

TREASURE & TROUBLE

Troubles of the Heart - Book One

BETTY WOODS



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My late mother-in-law, Mavis, who gave me the idea of Eugenia hiding her notes behind a loose stone in the column at her gate. She was absolutely sure I'd be a published writer.

My first agent, the late Mary Sue Seymour, and my mentor, Lena Nelson Dooley, who told me not to give up on this story and that it would find a publishing home one day.



Chapter One

1832

Outside Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Eugenia Hampton urged her mare Belle into a gallop as her favorite trail through the woods widened. She lifted her face to the warm spring sun as the honeysuckle-scented breeze caressed her face. Better to enjoy the beautiful May day than worry about her troubles. Her top hat slipped over one ear, but the chattering squirrels wouldn't scold her the way her mother would.

A startled crow flew within inches of Belle's head. The horse spooked and reared. Eugenia fought to stay in the saddle. She screamed just before slamming into the ground. While she struggled to quit shaking long enough to sit up, horse's hooves pounded toward her.

"Whoa!" a masculine voice commanded. A man quickly dismounted and knelt beside her. "Are you all right?" He tilted his hat back as he studied her.

She sucked in several shaky breaths. "I-I think so. A crow—at least it looked like a crow—spooked my horse."

“So I saw. If you’re sure you ain’t hurt, I’ll go catch your horse. Don’t move before I get back.”

“I’ll be still.” Her trembling legs wouldn’t support her anyway.

Swinging up into his saddle, he galloped off to retrieve the mare.

The few minutes the man was gone gave her a little time to gather her wits and assess her situation. She raked a gloved hand across the moss she’d landed on, shuddering at the sight of a fallen log lying only a foot or so away. How fortunate she’d been dumped in a soft place.

After the big man returned with her horse, he slid from his saddle and crouched in front of her. “Does it bother you to move, Miss Hampton?” He cocked his head as he scanned her face.

She shook her head. No pain for now. That had to be a good sign. Tomorrow might be another story. “I should be fine once I calm down.”

Resting his arm on his knee, he continued to watch her.

She smiled, hoping to reassure her anxious-looking rescuer. “How do you know my name when I don’t know yours?”

“Sorry. My name’s Paul Stuart.”

“Are you related to the Stuarts in this area, particularly John Stuart, my papa’s overseer?”

He nodded. “He’s my pa. I was at church this morning with my folks and saw you with your ma. That’s how I figured out who you are.”

“Oh.”

The more she gazed into his fascinating sky blue eyes, the more she wished she’d paid closer attention to the Stuart family’s pew near the back of the church. Wavy carrot-red hair falling almost to his collar drew her attention to his broad

muscular shoulders. She would have to be more observant the next time she went to services.

“You sure you’re all right, miss? You’re awful quiet.”

Nothing pained her as she took another deep breath. “I’m all right. I lapse into my own thoughts at times. I do appreciate your help.”

“A lady riding sidesaddle shouldn’t be galloping through the woods as if she’s trying to outrun a fire. You weren’t much more than a blur when I saw you, and this trail narrows down not too far from here.”

She stiffened. This stranger had no right to rebuke her like a child no matter how gentle his tone. “I’m an excellent rider. Papa bought my first pony for me when I was six, and I’ve been riding in these woods ever since.”

“Excellent riders still need to be careful. Look where you are now.” His lips almost formed a smile, accenting a very interesting cleft in his chin

The man sounded too much like her overly watchful mother.

“Always being careful is quite boring. Are you cautious every moment of your life?”

He chuckled as he looked into her eyes. “No, so I guess it wouldn’t be fair for me to be too hard on you.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Her mother did enough of that sort of thing. One person who didn’t understand about the thrill of unexpected adventures was enough. She didn’t need or want anyone else taking Mama’s place.

When she glanced down at the dirt and debris on her riding habit, she gasped. Mama must never see all this. She whisked away a few leaves. “I must be a frightful mess after taking such a tumble.”

“You don’t look too bad.”

Did not looking too bad mean not too disheveled or was he

admiring her as he studied her? After all, he'd noticed her in church and remembered her. She'd have to worry about his intentions later. For now, she needed to be sure Mama would never be able to tell Belle had thrown her. She patted her hair, trying to feel how many hairpins remained. "I'm certain my hair is a terrible mess, but does my appearance tell anyone my horse threw me?"

