

PRAISE FOR SUSAN PAGE DAVIS

The Rancher's Legacy by Susan Page Davis is a beautiful tale of hope, loss, and redemption. Rachel's grit and determination to continue her father's legacy amid such devastating grief, and Matt's vulnerability, paired with his strength and kindness, had me cheering them through each chapter. A lovely story that asks the question, how far will love go to protect family? This is a book to be treasured!

— TARA JOHNSON - AUTHOR OF ENGRAVED ON THE
HEART, 2019 FINALIST IN THE CAROL AND CHRISTY
AWARDS

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Rancher's Legacy*. It was filled with excitement, a heart-tugging mystery, and a sweet romance. A wealth of interesting secondary characters added to this wonderful story. Can wait to read the next in the series.

— VICKIE McDONOUGH, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF 50
CHRISTIAN NOVELS AND NOVELLAS

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Homeward Trails



Book One

THE
RANCHER'S
Legacy

Susan Page Davis



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Fort Lyon, Colorado
Tuesday, May 5, 1863

Matt Anderson spotted Rachel in the doorway of the stagecoach. She hesitated before stepping down and glanced about the street in front of the Fort Lyon station. Matt sucked in a breath. She was lovely—much prettier than he'd expected. But this striking young woman with the splendid chestnut hair showing beneath her broad, feathered bonnet couldn't be anyone else.

Her dress looked different from the ones Vida, the housekeeper, wore around the ranch house, much fuller and fancier. When his mother was alive, she hadn't dressed nearly as fine as Rachel Maxwell. The bodice molded to her figure, and the way the skirt belled out around her made it questionable whether she could get it through the coach's doorway. She begged to be stared at. After all, most of the ladies in these parts wore simple calico dresses.

He stepped from under the station's eaves, breathing faster than the short walk to the stagecoach accounted for, and placed

himself in her path. Apparently, the skirt wasn't the problem he'd anticipated, because the station agent had handed her down onto solid ground by the time Matt reached her. She thanked him and turned toward the station.

"Miss Maxwell?" Matt snatched his gray felt hat from his head.

Her brown eyes widened as she turned her gaze on him. "Yes, I'm Rachel Maxwell." She waited, offering nothing further.

"I'm Matt. Your father asked me to meet you and drive you to the ranch."

She frowned slightly, her arched eyebrows dipping just a bit. "I'm not sure I understand. Is my father ill?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I was coming into town anyway to pick up a keg of horseshoes and some lye. It's a busy time of year for ranchers. Your father said it would save him some time if I'd bring you, and ..."

Her shoulders sagged, which didn't bode well.

"So, you are in my father's employ?"

"I ... uh ... I work on the ranch, ma'am." He swallowed hard. Matt didn't like deception, but their two fathers had come up with this plan and talked him into executing it. He didn't have to say *which* ranch he worked on.

"I see." Her tone was distant. Hurt.

Matt felt lower than the creek bottom. "I've got a wagon yonder." He pointed toward where he'd tied up the team. Why was he talking like a hick, anyway? He cleared his throat and looked at the bags she carried—a soft leather handbag and a tapestry valise. "Do you have a trunk, ma'am?"

"Yes, and a portmanteau."

He nodded. Those huge skirts must take up a lot of luggage space. "I can see about them now, or I can take you to the wagon first."

"I'll stay with you and make sure—" She looked away for a

moment and then said, more gently, "and make sure they don't make a mistake."

Ha. She was afraid he'd mess up a simple task like retrieving her baggage. This gal may have grown up on a ranch, but she'd developed an uppity attitude somewhere along the way. Probably that fancy eastern school.

"Yes, ma'am." Wondering whether to act servile or to take charge of the situation as he normally would, he took her valise and ambled to the rear of the stagecoach. The sooner this ruse was ended, the better.

Two tenders were wrestling a large camel-back trunk with brass fittings from the boot. Most of the passengers had claimed their bags and walked away by the time the men had the unwieldy chest on the ground.

One of the men straightened and looked at Matt. "Help you, sir?"

"Yes, we'd like Miss Maxwell's luggage, please."

"Right here." The man pointed to the trunk and the leather portmanteau beside it.

"If I drive over here, can you help me load those?" Matt asked.

"Sure can."

Rachel opened her purse and held out a quarter. "Thank you."

The man eyed the coin for a moment. "You don't need to pay me, ma'am."

