

[Excerpted from
Rock of Refuge
Book 2
Mysterious Ways]

ROCK OF REFUGE

✿ BOOK TWO ✿

MYSTERIOUS WAYS



A Frontier Novel by
Donna Westover Gallup



CLADACH
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To Blaine Austin and Brian Paul,
Nana's little cowboys.

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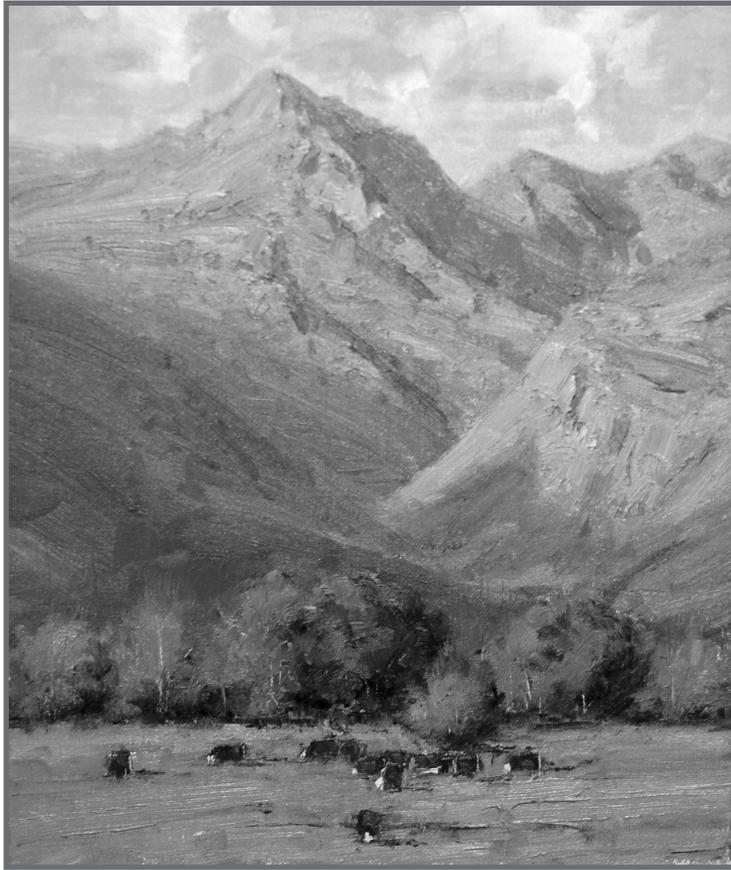
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“The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.”

Psalm 18:2

1871
Colorado Territory



THE CLOCK ON THE FIREPLACE MANTLE had lost its melodious charm for Charlie long ago and was now droning out the morning hour in a monotonous chime. A deafening silence would soon follow, broken only by the annoying ‘thunk’ of the clock’s large hand as it moved across its aged face to announce another thick, tension-filled minute. Charlie squirmed in his chair and fought the urge to yell out loud; nothing in particular, just something to get his grandfather’s attention. Yet Grandpa didn’t seem to notice a thing. The old man just sat at their small table, nonchalantly enjoying his breakfast and smiling mischievously. Tired of waiting, Charlie pushed his chair back with a huff and began to gather the dishes from the table.

Grandpa seemed to take even longer eating as Charlie filled the basin with hot water to wash his breakfast dishes. Occasionally, Charlie would throw a cold look in the direction of the table, trying to speed the old man along. Irritatingly— Charlie thought purposefully—the old half-breed would raise his fork ever so slowly and take another bite of food or sip from his coffee cup, all the while remaining quiet, and now and then smiling at Charlie. When he finished eating, Grandpa laid his fork across his plate and grabbed his coffee cup, finishing off the warm liquid in one gulp.

Charlie turned from the counter, expecting him to say something at last, but instead, Grandpa wiped his mouth with a napkin and carefully pushed his chair back, rising slowly while he stretched, his old knees popping loudly as he did so. Looking innocently at his grandson, he turned and shuffled into his bedroom. Charlie's eyes narrowed as they followed the old man's every step. Shaking his head, he reluctantly turned back to the dishes. He had to admit that there were times, more often than not, that the cabin wasn't big enough for the two of them anymore. Sometimes he felt closed in, even suffocated by the small rooms and the wooden walls.