His eyes narrowed. "Only the good Lord knows why you didn't break something or worse, and all you're worried about is how you look?"

The good Lord? Mama was the only one in her family on speaking terms with God, but that was none of this man's concern. How dare he be so blunt with someone he didn't know? She'd dismiss him this instant except that might prove his assumptions about her misplaced pride.

"I'm not as vainglorious as you think. Mama would never allow me to ride alone again if she knew Belle threw me. I couldn't bear losing this little bit of freedom." She gently removed a twig snagged in the lace trim on the collar draped over her shoulders. The current fashion of such large collars was a definite inconvenience today. "You have no idea how cumbersome it is to be a proper lady all the time."

"I don't guess I do."

Judging by the sarcastic tone of his voice, his patronizing thin smile perhaps bordered on disgust or mockery.

"Being a lady isn't as much fun as most people think. Sometimes I feel as if I'm smothering."

His eyes widened as he shook his head.

How useless trying to explain her situation to a man dressed in homespun who had no idea what her life was like. "I suppose I've bored you long enough. You must have more pressing things to do than listen to me ramble on."

"You're too hard to figure out to be boring."

Oh, and why is that? Regardless of what he thought of her, she was quite intrigued with her plainspoken rescuer. Not one of her suitors had ever dared speak his mind to a woman with a dowry as generous as hers. She couldn't help but admire this man's forthright behavior, especially the way he seemed so unimpressed by her status. How refreshing.

"You've helped me more than you'll ever know. Thank you." She shifted her position. "I should go home now."

"I want to be sure you can stand as good as you think you can before I leave." He rose and then offered his hand to assist her.

His large strong hand swallowed hers. Thoughts of dismissing him flew away more quickly than the crow she'd startled. His earthy scent and butternut-colored homespun shirt bespoke a common laborer, yet his confident stance signaled he'd hold his own with General Andrew Jackson if necessary.

"It ain't every day I get stared at the way you're doing." His eyes twinkled.

"Pardon me. You must be almost six feet tall. My papa and my brothers aren't tall, and I'm not accustomed to it."

That was the best explanation she could manage. She dared not tell this stranger how much she liked his uncommon self-assurance and commanding appearance in spite of his gentle rebukes.

He grinned. "To someone as small as you, I must look pretty big."

If he was so unimpressed with her, why did he continue smiling? Was he friendly by nature or did his intriguing, sparkling eyes indicate a deeper interest? Under different conditions, she'd enjoy discovering the answers to the questions tumbling through her mind. But her focus for now

must remain on being sure her parents never discovered Belle had thrown her.

She stooped to retrieve her top hat. Considering the circumstances, it appeared to be in surprisingly good shape “If I get the rest of the leaves and grass off my clothes, will I truly look all right?”

“Dirt don’t show too bad on your dark green dress. You should put your hair up a little better and get the leaves out before you put that sil—that hat back on.”

Had he started to call her top hat silly? His flushing cheeks suggested he had. She couldn’t blame him for thinking such a thing, but Mama wouldn’t allow her to ride without the proper attire. She wished for a mirror while she tucked her hair behind her ears and partially pinned the other strands. At least she didn’t have to see what she was doing to put her hat on.

“I’ll have my maid repair the damage to my hair when I get home. You may help me up on my horse now.”

His eyes narrowed to slits as he clamped his open jaw shut. He hesitated another moment or two then cupped his hands together to make a step for her and boosted her up onto her horse.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome.” He swung up in his saddle, looking much too serious.

Not a single hint of his former teasing in his now terse voice. His warm blue eyes had turned frosty cold. She’d puzzle over such a sudden change later. “Mr. Stuart, would you do one more thing for me?”

“If I can.”

“If you see either of my parents, please don’t tell them what happened this afternoon. I’m not exaggerating when I say they’d both be terrified for me. Mama might never allow me the freedom to ride alone again.”

He shrugged. "I won't say anything, not even to my pa in case he might say something to your pa."

"I'd appreciate that. I hope we can visit again sometime. Good day." She smiled.

"Good day to you." He tipped his brown hat.

With a gentle pull on the reins, she urged her horse forward. He didn't return her wave. She hoped her rescuer was a man of his word and wouldn't tell a soul about this afternoon. Even her indulgent father might forbid her to ride alone if he'd seen her crashing to the ground.