"No insult intended," Rachel said. "I guess I've been in the East too long."

"That could be." He turned back to his work.

Matt suppressed a smile. "We'll be right over with my rig."

Ten minutes later, he was driving out of town. Rachel sat demurely beside him on the wagon seat, the pheasant feathers on her hat nodding and her back as straight as the buggy whip sticking up from its bracket.

“So, you’ve never seen your father’s ranch?” he asked in as affable a tone as he could muster.

“No, we were living in north Texas when I left home three years ago. But I’m anxious to see it. Papa was quite excited when he found this property for sale.”

“It’s quite a choice spread,” Matt said. “And your pa seems to know what he’s doing.”

“Indeed.” Her voice went frosty.

Matt gritted his teeth. He’d have to be more careful what the “ranch hand” said to the owner’s daughter. He cast about his mind for what he knew about Bob Maxwell’s operation. “He’s got some fine cattle. The ones he bought last month are going to help him build a first-rate herd.”

They managed a restrained conversation for the next twenty minutes, but Rachel didn’t let down her guard for an instant. Matt supposed a well-behaved ranch hand would keep quiet and not try to carry on a conversation, but that was the main reason her father had wanted him to come and fetch her—so they could get to know each other. Why on earth he couldn’t have just introduced himself properly as the neighbor’s son, he couldn’t understand.

Oh, sure, the two fathers had thought it was a great idea. Let them get acquainted without Rachel realizing this was the man her father had earmarked to marry her. Apparently, she’d taken umbrage at the suggestion, and in her last letter had told her father to forget that notion. What did they expect to come from her spending an hour with him without knowing who he was? That she’d fall head over heels for a cowboy?

“When we top that rise, we’ll be able to see your pa’s place.” He nodded toward the hill ahead. The team slowed for the grade and leaned into their collars.

Rachel looked about. “It’s very hilly here.”

“Different from Texas, I guess.”

“Well, the part of Texas where we lived, anyway.”

Matt nodded. He and his father had moved to this valley a scant four years ago, after his mother's death. Miners were flocking to the goldfields then, nearer Denver and Golden City, and it hadn't taken long for homesteaders to see the potential for farms and ranches in this part of the territory.

They were two-thirds of the way up the hill when he noticed a plume of dark smoke billowing up from beyond its crest.

"What on earth?" He frowned.

Rachel looked at him sharply. "What is it?"

"That smoke. It's big. Something's not right."

She studied the sky before them as Matt urged the horses onward. Their sluggish pace irked him to no end. This was the steepest hill on the road home. He could climb it faster himself than the horses could pull the loaded wagon.

"Can you drive?" he asked.

"Yes, but—"

He thrust the reins into her hands, jumped down, hit the ground running, and charged up the last hundred yards. When he reached the top, he was panting, and sweat rolled down his back and off his brow. He lifted his hat and swiped his cuff across his forehead, staring at the scene below.

A huge, black cloud rose from the comfortable ranch house Bob Maxwell had just finished building in anticipation of his daughter's arrival. The acrid smell filled Matt's nostrils, but even worse, amid the faint shouts and shrill screams of horses that reached him came a steady stream of pops that could only be gunfire.

The Maxwell ranch was under attack.

RACHEL SHOOK the reins and clucked her tongue. "Come on, boys," she called softly to the horses. "You can do it." How would anyone get up this steep grade in winter, when the road was icy?

She looked beyond the team to the young man at the top of the hill. Matt seemed nice enough, and he had the rugged look of a man who worked outside every day. He was handsome, too. She hadn't seen so fine-looking a specimen for quite some time. But he was too cheeky. You'd almost think he owned the ranch. He ought to know better than to address her with such familiarity. Oh, well, that was the West for you. People out here had forgotten common courtesy.

Rachel wished he hadn't worn that pistol. In the East, gentlemen didn't go about with guns strapped to their hips. She'd almost forgotten about that. The ranch hands in Texas always had a six-shooter handy for rattlesnakes and such. Did they really need them these days, so often that they carried them about like spare change? She supposed there were rattlesnakes in Colorado, too.

At the crest of the hill, Matt stood with his back to her, gazing at whatever lay beyond. To her dismay, the plume of smoke had increased to an ominous cloud hanging in the sky directly beyond the hill. Was it a prairie fire? Surely not, in this hilly country.

