

The Rogue's Daughter

Molly Noble Bull

THE ROGUE'S DAUGHTER
Copyright 1986 by Molly Noble Bull

Serenade/Saga is an imprint of Zondervan Publishing House,
1415 Lake Drive, S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506.

ASBN 0-310-47552-X

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Edited by Nancye Willis
Designed by Kim Koning

Printed in the United States of America

86 87 88 89 90 91 / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Proverbs 3: 5-6, KJV

San Antonio, Texas
May, 1890

Chapter 1

She'd seen him again.

Rebecca Roberts froze and then took a step back. She was standing in a line with the other girls, waiting to enter the auditorium. All at once, there he was—the scar-faced man, watching her from behind a post near the door. The class went on an excursion earlier that morning that included a visit to the old Alamo mission, and he was there. A chill snaked down her spine. Who was this man, and why was he following her? She blinked as if she hoped he would go away. He didn't. She bit her bottom lip, and recent events unfolded before her.

Her day had started off well. Their teacher, Miss Peters, had organized a special breakfast at the college for the graduates followed by a ride through the city of San Antonio in the back of a wagon, and that was when she saw him for the first time. His eyes had haunted her—then and now. Their lewd, unforgivable brightness scared the daylights out of her.

Her heart pounded inside her chest, remembering. Rebecca had been sitting with the other girls in the wagon parked in front of what some called the Alamo, trying to listen as Miss Peters recited the history of the ancient structure for the umpteenth time, when she noticed that a man with a deep scar on his face was watching her. But at first, knowing he was studying her every move hadn't seemed out of the ordinary. Apparently, a lot of men liked to look at her. If she had never seen him again, she might never have remembered the incident at all.

"I know the mission is badly in need of repair," Miss Peter had said in that squeaky voice of hers, peering at the mission, "but I want you girls to pay close attention to the front of the structure, especially the arch over what must have been double front doors. The original doors might have been made of maple-wood, since that kind of tree grows around here, but I wonder what the doors had looked like at close range. We might never know."

Rebecca had noticed when a bee buzzed near her teacher's face, landing in her salt and pepper hair, but Miss Peters didn't blink an eye or pause to take a breath. "Now girls," the teacher went on, "we will get out of the wagon, like the poised and educated young ladies we are, and walk up to the actual building. But do be careful. I don't want any of you to fall and get hurt. Some of the walls are tumbling down and unsafe. So watch where you step. Hear?"

Rebecca had followed the other girls up a rocky path to the mission's main opening where the doors must have been located, and when nobody was looking, she touched the front wall of the ancient building with the palms of both her hands to test its texture. The stones felt cold to the touch and rough.

All at once she sensed someone watching. She turned, and there he was again, the scar-faced man—staring at her. His dark grasping eyes took in every detail of her body as an artist might do. But he was no artist.

Rebecca shut her eyes briefly, hoping all thoughts of the man with the deep scar on his face would disappear from her mind. But now as she followed the other girls into the auditorium and up onto the elevated wooden stage to receive her college diploma, the memory of him wearing cowboy clothes would not go away.

He could have been any one of about a hundred cowpunchers San Antonio attracted every year, and yet, he was different. Cowboy boots and a Stetson didn't suit him. Somehow, she knew that he belonged somewhere else, somewhere in her past. She longed to recall exactly where she'd first seen him—and when.

Rebecca lowered her lashes. If she could keep her eyes downcast until she'd calmed herself a bit, maybe she could forget he was probably out front, watching her right now. She couldn't guess why his mere presence earlier had affected her so strongly. He wasn't the first man who seemed to enjoy looking at her. Nevertheless, something about him troubled her more than she was willing to admit, but she wouldn't think about that now.

Professor Grant made a lighthearted comment before opening the graduation ceremony of the San Antonio Christian Teacher's College Class of 1890. She would try to appear amused.

###

Seth Matthews noticed the pretty girl with black hair as soon as he entered the crowded auditorium. She stood onstage with the other young women in front of a line of straight-backed chairs, and he couldn't stop looking at her. He took a seat on the front row, and then he turned slightly in his chair, directing a forced smile to the middle-aged woman in the seat beside him.

"Pardon me, ma'am," he said with a measure of respect. "But would you happen to know the name of the little black-haired girl on the end there?"

The woman frowned. "She's new this year," she whispered in a high pitched voice, "Transferred here from a school in Mississippi. But if you came here looking for a teacher or a governess, you won't want her, sir."

"I wouldn't?"

She shook her head. "Too impulsive. That girl is always jumping to conclusions." Lifting her head at a pious angle, she turned her glance to the beamed ceiling that lined the steeple roof.

But her eyes softened a little when she gazed back at Seth. "Are you looking for a teacher? Or did you come to the graduation for some other reason?"

