

[PDF] Her Hesitant Heart (Harlequin Historical)

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Description:

About the Author Carla Kelly started writing Regencies because of her interest in the Napoleonic Wars. She specializes in writing about warfare at sea and the ordinary people of the British Isles who were, let's face it, far more numerous than lords and ladies! In her spare time she likes to cook, crochet, read British crime fiction and history books, and is never happier than talking about the fur trade or Indian Wars - her other favourite interest. Carla lives in Carbon County, Utah.

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Emily Reese, not the brightest lady, had been unable to furnish Major Joseph Randolph, Fort Laramie's post surgeon, with a working description of Susanna Hopkins, her older cousin. "I think she is thirty-two," Emily had said. "Old, anyway."

Joe smiled at that. "I doubt traveling females will be thrilled if I ask if they are thirty-two," he had told her. "Give me a better description, Emily. She's *your* cousin."

He knew her well enough to call her Emily. Almost five years ago he had delivered her son, Stanley, in an army ambulance between garrisons. Emily Reese had been neither his best patient nor his worst one.

Emily obliged with a better description. "She is of medium height, average figure, and her hair is blond."

She became serious quickly. "I appreciate this, Major," she told him. "If you can take her in the ambulance, so much the better. She does not have much money." She thought a moment, then whispered, "Susanna is divorced."

"That is *not* my business," Joe said.

"You're a surgeon," she countered. "Anything I tell you is confidential."

He sighed, wondering how Emily Reese's husband managed to keep from drinking himself to death. Some men must prefer stupid wives. Come to think of it, Captain Daniel Reese wasn't the brightest company commander in the army. "Emily, I'm not a priest. I keep *medical* matters confidential."

She couldn't seem to stop. "She abandoned her son. I can't imagine that, but she is a relative, and my parents had to help her."

"I'm certain she had her reasons," Joe replied. *Good God, what kind of relative would blab such a scandal?* he asked himself. *They sound as horrible as mine.* "I hope you won't reveal this to anyone else," he said, not sure how much force to apply to a scold. "You know what gossips army people are."

"Should I make up a story?"

"Say nothing. All anyone wants is a teacher."

"I know! I will say she is a war widow!"

Joe sighed. "Emily, don't. Can't you imagine how distressed the veterans would feel about such a lie? We saw our friends die from Bull Run to Appomattox Court House! Please, please don't."

Joe hadn't minded the diversion of looking for a lady on the train. General court-martial duty in Cheyenne right before Christmas was never pleasant, unless those presiding thought to catch the eastbound Overland Express for home. He probably wouldn't have been involved in this unshirkable army duty, except that one of the defendants was a major, and there must be majors and above weighing him in the balance.

Joe had no plans. His former home was a plantation west of Richmond and his two widowed sisters residing there had long ago turned his portrait to the wall, and returned his letters, except the one containing a bank draft for taxes on the place. *No wonder I am a cynic*, Joe told himself on more than one occasion.

Unexpectedly, the court-martial had dragged on much longer than anticipated, and the officer board

watched its holiday plans turn to gall and wormwood. The defendants—officers who should have been cashiered years ago—had argued long and eloquently to avoid removal from the army.

The matter had ground on, each officer on the board growing surly as the likelihood of Christmas at home vanished. To no one's surprise, revenge came as both defendants were cashiered.

Major Walters, a single fellow like himself, was in no hurry to return to dreary Fort Fetterman. The officers' mess at Fort Russell, near Cheyenne, was better and Joe had time to meet the westbound train in Cheyenne that afternoon.

But there was no Susanna Hopkins. He rode the three miles back to Russell, arriving in time to watch Walters dress in his better uniform for the evening's New Year's festivities.

Immune to parties, Joe walked to the post hospital. It wasn't his hospital, but he knew the surgeon well. Sitting close to the heating stove, they toasted the season and swapped gory stories from the late war until the hospital steward came on duty in the morning.

As a consequence, Joe was late to the depot; the train had already departed. Joe directed the ambulance driver to the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage depot, a noisome place with sawdust on the floor to absorb tobacco juice and spittle.

The major went inside, and there was Susanna Hopkins at the ticket window. He had no doubt it was her: medium height, blond hair. He couldn't discern her figure because of her overcoat, but she looked surprisingly tidy, considering her days on the train from Pennsylvania.