She slapped the reins against the horses' hindquarters. Only a few yards to go. The cowboy didn't turn to look at them. Finally, the team reached the summit and heaved onto an almost flat stretch of road. They walked a few more steps until the wagon was also on the level, then they stopped without her bidding.

In the distance below, a building burned furiously, and the smoke billowed up, higher and higher. She could see the angry flames, and animals milling about in fenced enclosures. The sounds that the wind brought her seemed too small—whinnies from the troubled horses, shouts, and banging. A dark dread seized her.

"What is that place?" She turned and stared at the cowboy.

Slowly he looked over at her. "I'm sorry, Miss Maxwell. That's your daddy's ranch."

In speaking, he seemed to gain purpose and strength, while Rachel's stomach tightened and she found it hard to breathe.

He strode to the side of the wagon but did not climb up. "You see that road that branches off down there?" He pointed down the slope to the right. A byway branched off and was soon lost to view in a stand of pine trees.

"I see it."

"That goes to the Anderson ranch—your nearest neighbors. Take the wagon and drive there. Tell Mr. Anderson your father's being attacked and needs his help."

She gathered the reins. "What about you?"

"I'll run down the hill and help your father if I can." He reached into the back of the wagon and took out a rifle. He took a moment to rummage about in a sack and brought out a small pasteboard box. Ammunition.

Rachel shivered. The wagon was a rolling arsenal, and she hadn't realized it.

"Go," he said. "Hurry!"

She looked once more toward the fire below them. The roof of the ranch house was alight. Her father had written her just a few weeks ago about the cozy home he had prepared and described the comfortable rooms and furnishings. Rachel wouldn't allow herself to think about that. She grabbed the whip and popped it.

"Get up!" She barely had time to gather the reins. The team took off at a canter, but she managed to pull them in so that they headed down the incline at a safer pace. Her stomach clenched as they swung around a curve, but the horses kept their footing.

Was the Anderson ranch so far away they couldn't hear the clamor from her father's place? What if she couldn't find it, or it was too late for the neighbors to help her father and his men?

And who was attacking her home? She should have asked Matt. Somehow, she didn't think it was Indians. Why that was, she couldn't be sure. She hadn't heard wild war whoops—was that it? They'd been too far away to tell much about the tiny figures she'd seen moving about near the barn and the burning house.

The house was already lost. What about the people? Her father had written that he and the foreman had hired ten hands. How many of them would survive this day?

Gulping in deep breaths, she tried to concentrate on her driving. The road leveled out, and they barreled along the valley floor. So long as she could keep the team in the middle of the road, she would let them go as fast as they wanted.

They must have come two miles or more. How far was it to the Andersons'? Again, Matt hadn't said. He'd done enough talking on the way out from town. Why couldn't he have told her something useful, instead of asking about school and telling her how beautiful the sunsets were here?

A structure loomed off to her left, and she traced the ridgepole of a barn. She watched for a lane leading off toward it and pulled the horses in. They snorted and high-stepped, but their passion was spent, and they jogged on, still nervous from the excitement of their headlong rush.

She realized she was on the ranch lane. The road she'd followed down from the hills led only to this place. The yard opened out around her, with the barn and a couple of sheds, a corral, and a vegetable garden surrounding the ranch house. Beyond was open rangeland.

"Whoa!" She hauled back on the reins.

A man came out of the barn, and another ducked between the rails of the corral fence. Both walked toward her.

"Ma'am," the older one said, touching his hat brim. The second man was a little younger and followed suit.

Her heart still pounded, but she tried to calm her voice. "Mr. Anderson?"

"No," the first man said. "I'm Pard Henry, and I work for Mr. Anderson." He eyed the wagon and team of panting horses. "Are you Miss Maxwell?"

"I am. And my father desperately needs help. His ranch is being attacked."

The older man's eyes whipped to hers. "By whom?"

"I don't know. We saw from the hilltop that the house was burning, and we heard gunfire. One of my father's ranch hands was driving me, and he told me to come get you."

He turned to the man beside him. "Pete, the boss and Jimmy went up to clean the spring. Ride up and get him. I'll get the rest of the men. We'll go across the range. Make sure everyone's armed." He held up his hands to Rachel. "Let me help you down, Miss Maxwell. You can wait here with Vida."

A woman of about forty had come to the door of the house, and now she stepped out onto the stoop, wiping her hands on an apron.

"What's happening, Pard?" she asked.

