

THE TROUBLING ROGUE

Troubles of the Heart - Book Three

BETTY WOODS



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Chapter One

Charleston, South Carolina
Early April, 1834

“**Y**ou are the ones who don’t understand.” Nathanael Williams sucked in a deep breath. Then another. Willing himself not to raise his voice to his parents sitting on the couch in front of him. He focused on the blue tapestry print of the cushions behind them as he pondered how to convince them he was right.

When Father had ushered him into the parlor to talk after supper, he’d suspected something was awry because of his father’s listless tone. But he hadn’t expected a discussion on the preposterous idea of him leaving Charleston. “The only one who should go anywhere departed in her father’s carriage three days ago. As did the hot-tempered fiancé she wronged.”

Father shook his head. “You must go to Tennessee. I see no other way to squelch this scandal.”

“Only for a short while.” Mother offered him a thin half-smile as she leaned toward him.

Her effort to lessen the impact of Father’s words increased

his frustration instead. Insisting Nathanael go to Tennessee without hearing what he thought didn't constitute the discussion Father had said he wanted to have.

"I haven't set foot out of this house for five days. I also avoided a duel with Eileen's angry fiancé." He almost choked uttering the woman's name. "The rumors will die down soon. I'm innocent and shouldn't be going anywhere."

"True. But I lost a shipping contract today. And—"

"*We* lost the contract." Father's eyebrows quirked up at Nathanael's emphasis on *we*. "I've been the only one working with you for the last two years." Mother's mouth formed a perfect *O* at Nathanael's lack of respect and manners toward his father.

"Yes, but ..." Father took Mother's hand in his, massaging each finger with his free hand. He glanced into her solemn eyes before returning his attention to Nathanael. "Two ladies were whispering behind your mother's back as she walked into the milliner's yesterday. They didn't realize she saw them pointing at her."

Nathanael could guess the old biddies' names. Mother's quivering lips helped him bite back the heated words he longed to retort. "I'm sorry someone treated you so unfairly."

She nodded.

Father aimed his gaze at Nathanael alone. "I posted a letter to my brother yesterday saying to expect you in Tennessee by the end of the month at the latest, barring unforeseen travel delays along the way."

"No!" Nathanael jumped to his feet. He stared down at his parents as the impact of his father's incredulous words sank in. "How can you assume the brother you haven't seen since before I was born will want me appearing on his doorstep before he has a chance to write you I'm welcome?"

“Douglas and Evelyn will take you in with open arms. Twenty-five years apart cannot sever our family ties.”

But false innuendo and gossip could cut Father’s ties with his only son and have him insisting Nathanael should travel almost four hundred miles to a place he’d never been. To people he’d never met.

“We can’t endure further damage to the business our family has worked so hard for. The business you will inherit one day.”

“Which is why I should stay. Help you fight for what’s right, for our livelihood.”

“You must go, son. For your sake. For all of us.” Mother’s voice cracked. “We will miss you.” She ducked her head.

“I purchased your ticket for tomorrow’s stage before I came home this evening.” Father’s terse tone signaled his determination to have his way.

Nathanael clamped his open mouth shut as he dropped down onto the dark blue chair he’d recently occupied. “Fleeing to Uncle Douglas’s house will assure people I’m guilty of every lie that woman has spread.”

Father shifted in his spot. “Not as often as I’ve asked people at church to pray for my brother’s heart problems. You’re going to see to your uncle. Help him, as I told the ticket agent.”

“We’ll tell everyone at church how proud we are of our selfless son traveling so far to help a family member in need.” Mother’s hopeful tone didn’t match the beseeching look on her face.

Swallowing a groan, Nathanael closed his eyes. His parents had made up their minds. Days ago, judging from all Father had already done. Without their support, he couldn’t stay and face down the lies spreading about him. “I’ll retrieve a small trunk from the attic and start packing.”

“I’ll send for Peter to get the trunk.” Mother’s immediate agreement cut into his soul.

“No need for that.” Nathanael rose, turned on his heel, and marched into the hall before either of them had a chance to say more. Neither of them called after him.

A short time later, Nathanael set the dusty trunk by the foot of his bed. He sneezed as he wiped it with his handkerchief. The trunk hadn’t been used since Mother and Father had gone to Savannah to see his sister and her husband. If only Eileen’s family plantation weren’t outside of Savannah, he could visit his sister a while, instead of being exiled to Tennessee.

Jerking open the doors of his wardrobe, he stared at the clothes hanging inside. He’d take enough for two weeks. No more. No clothes for cooler fall weather. One evening coat. No more. He wouldn’t be partying or celebrating anything in Tennessee. He’d be home by the end of July. No later. Regardless of whether they wanted him then or not.