He leaned over the basin. Through wisps of steam, he caught the glum reflection of his own face staring back at him. *Why am I feeling this way?* he sighed. *I love Grandpa. I love this cabin and the farm. It's been my home since I was three years old. So what is this apprehension I'm feeling? What's wrong with me?*

Questions pummeled his brain until Grandpa's voice bellowed from the back room and startled him from his thoughts.

"There's a heap of heavy sighin' comin' from in there," the old man called out. "Somethin' got yer goat, son?"

"Figures you'd hear that," Charlie muttered testily as he grabbed Grandpa's dishes from the table. "Been tryin' to get you to talk all mornin' and you act like you don't hear a word, but then you can hear a bee buzz a mile away."

"I heard that, too," the old man replied as he shuffled out of his bedroom and over to the fireplace to reach for the coffee pot. Taking a clean cup from the counter he poured

himself another drink and said, "Ready to talk now if ya want to."

Charlie fumbled with a fork and watched Grandpa from the corner of his eye. "Don't know what good it would do."

Grandpa shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe none, but it won't hurt none either, so just spill it out."

Charlie didn't look up from the basin but absentmindedly wiped at the same fork. "Well, I don't know . . .," he said with irritation. "You were actin' like you didn't care earlier, so maybe I should just forget it."

Grandpa raised his bushy silver eyebrows. "Forget what?"

Charlie glared at him, but Grandpa just sipped his coffee. "Go ahead; say it," he said.

Charlie dropped the fork. It plopped into the water and tiny bubbles scurried into the air. He blurted, "Well, first it was Wilbur, then Mary Lou, and now you."

"Whoa." Grandpa held up a hand. "That's a passel of folks. I thought it was just me that was frustratin' the daylights outta you, but since there's a list, let's go over them one at a time so I can keep track. What's goin' on with Wilbur?"

Charlie shifted his weight from one foot to the other, ignoring Grandpa's sarcasm. "You know. He's done moved into town to take that job at the post office."

"Yeah, and that has you all miffed?"

"No," Charlie answered coldly. He fished the fork from the basin and laid it on the counter, "it's just that . . . that . . . well, yeah, I guess it has. I mean, he didn't even talk to me about it. Just up and moved. I didn't even know he

was lookin' to leave the farm. Wilbur's been my best friend since we were young'ns. Why didn't he let me know he was leavin'?"

Grandpa looked over the rim of his cup and answered evenly. "Maybe he doesn't consider movin' to Pueblo such a big deal."

Charlie swished the rag inside a bowl. "That's not it," he muttered. "The point is, he didn't talk to me about it."

Grandpa leaned against the counter, his gnarled fingers woven around the warm cup of coffee. "Sounds like what most people do when they make up their minds about somethin'. He mighta been afraid you'd try to talk him out of it."

Charlie stopped swishing the rag across the dish he was holding. *Would I have done that?* he wondered.

"What are you really upset about, Charlie? That Wilbur didn't let you know, or that he decided it was time to leave the farm for an adventure, and didn't ask you to go with him?"

The question agitated the boy. He wasn't sure why, but it did. Setting down the plate, he grabbed an iron skillet and picked at the burnt egg remnants that were stuck on it.

"Ponder that question," said Grandpa, "and let's move on to the next person in line. What's goin' on with Mary Lou?"

Charlie threw a glance at the old man and sighed as images of Mary Lou bounced in his head. She was the youngest of the Tuttle family and Wilbur's only sister. She had finished the last of her lessons at the schoolhouse and was talking about going east in the fall to attend finishing

school. Still cross, he grabbed the wash rag and vigorously scrubbed the skillet, but to no avail. The egg wasn't budging. "Dumb ol' finishin' school!" he mumbled under his breath. *What in the world is a finishing school anyway?* he thought. *Finish what?*

Grandpa leaned against the counter patiently until Charlie stopped messing with the skillet and, in defeat, stared blindly at the cabinets in front of him. "She's leavin' too," he snapped.

