host of other demands these past years.” And he’d become used to that name.

“Is it so hard for you to stay in Topeka? For your mother’s sake?”

“Not as long as I am free to travel.” His father brought out an immature side of him. He knew why marriage and staying in Topeka were important to his parents. Knew it too well. He’d heard so many times growing up how he was a miracle. Their only child. Though his mother called him a blessing from God, his father seemed to think having William was a right in life.

“You aren’t our prisoner, William. With the money we have, you could travel anywhere you choose.” He slumped in his chair. “We’re growing old too fast. Someday you’ll understand.” His father rubbed his balding head.

“I’m sorry. I know you wish the best for me and always have. I’ll consider what you are asking and continue to pray for God to soon send the one He has chosen for me.”

A muscle ticked in his father’s jaw. “God again.”

CHAPTER THREE

MARY STOOD ON THE platform waiting to board the Pueblo Excursion train. She shivered in the March wind despite the woolen traveling suit she wore. No, it wasn't from the cold. Excitement coursed through her, sending goosebumps down her spine. She was really doing this. Her first adventure, and if she could get Aunt Cora's secret from her, it would not be the last.

"Mary, stop bouncing." Aunt Cora touched Mary's arm. "It's a train ride—"

"Not an elephant ride in India. I know. But to me, it's as exciting. Imagine being cooped up in boarding school for years, Aunt Cora. The only time I had fun was at home when Father let me practice shooting. You were so fortunate that you didn't have to endure the life I've had."

"Yes, your life has been horrible. Attending school must have been similar to incarceration." Aunt Cora scowled.

"But it was. We were told when to eat, when to sleep, and when to pray." Mary knew many girls would've been happy to go to school. But all she'd ever wanted to do was grow up at home and experience all St. Louis had to offer. Her father's ideas about appropriate experiences differed from hers. If he would have let her, she would have volunteered at the orphanage. Instead, he sent her away to boarding school. He might as well have kept her locked up.

"Protecting you," he'd said. From what, she had no idea.

She wanted to travel the world. Her father wanted her to be a wife. They'd been at odds for months. When Aunt Cora had suggested Mary come with her on the excursion to see what else life offered, Father's eyes had narrowed before he'd said no. Then Aunt Cora told him about her illness and how she needed a companion on this trip. He relented.

"It hasn't been a dull life from what you've said in your letters," Aunt Cora said.

"Schoolgirl fun and pranks, and no, I didn't come up with them. Not all of them. It doesn't compare to the excitement you've had, Aunt Cora."

"You have no idea what I have endured, Mary."

Mary chose not to reply, even though she disagreed. Today was a joyful day. Even the rumble of the baggage carts reminded her of low laughter. So many people gathered on the platform and beyond it would be impossible to count all of them. Men, of course, outnumbered the women from what she saw, but there were more than she'd expected.

The crowd came to a halt. Mary overheard a couple close to them talking. She turned slightly to see them, surprised to find them head to head whispering and smiling. They traveled together? And were happy? She couldn't pull a memory of her mother and father ever doing that.

"Get your Pueblo Excursion photo made here." A photographer stood in front of a drooping banner displaying a steam engine in front of a mountain. "Remember this trip forever!"

"Let's do it, Aunt Cora." Mary swayed and clapped her hands. Her purse swung from her wrist, almost hitting her chin. "I'm sure I'll never forget this trip, but it would be nice to have a memory to pull out and look at."

"Goodness gracious. It's a good thing I'm holding our dinner basket, or you'd have it smashed and upside down by now. You must settle down. We can get the picture taken, and by then, it should be time to board."

Mary straightened her back and forced herself not to run to the photographer. She didn't wish to embarrass Aunt Cora, especially if she hoped to travel with her again. She would act the perfect lady she'd been trained to be.



Wyatt Cross jumped from the buggy as it arrived at the station, overnight case in hand. He'd procured a ticket for the excursion by chance. He saw the ad and approached his editor about doing a story. He would be one of many reporters onboard, but he doubted their mission would be the same as his. There were 446 people on this train, but he wasn't interested in why the men took the trip. The women. That's where the stories would be, and, if God was listening, a wife for him.

His bag held tight in his hand, he looked for a porter. It was a two-day trip, but he needed to look good when he arrived in Pueblo, so he'd brought an extra suit. There would be cameras at the other end, and he didn't want to show up in the newspaper his father read looking unpresentable. It would only strain their relationship further.

"May I help you with that, sir?" An employee of the train company appeared in front of him. "Bound for Pueblo?"

"Sure am, George. Take care of this for me?"

"May I see your passage ticket, sir?"

Wyatt pulled the colorful ticket from his coat pocket.