It was none her business why he was there, but Seth decided to answer her question anyway. "I'm looking for a governess for my children."

"I thought so." She smiled. "I'm Miss Peters, the main teacher here."

She offered him her hand, and he shook it. But he was still looking at the pretty young woman with all that black hair.

"Someone like my niece, Miss Alma Pritchard, would be much more suitable, I think, in handling your children. She's smart, too, my Alma." Miss Peters pointed to the stout, freckle-faced redhead standing next to the beauty. "Alma's the only girl in the class with any brains in her head."

"Oh, yes." Seth paused, hoping to find a way to say what needed to be said as diplomatically as possible. "I'm sure your niece will make someone a fine teacher, ma'am. But about the dark-haired girl on the end, next to your niece, what's her name?"

"Rebecca. Rebecca Roberts. But I'm sure, sir," Mrs. Peters went on, "that you won't hire someone like Miss Roberts."

"Sure 'nuf?" His dark gaze was still focused on the flower-banked stage, and when Rebecca dropped to her chair with such poise and elegance, an inner smile formed deep inside him.

He liked the fact that she appeared completely unaware of her loveliness—first carefully smoothing her long, white linen skirt and then fingering the white lace collar at her throat. With

her fair complexion and black hair, Rebecca reminded him of Snow White, a character in a storybook his mother read to him as a child.

Her beauty captivated him—even from the ten or twelve feet separating them. But for all her physical charms, she looked a mite young for the teaching job he'd come to the school to offer.

A girl like Rebecca attracted men like flies to the honey-pot, and the last governess he hired quit to get married. He wasn't ready to go through that nightmare again. And yet. . . .

Miss Peters elbowed his right arm, breaking into his reflections. Then she gestured toward her niece onstage.

"It's time for Alma to give her speech," she said. "She's the class valedictorian, you know."

"That's nice," Seth said, turning his attention back to Rebecca.

###

Rebecca only pretended to listen as Alma Pritchard droned on and on. She felt someone watching her and prayed it wasn't the horrible man she saw at the mission. But who else could it be? She didn't know anybody in the city except for her classmates and teachers, her pastor and his wife, her landlady and some of the people from the small campus church she attended.

Rebecca searched the auditorium, looking for the scar-faced man, and was relieved when she didn't find him. The man watching her looked tall compared to the others on the front row of spectators—probably taller than Tom. His brown-leather boots indicated that he was a cowboy, a sandy-haired cowboy at that. She was instantly drawn to him, forgetting for a moment, everything and everyone else.

Somehow, just looking at the stranger's handsome face—his warming smile, made her feel safe. His broad shoulders and lean, muscled body blocked from her line of vision at least three rows of spectators, and he was the only man she saw who was holding a wide-brimmed hat.

She knew it wasn't proper to stare. Yet Rebecca found it difficult to wrench her gaze from his smoky appraisal.

At last she averted her glance and feigned an interest in Alma's uninspiring words. Even so, she couldn't forget his face, his eyes. . . . nor could she stop wondering who he could be and why he kept looking at her.

When the service ended, Rebecca dismissed the incident and hurried offstage to gather her things and slip next door to the chapel. Just outside the dressing room door Alma caught up with her.

"Aunty Peters and a young man want to talk to all the seniors in the practice room before we leave," she said.

Rebecca frowned. She didn't want to go to the practice room. Miss Peters knew she was in a hurry. But then . . .

She recalled again the encounter with the scar-faced man at the side door of the auditorium just before she went inside. That same exit led to the church next door, and it was almost dark outside. She would have to cross the connecting walkway alone to reach the chapel. But if she went to the practice room first, she might be able to convince one of the other girls to go to church with her. She decided it was worth a try. Besides, she wanted to find out if the man with Miss Peters was the handsome cowboy.

"All right, I'll go," Rebecca said. "But I do have to hurry. I'm almost late for church as it is."

"So?" Alma shrugged, leaving no doubt she cared little whether Rebecca followed or not.

A slashing retort flashed into Rebecca's mind, but she rebuked it. The red-haired girl disliked her. Since the first day Rebecca arrived in San Antonio, Texas, Alma had made that quite clear.

As she followed Alma through a maze of hallways behind the big stage, she found herself wondering who was requesting the interview. Was it the cowboy?

At the door of the practice room, she paused, praying for the courage to go in. Somehow, she wanted the cowboy to find her attractive. Rebecca pushed back a lock of her hair that had escaped the bounds of her bun. Then she pressed out a couple of imaginary wrinkles from the linen shirt, and straightening her shoulders, she released a long sigh. She was as ready as she'd ever be and stepped inside.