He grimaced as he tossed a pair of trousers into the trunk. The people who had stood with him all his life, no matter what, now wanted to banish him. They had chosen to save shipping contracts over salvaging the reputation of their wronged only son.

After packing his clothes, he lit a candle and then carried it and his Bible to his writing desk. The fifth commandment said to honor his father and mother. The first commandment with a promise if people obeyed it. If not for God’s instruction, he’d stride downstairs at breakfast in the morning and tell his parents he’d stay in Charleston.

But he’d never dishonored the people who loved him with their entire beings. He couldn’t do so now. No matter how much his heart ached at the idea of them casting him aside for

the sake of the family business that his father and maternal grandfather had spent their lives building.

* * *

A FULL MONTH LATER, Nathanael stepped out of the last stage on his journey to Murfreesboro, Tennessee. No one would be here to greet him. They wouldn't know his exact arrival after such a long trip, especially after muddy roads in the eastern part of the state had slowed travel by several days.

The driver unloaded Nathanael's trunk, setting it on the wooden sidewalk outside of the ramshackle stage station.

"May I leave this here for a bit? Until I find my family I came to visit?" The word family stuck in his dry throat. His family was in Charleston. Except they no longer wanted him.

The driver nodded. "No one will bother it."

Nathanael walked down the street to the general store, assuming it would be a good place to ask about his cousin. He paused to let his eyes adjust to the dim light inside the crude, almost log-cabin-type structure. He was a long way from Charleston in so many ways.

"I'm Nathanael Williams. Could you tell me how to find Luke Williams? He's my cousin. I understand he and his wife live here." He walked toward the bearded man behind the counter at the back of the store.

The man studied Nathanael. "You do look some like Luke's father."

"Douglas Williams is my father's brother." Nathanael understood the man's reluctance to give out information to a stranger who appeared with no notice. Perhaps telling him his uncle's name would ease the man's mind. "I'd appreciate it if you'd direct me to Luke's house. He knows to expect me about this time."

The man nodded. "Luke's office is on the next street over. Look for the sign with Glynne and Williams Attorneys on the door."

"Thank you."

The short walk gave Nathanel a good way to stretch his legs. Something he hadn't been able to do much since he'd left home. He brushed the dust off his coat and top hat before opening the door to his cousin's office.

"Good afternoon. May I help you?" The man Nathanael assumed to be the clerk rose from a small desk to greet him.

"I'm Nathanael Williams. Luke has been expecting me."

"Mr. Williams said you could be here any time." The man grinned. "He should be finished with his client soon. Please be seated." The clerk motioned toward two wooden chairs near the door.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Nathanael rose as a sandy-haired man about his age ushered an older man out of the office.

"Thanks for your help." The older man shook Luke's hand.

"My pleasure." Luke froze to stare at Nathanael as the older man saw himself to the door. "You must be Nathanael."

"I am."

Luke closed the distance between them in a few quick steps. Nathanael held out his hand. His cousin grasped it as he looked Nathanael over. "Welcome to Murfreesboro. You look so much like our grandfather when he was young. With your brown hair and brown eyes, you're almost the exact image of the oil painting my parents have at their house."

"My father has the miniature for that painting." Luke's broad smile gave Nathanael's spirit a much-needed lift.

. . .

IN HALF AN HOUR, Nathanael strolled toward the edge of town with Luke after arranging for Nathanael's trunk to be brought to the house. Several people greeted Luke along the way. He didn't hesitate to introduce them to Nathanael, a welcome situation after being shunned by so many people in Charleston.

Luke's wife, Clarisse, greeted him with the same enthusiasm as her husband when they walked into the house. "Do come into the parlor. We can visit until the cook has supper ready. We've all been looking forward to meeting you."

"Thank you." He followed the couple down the hall.

Clarisse settled onto the maroon couch. Luke took the spot next to her. Nathanael chose a beige chair next to them.

"You're our first guest in our new house." Clarisse beamed at him. "We started moving in last week."

"I'm honored. Thank you for not minding my coming with so little notice."

"Not at all." Luke's blue eyes sparkled. "We don't mind helping family in need. What's more, I finally get to meet someone I've only heard about in letters since I was a boy."

By the time Nathanael lay his head on the pillow in the guest room, he'd talked more than he had in ages. His hosts asked a multitude of questions about Charleston and the family there, as well as telling him about their family, who were so eager to see him. Luke had to go to court tomorrow and Wednesday. They'd go to his parents' house on Thursday.

Perhaps he'd rest well for the first time since before leaving home. His worries about not being welcome had evaporated during his cordial walk with Luke to the house. His cousin assured him he'd be received as warmly at his uncle and aunt's house.

This dreaded exile might not be as bad as he'd feared. Unless it lasted longer than he wanted.