George returned the ticket along with a numbered metal check. "Only one stop along the way. Your bag will be waiting at the hotel for you when you arrive."

"Thank you." Wyatt handed the man a few coins and received a wide grin in return.

"Get your picture taken before you board the train! Remember your—" A shout drew Wyatt's attention away from the attendant. He was about to dismiss the hawker when he noticed a young woman and her companion conversing with the photographer.

The young one, with hair the color of untarnished copper, smiled so hard her cheeks would hurt by the end of the session. He'd seen her before, but where? The older one, maybe her mother or aunt, showed no excitement. Bored, maybe? From her outfit, Wyatt would guess she'd been on many more exciting journeys and this one didn't compare.

So those were two of the eighty-three women on the trip. He'd start his interview with them.



Mary took in the clamor around her. They got their photo taken right away. It was good she'd urged Aunt Cora to act, or they'd be standing in the line that formed.

"Ladies, you won't regret having this beautiful reminder in the years to come." The photographer placed them close together under the banner. "Give me your basket and hand luggage. You don't want that in your photo."

Aunt Cora handed it over. "Mind you be careful of that."

"I will, madam. And miss, what about your umbrella?"

"It's part of my traveling costume."

The photographer nodded, then stepped to the edge of the photo prop and set down the basket. Once he moved behind the camera, he slipped under the dark cloth.

"Thank you for doing this, Aunt Cora."

The photographer poked his head from under the cloth. "Get a little closer to each other, please, and stand very still."

Mary brushed up closer to Aunt Cora until their shoulders touched.

"Hold still just a little longer."

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary glimpsed a flash of green as a child ducked off with their dinner. "Stop, thief!" She fled after him, ignoring the calls of the photographer and her aunt. She had to catch the robber or they wouldn't have a meal on the train. She wove through the crowd, shouting as she went. "Excuse me!"

The crowd parted, but no one stepped forward to help. There wasn't time to purchase another meal, and she had no intention of letting the boy steal it from them. Aunt Cora had to eat or she would faint. Mary promised Father she'd take care of his sister, and if that meant chasing a child, then she would.

There, a green jacket in front of her. She'd caught him. She leaped across the remaining space between them. Her motion knocked the boy to the ground. Mary wobbled but kept her balance.

"That's mine!" She leaned over him, placed her foot on his leg, and yanked the package from him. "Stealing is wrong, and stealing from women is even, even more wrong."

She nudged the boy with her umbrella. "The Bible says thou shall not steal—"

The umbrella handle slid through her hand.

Gasp, she turned her head. Another thief? A man towered over her. His mustache quivered. Was he angry? Her knees trembled. Would he strike her? Was this one of those incidents Aunt Cora told her to be aware of, where one person acted as a decoy and the other stole your money? She stood taller. "He stole—"

"He's probably hungry, miss. I'm sure he'll apologize if you let him off the ground. Won't you, son?"

Her face heated with embarrassment at the compassion and maybe something more in his voice. "I can handle this. I do not need your help."

The boy tugged her skirt. "Missus, I'm sorry. I am hungry. My sister is, too. I promised her I'd find food."

"You sit still, and be quiet." She kept her foot on the boy and stared at the man in front of her. Did she know him from somewhere? Then again, Father introduced her to so many men she couldn't be sure. It wouldn't do if word of her behavior made it back home. Gathering her thoughts, she stilled her emotions and directed her attention to the boy. "How old are you?"

"I don't have to tell you."

"Where is your sister?" The boy couldn't be more than eight. The whistle blew its boarding signal. She didn't have time to help this child right now. His clenched lips said he wouldn't give her any information.

She couldn't fix everything, but today, she could help this boy. She opened the basket and withdrew a sandwich, then an apple, and handed them to the boy. "Share this with your sister."

"Thank you. God bless." The boy stood, swayed on his feet, ready to run.

“Go on.” He didn’t need more encouragement. He scampered away without looking back. It concerned her that he might not have enough to feed both him and his sister. She should have given him more. Father said she shouldn’t have such a soft heart for beggars, that they took advantage of her. Still, how did one know if a child was truly in need?

“That was nice of you, though he may not have a sister.”

She bristled at the man’s warning comment. So much like her father. “But he might. I’ll take my umbrella, thank you. I have a train to catch.”

CHAPTER FOUR

DIANA LESIRE BRANDMEYER WRITES historical and contemporary romances. She is the best-selling author of *Mind of Her Own*, *Frontier Legacy Brides series*, and *The Silvertown Lake Romance series*. Once widowed and now remarried, she writes with humor and experience on the difficulty of joining two families, be it fictional or real life.

Please visit her webpage, www.dianabrandmeyer.com to sign up for her newsletter.

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