The cowboy dominated the small gathering. All at once his dark, penetrating eyes beamed gently into hers, and a new and strange sensation swept over her. His nearness seemed to engulf her with a kind of joy. She barely noticed Alma, grimacing beside him.

"Oh. There you are, Miss Roberts," Miss Peters said.

Rebecca noticed that her teacher's voice sounded softer, kinder than she was accustomed to hearing, and its pitch was even a couple of notes lower. From the way Miss Peters smiled up at the cowboy from her place near the door, it was apparent she wanted to impress him.

"May I present Mr. Seth Matthews from Rio Ranch in South Texas?" The tone of Miss Peter's voice was still low but as squeaky as a wagon wheel in need of a good coat of grease.

"How do you do?" Seth and Rebecca said at once.

They laughed then as if each noted the other's eagerness in greeting the other.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "You go first."

Her laugh melted into a smile. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. . . ." In her excitement, she could not even recall his name. "Mr. . . ."

"Matthews," he provided. "Seth Matthews. And I'm glad to meet you too, ma'am."

When she offered him her hand, he took it, holding it a little longer than was necessary. Something like a lightning shock warmed the hand he clasped. Yet somehow, this lightning shock was gentle and pleasing, at least to Rebecca.

"Mr. Matthews is here to hire a governess for his children, and he wants to speak to each of our girls," Miss Peters explained. "He'll be interviewing the rest of the girls in the morning. But since you'll be going to church, Miss Roberts, I suggested that you speak with Mr. Matthews right after the service."

"Is that all right with you, Miss Roberts?"

Rebecca smiled internally. "Certainly, sir."

"So you haven't found a teaching job yet?" he asked.

Seth's Texas drawl was pleasing. The sound of his deep, resonant voice intrigued her, and she was well aware of his engaging smile. "No, I haven't," she said at last.

"I'm glad to hear that. And may I have the honor of escorting you to church tonight?"

Her cheeks felt warm. Rebecca turned her gaze to the blue-flowered wallpaper on the wall behind him, hoping he wouldn't notice that she was probably blushing. "I'll need to get my bonnet and gloves."

"I'll wait for you here."

A feeling of excitement, unlike Rebecca's usual, rather cold reaction to men, must have radiated from deep inside her. But she was too elated to notice or even care. As she headed for the door, she noticed that Virginia Barker had moved from her location by the makeshift stage and was gliding across the floor in Seth's direction.

In the dressing room a few minutes later, Rebecca disregarded her reflection in the mirror above the white-painted dressing table and tried to concentrate on the bow to her royal blue bonnet. Yet as hard as she tried, she couldn't keep her thoughts from one, overshadowing topic. Seth Matthews.

At last Rebecca pulled on her white gloves and prepared to leave the dressing room. Still thinking of his dark eyes and near perfect features, her heart accelerated. But her joy plummeted when Miss Peters' words, spoken in the practice room with Mr. Matthews, came back to haunt her.

Suddenly freed from the power of his deceptive charm, Rebecca attempted to recall exactly what the woman had actually said when introducing Seth . . . something to the effect that Mr. Matthews had come to San Antonio to find a teacher for his children. Children?

All at once she knew her girlish dreams of a friendship with Seth Matthews were nothing more than fantasy. Of course he was married. He had children, didn't he? His interest in her was purely professional. Why had she allowed herself think it might be more than that? Rebecca reached for her purse, deciding what to do next. She didn't want to see him—not now. Was she truly obligated to go back to the practice room and see him face-to-face?

Why had she agreed to let him walk her to church? Maybe it would be wise to simulate the symptoms of a headache or something and forget the whole thing. But she wasn't physically ill. To say that she was would be a lie.

Would he try to talk her into accepting the teaching position he offered? Well, she thought with more than a trace of indignation. I'll simply refuse.

Still, she wanted to escape the coming confrontation, run as far from it as humanly possible. This was what she had done as a child. But she was grown-up now, a teacher, and she needed to behave like an adult.

She sensed that there were no adult answers . . . only the application of truths learned in church as a child back in River Road, Mississippi. Rebecca prayed and then she knew. She would have to explain her actions to Mr. Matthews and try to avoid future contact with this handsome married man.

Or was she being foolish? Surely Mr. Matthews wouldn't pick her to teach his children after he had the chance to review her scholastic record. She'd worked for her room and board at the boarding house since arriving in San Antonio and hadn't found the time to study as much as she would have liked. Her marks clearly showed it. Someone like Mr. Matthews would want the smartest girl in the class . . . someone like Alma Pritchard.

Rebecca concluded that Mr. Matthews might have ungentlemanly designs on her. For what other reason would a married man want to escort a single girl anywhere, much less to church?

A few minutes later Rebecca reached the door of the practice room. Standing just outside, she hesitated before going in, praying for the courage to tell Seth she would be unable to allow him to walk her to church. She hated scenes, and the task before her could be embarrassing.