* * *

PAUL KEPT an eye on the woman until she rounded the next bend in the trail. She rode away quickly enough. Maybe she was telling the truth about not being hurt. She must not be as fragile as she appeared. Her light blonde hair falling around her narrow shoulders made her look as delicate as the lace decorating her clothes. He'd really enjoyed watching those lively green eyes of hers that talked as much as she did.

Plumb crazy thoughts. He shook his head to clear his mind. She'd ordered him to help her up on her horse as if he were one of her father's slaves but called him sir when she thanked him. What a strange woman. Promising not to tell anybody about her reckless behavior probably wasn't right, but going back on his word wasn't either. Except such a reckless woman would put herself in danger.

Instead of heading toward Murfreesboro and home, he turned his horse down the narrow trail leading to Hopeton, Titus Matthews's plantation. His best friend could probably help him decide about keeping his word to the lady. Maybe, for her own safety, he should tell someone how she'd been galloping through the woods. She could have been hurt—even

killed—if that crow had been a low branch hanging in her way.

A few minutes later, Titus grinned at him as they seated themselves in the wooden chairs on the front porch of Titus's columned mansion. "I didn't expect to see you here this time of day. You usually don't like to be this late going back to Murfreesboro."

"I didn't expect me here either." Paul stretched out his legs and propped his elbows on the wooden chair arms. "I figure you know Eugenia Hampton."

"Our families have been friends since I was a boy. How do you know her?"

"I don't." He gave the one person he trusted to keep a secret a quick version of how he'd helped the lady. "Should I keep quiet about her?"

Titus nodded. "Her parents are every bit as overprotective as she said."

From what Paul had seen, they should be, but he had better manners than to say something so impolite about a friend of Titus. "Then I'll keep her secret."

"She'll be sure to thank you if she gets the opportunity. From what my sister says, Eugenia often rides on Sundays."

Paul shook his head. "I don't always take that trail on my way home."

"In case you do, Eugenia could use more friends. She's lonelier than you'd guess."

As spoiled as she was, Paul could understand why she needed friends. "I can't see a lady like her ever wanting to be friends with a man like me."

"Then I promise, she'll surprise you." Titus's eyes twinkled as if he'd said something hilarious.

Just what, Paul couldn't figure out. Miss Eugenia Hampton had acted like any other highfalutin lady he'd ever met. He

couldn't say that to Titus, so he'd better think of something nice. Staring toward the well-tended lawn gave him a moment to think.

"She was calmer than I thought she'd be after taking such a spill."

Titus chuckled as he shifted in his chair. "That can't be the first time she's fallen off a horse."

"Probably not, if she rides like I saw today."

Paul swatted at a fly while trying to figure out why a lady so unlike him would bother saying one word to him if she didn't want or need something. "She'd gallop that horse the other direction from me if she knew I won't own slaves. You're the only person around here I can be honest with about that."

And he couldn't be completely truthful with a slave owner like Titus. He dared not tell anyone the real reason he'd left Nashville in such a hurry. Since he wanted to get to Murfreesboro before dark, he talked with his friend only a little bit longer.

During his ride home, he couldn't shake thoughts of Eugenia Hampton. He liked her spirit, even if she had challenged him when he told her it wasn't safe for her to gallop her horse through the woods. Without whining once about her fall, she'd gotten to her feet. A woman with that kind of gumption would fit right in on the frontier farm he hoped to own someday.

Such ridiculous thoughts made him laugh out loud. She's too spoiled to even think about. Her riding clothes were fancier than his mother's best Sunday dress. A woman with everything money could buy should count her blessings, not complain about being smothered by her wealth. God could smother him like that any day, and he'd never fuss about it.

Still, it had been a long time since he'd come across a woman with such a perky spirit and so much nerve. But she'd

talked an awful lot without saying one thing important, no matter how much he'd enjoyed watching her expressive green eyes. He liked and didn't like the woman, all at the same time. If such an aggravating lady needed friends, someone else would have to help with that.

Except God called Paul a friend, no matter that he could never deserve such a precious friendship.

His thoughts jolted him in his saddle. "All right, Lord. I'll think about being her friend if I ever see her again. I hope You understand, I ain't in a hurry for that to happen."

He'd run from enough problems in Nashville. He didn't need woman trouble added into the mix.