Interested, he watched her. The stationmaster pointed to the fare chart. Joe watched as she took another look into her wallet. The stationmaster shrugged his shoulders, then gestured for her to move aside. She sat on the bench by the potbellied stove.

Joe saw her face when she turned around, and it was a sweet face, heart-shaped. Her blond hair had a dark blaze by her temple. Gold-rimmed spectacles perched on her nose, but they could not hide the bleakness in her eyes. He knew he was looking at a fearful woman.

Joseph Randolph's heart went out to the woman who sat, terrified, on a bench in the dirty stage depot. *She may be divorced, but what drives a woman to this?* he wondered, even as he loosened the muffler about his neck, removed his hat and started to unbutton his greatcoat. Whatever her marital woes, Mrs. Susanna Hopkins looked like she needed good news.

Susanna felt tears behind her eyelids. She raised her spectacles and pressed her fingers hard against the bridge of her nose to stop the tears. Crying in front of strangers would only lower her further into that class of pitiful women without purpose or goal. *I am not there yet*, she reminded herself.

She had passed a Western Union office on her short walk from the depot to the stage station. Perhaps she could wire Emily at Fort Laramie and explain her plight. Maybe she could leave her luggage at Western Union. Surely some establishment needed a temporary dishwasher, or even a cook.

If not that, perhaps she could find a church, and pour out her troubles to a minister. Her optimism faded. If she had to tell her whole story to a minister before he would help her, she would fail. Her own minister in Carlisle had counseled her to return to the man who had abused her. When she

refused, he had shown her the door without another word.

"Mrs. Susanna Hopkins?"

Startled, she looked up at a tall man in uniform. His greatcoat was unbuttoned, and she saw gold braid and green trim on his collar. She glanced at his face and then looked away, shy, even though her brief glance took in a kind face. "Do I know you?" she stammered.

"No, ma'am, you don't, but I have been sent by Mrs. Emily Reese. She said you were medium height and blonde, and I've been looking."

She took a deep breath. "You're from Fort Laramie?"

"Yes, ma'am." He gestured to the bench. "May I sit?"

"Of course, uh, Captain?" She paused, not sure of his rank.

"Major, ma'am, Major Joseph Randolph, with the Army Medical Corps."

They shook hands. Before she could stop herself, Susanna blurted out, "I'm three dollars short of the fare for the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage."

"It happens," he told her, unperturbed.

He was a big, comfortable-looking man, his hair dark but graying. Fine lines had etched themselves around his eyes and mouth, probably from the sun and wind. Susanna thought his eyes were brown, but she gave him only a glance.

"When Emily heard I was to be in Fort Russell, she thought I could spare you a trip on the Shy-Dead."

"How kind of you!" She stopped, embarrassed.

She could tell her exclamation startled him. "It's easy, Mrs. Hopkins, if you don't mind keeping company with men in an ambulance."

"An ambulance?" she asked doubtfully. "Someone is ill?"

"We travel that way in the winter, when we can."

He had a distinct Southern drawl, stringing out his words in a leisurely way, and saying "ah" instead of "I," and "own" instead of "on." She hadn't thought to hear a Southern accent from a man in a blue uniform.

"I was planning to meet the train, but New Year's interfered," he said.

She had to smile at that artless declaration. "Too much good cheer?"

He smiled back. "Medicinal spirits! Fort Russell's post surgeon and I refought Chattanooga and Franklin, and before I knew it, I was late. We're leaving tomorrow morning, ma'am. There's room for you."

"I'm obliged," she said. "I'll be ready." She stood up, as though to dismiss him, unsure of herself.

He stood, too. "I can't just leave you here until tomorrow morning," he told her. "I'll take you to a hotel."

She shook her head. "I'll be fine." She looked around at men sitting on benches, a cowboy collapsed and drunk in the corner, and an old fellow muttering to himself by the water bucket.

"A modest hotel," he insisted.

She could tell he wasn't going to leave her there. "Quite modest, Major Randolph," she replied.

"Cheyenne has only modest hotels," he informed her. "There is a pathetic restaurant close by, and we'll stop there, too."

"That isn't necess□"

"I'm hungry, Mrs. Hopkins," he said. "So is my driver. Be my guest?" He peered at her kindly. "Don't argue."

"Very well," she said quietly.

"Excellent," he said, as he butto...

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