Yet when she saw him standing near the door, talking so intimately with Virginia Barker, a burning rage ignited her insides. She should have known he would be flirting with the tall, willowy blonde. Rebecca thought Virginia was the prettiest girl in school.

Angered, and confused by her anger, she turned sharply and wove her way back down the dimly lighted hallway to the heavy, oak door leading to the covered walkway outside. The faint light of late evening looked back at her. Then she saw him—the outline of a man in shadow, leaning against a tree.

Fear blanketed her. Was he the man with the scarred face?

She was unable to move. Then it came to her. She was standing in the light from the lamp above the doorway. He could see her much better than she could see him. She stepped back inside, reaching for the open door. Before she could slam it shut, he started toward her.

Rebecca managed to pull the door closed. Then she whirled around, racing back down the dark hall toward the lighted practice room. The outside door squeaked open—then banged shut. Her worst fear had materialized. Rebecca's choked scream echoed down the hall.

The scar-faced man was chasing her! She knew it. She could hear his heavy footfalls on the hardwood floor, could picture him coming closer, closer. If he managed to catch up with her, he would surely clap a hand over her mouth to keep her from shouting and force her inside one of the dark classrooms. She didn't even want to think what might happen then. She needed to call out again while she still could.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out—too frightened to make a sound. Rebecca raced on.

At the next blind corner, her trembling body slammed into a hard, shadowy form. Frozen with fear, she gasped. Long arms coiled around her. "Let me go!" She struggled to free herself. But his firm hold only tightened. "Let me go! Do you hear?"

"Miss Roberts?" Seth's deep, resonant voice spoke kindness and gentle compassion. "It's me. Seth Matthews." He reached down and lifted her chin so their eyes met. "What happened here? You're trembling."

"Mr. Matthews?" Relief enveloped her. "Is that really you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Now tell me what happened."

"Someone's following me! That's what happened. Can't you hear someone coming down the hall there?" She pressed her head against his chest and sobbed.

"Well, don't worry, ma'am." He stroked the back of her head. "You're safe now."

"Miss Roberts!" Professor Grant exclaimed from somewhere behind her. "What's going on here?"

The footsteps had stopped. Looking up, she saw the professor glaring at the two of them as if he thought they were lovers.

"I must say this is hardly the sort of behavior I would expect from one of our young ladies. I was just outside on the grounds when I saw you standing in the doorway, Miss Roberts, and I noticed how upset you looked. But when I went in to see if I could be of help, you ran away."

Rebecca couldn't believe what she was hearing. "It was you outside?"

"Of course."

Rebecca relaxed. Seth's arms relaxed against her, and she realized she was still in his embrace. Blushing, she pushed his arms away and stepped back from him.

The professor lifted a graying eyebrow, studying Seth with suspicion written all over his face. "Who are you, sir?" the professor demanded.

"I'm Seth Matthews from Rio Ranch in South Texas."

"Matthews, did you say?"

"Yes, sir. I came here to hire a teacher for my children and met Miss Roberts in the practice room with Miss Peters a few minutes ago. When I found her here in such distress, I . . ."

"Are you related to Clemmins Matthews for whom Matthews Hall is named, sir?"

Professor Grant asked a little more kindly.

"He was my uncle."

The scowl on the professor's face was replaced by a quick smile. "Well, Mr. Matthews." The professor offered Seth his hand. "I'm glad to know you. I'm the president of the college here. Pickford Grant's the name."

Without returning the professor's smile, Seth took his hand. "How do you do." Seth looked down at Rebecca. "And I'd like to explain why Miss Roberts and I were . . ."

"There's nothing to explain," the professor said a little too warmly. "And I would love to have the chance to talk to you, Mr. Matthews. I greatly admired your late uncle. He did much for the college here. I hope I can persuade you to visit our home this evening. Mrs. Grant would just love to . . ."

"Thank you for asking," Seth said. "But I've promised to escort Miss Roberts to church this evening, and we're late already. I hope you'll excuse us, so we can be on our way."

"Of course," the professor said with a wink and a knowing smile. "You two go on."

Rebecca was sickened by the professor's double standard of morality. Seth's importance had closed his eyes and ears to any apparent indiscretion. He probably didn't really believe she was headed for church . . . nor did he seem to care.

She hadn't intended to go to church with Seth, but she couldn't back out without explaining to the professor that Mr. Matthews was married. The possibility that Seth might give money to the college as his rich uncle had before him was all that mattered to Professor Grant.

But, then again, Rebecca didn't relish the idea of walking alone to the church next door. Before she knew it, she'd exited the auditorium on the arm of a married man. They were walking together down the dark, covered walkway before she allowed herself the pleasure of taking a decent breath.