"Ahh, another one gone on an adventure without you."

He pulled out a chair and made himself comfortable at the table. This part of the conversation involved a girl and he was definitely interested in hearing what his grandson had to say about her, considering Charlie rarely mentioned girls.

"You and Mary Lou weren't really that close, were you?"

"Not really." Charlie scrubbed the skillet. "She was always there, tagging behind Wilbur and me."

"You fancy her?"

Charlie turned and looked at the old man like he was crazy. "I just said she irritates me. She's a pest and not exactly what I'd call pretty, though she does have nice blue eyes."

Grandpa took a swallow from his cup. "Uh huh. That's how it starts. The little pest soon becomes a bug, a love bug that bites when you least expect it. Guess you got bit bad."

"No, sir," disagreed the boy firmly. "It isn't like that. Me and Mary Lou have always just been friends." He set the wet skillet on the counter with a thump, squeezed the water out of the rag, and hung it from a nail to dry. Pulling the other chair out from the table, he sat across from his grandfather. "I mean, she's cute, but we hardly ever talk. Most of the time

I make her mad by sayin' the wrong things, especially when I make fun of her front teeth."

Grandpa looked at the distraught boy and hid the smile that tried to curl at the corners of his mouth.

"You tease her about her front teeth?" he asked in mock surprise. "Didn't I teach you to treat a girl better'n that?"

Charlie's chin hit his chest. "Yes, sir," he mumbled. "But she isn't a regular girl. I can get on her nerves faster than anythin', and she always knows how to get on mine."

Grandpa rubbed his chin. "Her leavin' upsets you?"

Charlie grabbed Grandpa's empty cup and stomped to the basin. The heels of his heavy boots raked the floor boards.

"When she leaves, there won't be no one left," he said.

Grandpa's eyes grew wide with surprise. "There's me."

"Yes, Grandpa, but even *you* are changin'."

Grandpa rose from his chair and leaned against the counter again, folding his arms across his chest. "And that brings us to person number three on your list of most aggravatin' folks. So, how am I changin'?"

"Cause you know when things are botherin' me and you always sit and talk to me, but not this mornin'. This mornin' you didn't say nothin'. No words of wisdom, no direction, just a silly smile. I figure you're just gettin' too old or I'm gettin' to be too much of a bother."

"Well," said Grandpa with a sigh. "I am gettin' older, no denyin' that. And you're like a son to me and could never be a bother, so I don't think either one has anything to do with what's ailin' you. Maybe you're just feelin' sorry for yourself."

Charlie spun on his heels and faced his grandfather. Crimson color snaked over his cheeks and neck. "I . . . I am not feelin' sorry for myself," he stammered. "Why should I?"

"Your friends are growin' up and movin' on with their lives. And you feel like you're stuck here with an old man and a farm, the same ol' life. That's what's eatin' at you, isn't it?"

The boy's jaw muscles flinched as he turned sharply away. Without answering, Charlie grabbed the basin and pushed the back door open with his shoulder. The dirty dishwater hit the ground with a *whump!* and splashed out in all directions. The earth ferociously drank up the liquid.

Inside, Grandpa picked up a towel with one hand and grabbed the wet skillet with the other. Rubbing briskly, he looked towards the open door. "Here's some advice for you. I took both Bessie and Nellie out to the pasture this morning', so now'd be a good time to go clean out their stalls."

Charlie leaned in and plunked the empty basin on the counter then stepped off the stoop. Watching Grandpa's face, he pushed the door closed with the tip of his boot. Grandpa threw Charlie a wide grin as the door shut between them. Charlie, scowling, strode away from the cabin and his grandfather.

Grandpa hung the skillet from a nail on the mantle and shuffled back into his bedroom where he pulled the ledger from the dresser drawer. Sitting on the end of his bed, he stared at the book. There was nothing he could do. The

numbers were what they were and he had to make do. Finally, he squeezed his eyes and pushed the worry from his face. “Charlie must never know,” he mumbled as he laid the book back in the drawer. “He’s got his whole life ahead of him, Lord, so there’s no need to worry him about mine.” Slowly he slid the drawer closed. “No need to worry,” he whispered.