"Maxwell's place is under fire. This is Miss Maxwell, and I expect she just came in on the stage. Give her something to eat and make her comfortable." While he spoke, the ranch hand guided Rachel past the woman, into the house. In a spacious room that seemed part parlor, part dining room, and part office, he hurried to a rack on the wall where several rifles stood, took one down, opened the breach, and checked the load.

Another cowboy, who looked to be barely out of his teens, came to the door. "I've got my gun." He patted the revolver strapped to his hip.

"There's three more rifles here. Take one." Pard gestured toward the gun rack.

Within moments, both men were gone. Rachel heard someone giving orders in the yard and then hoofbeats

drumming as they rode away together. Her heart pounded faster than the horses' hooves.

"Well, then," the woman said dourly. "Take a load off your feet, missy. Would you like some bread and butter? I've got coffee hot."

"I couldn't think of it," Rachel said, wringing her gloved hands together. "My father—"

"Now, now, fretting won't help him one whit. You'd best sit down and eat something. We'll know more in a bit, and you might need your strength then."

Rachel could see the sense of this, though she wished she had insisted on going with Mr. Anderson's men. But that would have required them to saddle a horse for her. Time was of the essence.

"Are you Mrs. Anderson?" she asked hesitantly.

The woman barked a short laugh. "Me? No. I'm Vida Henry. My husband's Pard, the man you just met. I just keep house for the Andersons."

"I see." Rachel tried to recall what little her father had told her about the Anderson household. Wasn't Mr. Anderson a widower? He had a grown son. That was the main thing she'd gathered. Her father thought she and the son might make a match of it. That hint incensed Rachel so violently that she'd sent her father a scathing reply, saying she would pick out her own husband, thank you, and he wouldn't be a saddle bum.

She supposed she'd gone a bit overboard. A ranch owner's son wasn't exactly a saddle bum—especially one who was heir to a spread that was obviously prosperous. This house sprawled comfortably large, and the furnishings, while not fine quality, were certainly better than the pioneer bits and pieces her own parents had used in north Texas.

"Come on in the kitchen," Vida said.

Rachel followed her meekly. The kitchen was warm, but not oppressively so. She noted an open window, probably offsetting

the cookstove's output. A long counter lined one wall, with cupboards below and above. Several pans, a large pottery bowl, and a two-gallon crock sat on the counter. Nearby sat a pie safe and an oak cabinet that appeared to be a crude icebox. Across the room was a square oak table with three chairs pulled up to it.

"Coffee?"

"Oh, thank you." Rachel sat down and removed her gloves. She looked around for a place to lay her hat but didn't see a suitable spot. Near the back door, a peg rack hung on the wall with a couple of frayed coats and a battered man's hat on the pegs, but her elegant bonnet was not to be hung up for storage. She'd just have to keep it on.

Vida brought a thick crockery mug and set it on the table before her.

"Sweetenin'?"

"No, thank you," Rachel said. "But have you any cream?"

Vida's eyebrows lowered. "Yup." She walked to the icebox and opened it.

Rachel felt a bit petty, asking for cream when her father was in mortal danger. Still, one couldn't be expected to drink coffee that had perhaps been simmering for hours black—and tea had not been offered.

Vida brought a small pitcher to the table and set it down with a thunk. "Anythin' else I can get you?"

"No, thank you. This is fine."

The housekeeper turned away, and Rachel lifted the pitcher. She'd gotten on someone's bad side, that was certain. After pouring a generous dollop of cream into her cup, she realized she didn't have a spoon. She glanced at Vida's stiff back. The woman had gone to the counter and begun to cut up something with quick chopping motions. Her knife whacked the cutting board repeatedly.

Best not to ask for a spoon, Rachel decided. She raised the

cup to her lips and took an experimental sip. It was all she could do not to spit the bitter liquid back into the cup. Even with the cream, it tasted so awful she wouldn't have called it coffee. She made herself swallow and then sat gazing dolefully down at the cup that was still nine-tenths full. Maybe she should have accepted the offer of sugar. She saw nothing of the bread and butter Vida had mentioned earlier.

"How far is it to my father's ranch?" she asked.

"About three miles, across the range. Five by road."

"Oh. I wonder why they didn't hear the gunshots."

Vida chopped faster. How could the woman be so calm when people's lives were in danger? After half a minute, she paused her chopping. "They's a ridge between hither and yon."

"I see." Rachel stood and picked up her gloves. "I think I'll stroll out into the yard and see if I can make out anything."

"Suit yourself."