



A Woman Called Sage

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Zondervan

ISBN 978-0310293293

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Chapter One

Southeastern Colorado Summer, 1875

Life didn't get any better than having the love of a good man and his baby kicking against her ribs. Add a summer breeze to cool the heat of a southern Colorado sun and a bed of soft green grass tickling her feet, and Sage felt a slice of heaven had come to earth.

"Remember the first time I asked if I could come courtin'?" Charles propped himself on one arm and placed his hand on her mountainous stomach.

"Every minute of it. I was ordering sugar and coffee from the general store while Mama looked at yard goods, and you were asking about a rifle." She laughed. "You nearly rubbed the finish off that Winchester."

"But I bought it. You were wearing a blue bonnet and trying to look like you weren't watching me."

Just how did he know she had fought to keep from staring at him? Her childhood friend had grown into a handsome man. "Now, Charles, that's not true. You were pretending not to look at me."

He shook his head as though she were a naughty child. "You're right about me not being able to keep my eyes off you, but...Oh, I feel her kick. She's a strong one."

"You should feel him kick after midnight."

Charles kissed her stomach. "I couldn't remember when you'd gotten so pretty, and I vowed I wouldn't leave the store until you let me call on you." He shooed away a honeybee buzzing over them. "I turned that rifle over and over in my hands until you and your mama were finished with the storekeep. Sage became the most beautiful name I'd ever heard."

"No one can say my name like you or make me as happy."

He sat up and stared out at the cottonwoods in the distance; one had seen too many seasons, and its gnarled branches twisted to the sky like a crooked old man. Sage's pet wolf chased a rabbit, and the animal scampered away. Birds serenaded them as though they were the only two people in the world ó well, three.

"We'll give our baby a fine life, Sage. You'll be the perfect mama because you're the perfect wife." He turned, and his brow etched into deep lines. "Every day I wake up next to you is a gift from God."

She started to sit up, and he helped her. "I will always remember the things you say to me because my heart says them back to you." She touched his face. "Here I am the size of a buffalo, and you're making me feel pretty. Oh ó " Placing a hand on her stomach, she grinned. "He's kicking like he knows we're anxious for him to get here."

"It's a she."

She reached up to run her fingers through his thick, nutcolored hair, and envisioned a son with his papa's green eyes, sparkling like the stars. "He'll be here in about six weeks."

"Boy or a girl, it will be a fine baby. Elizabeth Sage."

"Timothy Charles." She smiled, admiring his broad shoulders. Oh, what a lucky woman she was.

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "I have something to tell you."

Her pulse raced faster than a hummingbird's wings. "Is the news good?" she said, hoping he wasn't leaving again. Those times were so hard to bear.

He caressed her face, gently, as he always did, so she wouldn't feel his calluses. "You can tell your father that after two weeks, we won't need him to help with chores anymore."

Sage held her breath. "You won't be traveling?"

“Nope. I head out three days from now, and I’ll be back in less than ten days’ time. Then I’m home for you and our baby and all of our babies to come, every day, for the rest of my life. I’ve sold the ranch up north, and I’m heading there to close the deal. We’ll have enough money to buy more land here and maybe some cattle too.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him long and hard. He smelled like the outdoors, and she loved it. Loved him. At times her feelings frightened her, as though she didn’t deserve Charles and his affections. Tears slipped down her face.

“I think you’re pleased,” he whispered.

“Very pleased.”

“It’s about time I ran this ranch myself and became a respectable husband and papa. Your father’s right. I leave you alone much too often and depend on him to oversee the place.” He laughed. “Who knows? Now he might learn to like me.”

Having Charles and Papa enjoy each other’s company would be next to perfect. Her tears flowed like a rushing stream ó a steady occurrence of late, with the baby growing inside her. “You are more than I could ever ask for. We’ll work this land together and raise a fine family.”

His gaze grew intense, as though he had something more he wanted to say but couldn’t bring himself to speak.

Had he and Papa argued again? “What is it?”

He shook his head. “A man has no right to be this happy.”

“Or a woman.” She heard his stomach growl. “I think we need to head back home so I can finish supper. Can’t have my husband starving.”

He kissed her nose, each cheek, and her lips. “There, I just had dessert first.”

Charles whistled for Wolf to join them, then pulled her to her feet. The gray and white female bounded toward them. Sage patted the animal’s head, and Charles laughed. Her pet wolf was the talk of neighboring ranches, but Sage had tamed her. Just like Charles had tamed some of Sage’s wildness but not her spirit.

Hand-in-hand they walked the mile back to their ranch. While Charles fed the livestock, Sage checked on a fork-tender beef roast that had been simmering most of the afternoon, along with potatoes, onions, and green beans. She rolled out biscuits and added another log to the fire before baking them. For a moment, she stole a whimsical glance at the cradle Papa had built and the tiny quilt Mama had stitched. Baby clothes draped over the side. Soon. Very soon.

Grasping the vegetable basket, she hurried outside for fresh tomatoes. From the shade of a juniper, she squinted into the sun and saw men riding near the west pasture and the creek that wound through the ranch.

"We got company," she said to Charles, who was pumping water into the cattle trough.

He caught a glimpse of the men and snatched up his rifle from where it leaned against the trough. "Sage, get inside the house. Now! Fetch your rifle and be ready to use it."

As clumsy as she felt with the weight of the baby, Sage raced to the porch, up the three steps, and inside the house. The tone of his voice had shaken her. He'd never used it before.

He knows who they are.

The loaded Winchester rested in the corner nearest the door. The moment she wrapped her fingers around the metal barrel, the gravity of Charles's warning sent an icy chill up her spine. Who were those men? Or was Charles simply being cautious?

She glanced out the open door toward the riders. Charles had moved into the shadow of the barn, his rifle resting against his shoulder. She closed the door just enough to see outside and shoot.

The four men were a dirty lot, but that wasn't anything unusual.

"Stop right there," Charles said. Wolf growled, and Charles didn't hush her.

"Not until we get what we came for," one of the men said. "We know it's here."

"There's nothing on this ranch that belongs to you. Consider yourself warned. There's more than one rifle fixed on you."

"Liar. Ain't no one here but you and your Injun woman. We came to get what's owed to us, and we ain't leavin' until we have it. We can tear this place apart with or without your say-so."

"This is your last chance," Charles said. "Get off my land."

"When we have our money and you're dead."

"Kill me and you'll have more trouble than you ever thought."

Sage held her breath, straining to listen to every word. She wanted to shout at Charles to give them whatever they wanted. And why did they want him dead? All she and Charles had of value was livestock. The men could have driven them off and been gone.

Before she could further contemplate the situation, a shot rang out, and Charles fell backward. Sage gasped and rushed onto the porch. Another shot, and Wolf sprawled out beside Charles. Something seized her ó a mixture of fury and panic. She stumbled down the steps, tripping in her awkwardness.

“Charles!” He didn’t move, no matter how loudly she screamed his name. Blood poured from his chest and spilled onto the ground. The men laughed, and she stared up at them, memorizing each grimy face.

The one who had shot Charles pointed his rifle at her. “Tell us where the money is or you can join him.”

“We don’t have any money. Take the cattle and horses.”

“I won’t ask again.”

She stared into his face, memorizing the dark, curly hair and hollow, wide-set eyes. With Charles’s body at her feet, revenge rose in her spirit. She raised the rifle, but too late.

He fired.

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