



Not Too Late

By Kimberly Burns

September, 1947

"It is just so odd. Your mother rarely even goes into town." Donna's sharp voice carried through the early morning air. "For her to ride along to deliver hay across state lines is...well, peculiar. And why does your father want to go all the way to New Mexico to sell his hay? Why not Pueblo?"

Although a flatbed truck loaded with hay bales stood between them, AnnaMae heard every word her daughter-in-law uttered. She hadn't been as quick to speak her mind as Donna when she first arrived at the ranch. She had been a girl then, just a child.

"Pop got a good price for hay in Raton and Mom never gets much of a chance to leave the ranch. There is so much work to do with us six boys and again as many hired hands," Tom answered his young wife. "It's a good time for her to get away, since you have to stay here anyway with this little one."

Giggles bubbled over the loaded truck. AnnaMae imaged Tom tickling his tow-headed baby.

"Riding in a bouncy old hay truck to New Mexico doesn't sound like a good time to me," Donna retorted.

That girl doesn't miss much, AnnaMae thought. Funny thing was it was because of Donna that AnnaMae was going on this little trip.

Three trucks made up today's convoy. AnnaMae would ride with her husband, Will, in his latest pride and joy, a new Ford Flatbed, red with shiny black fenders and running boards. Tom would drive the bigger International Harvester and younger brother, Johnny, would drive the old Ford.

"Time to hit the road," Will shouted as he hustled down the line of vehicles, making a last check of the neatly stacked bales.

"You ready, Annie?" Her husband of nearly thirty years shot her a big grin. Will reminded AnnaMae of Teddy Roosevelt, always charging around with a toothy smile and round glasses.

She nodded, offering him a timid smile of her own. She didn't need help climbing into the high truck, but Will gave her an uncharacteristic hand up. This trip was special to him, too.

Last fall, Tom's five brothers had whooped and hollered when he and Donna burst into the ranch house, announcing they had run off and gotten married.

"Have you told your folks, Donna?" Will asked. "Did they act like this wild bunch?" An unlit cigar bobbed between his teeth.

Donna's smile fell and her lips pressed into a resolute line. Her chin jutted out with stubborn determination.

In that moment, AnnaMae understood exactly what wasn't being spoken aloud. The reason Donna and Tom had eloped and why her family had been unhappy was writ clear on the girl's face. AnnaMae knew what it felt like to be unclaimed by family.

"The craziest thing happened on the way home." Tom, the family's gentle giant, changed the subject, drawing attention away from his bride. "I laid the marriage license up on the dashboard. As we were coming down Raton Pass, with the windows down, that dang piece of paper flew right out the window!"

"Maybe you're not really married," Johnny poked his older brother in the belly. "Maybe you two just wanted to play married," he teased.

"That's enough John," AnnaMae said firmly. The kid blinked with mild surprise as she was not the disciplinarian of the house.

"Johnny's a knucklehead." Eldest brother Stan ruffled the younger one's hair. "But he has a point. Tom, you should get a copy of that marriage license. The government may need you to prove the marriage."

AnnaMae and Will locked eyes. Would they need official paperwork for their marriage? That would be

difficult to produce in this county, in this state.

"I don't know all the details," Stan continued. He was AnnaMae's smartest and most serious son. He liked to have every I dotted and T crossed. "The GI Bill is offering loads of benefits to returned servicemen. A married man will probably qualify for a low-interest home loan."

"Speaking of homes," AnnaMae cleared her throat. "Where will you two be making yours?"

Widening his eyes in a hopeful plea, Tom asked his parents, "Would it be all right if Donna and I stayed here? Just for a little while?"

"Of course," AnnaMae said. *I've always been able to make the best of a tough situation, she thought. And I'm good at keeping secrets.*

1916

The Model T Ford chugged out of the hot flatlands of eastern Colorado and into the verdant Wet Mountain Valley. It was the first time thirteen-year-old AnnaMae had ridden in an automobile. She saw deer, antelope, and a bald eagle, but very few people.

"We're here," Edward Boltman announced as he turned off the dirt road and onto two faint tire tracks wandering across a field. Snow drifts leaned against the shady side of a large barn and a small ranch house. In the distance, snow blew from the high peaks of the Wet Mountains like the gauzy scarves of motoring hats. The cool air smelled of fresh pine and manure. Hereford cows, some heavy with unborn calves, others with white-faced babes at their side, lowed in a nearby pasture.

Her father had hired out AnnaMae—sold her, really—to Edward Boltman. The girl would keep house for Edward, his aged mother, and son living on their remote mountain homestead. AnnaMae's father took the first month's wages with instructions to mail any money she made to Pueblo, General Delivery, as he headed with the family off in search of his next job.

"Just do your chores. Don't talk back and you'll have no problems with Grandma Kat," Edward advised her as they pulled up to the house.

AnnaMae was good at working hard and staying quiet.

Rooms had been added onto Edward's ranch house over the years. Bedrooms, a food pantry, storage areas, and sleeping porches sprouted from a large central kitchen without much planning. Large south-facing windows let in the sun, brightening and warming the room.

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"Don't you entertain any thoughts about my grandson." Grandma Kat warned in a low voice. The old woman's eyes narrowed into hard slits. "You better get busy if dinner is gonna be ready by six o'clock. Run out to the cellar and bring back some potatoes and carrots. Scrub good before you peel 'em. While that's cooking, clean these floors and beat the rugs. You'll do that every day; the men are forever tracking in mud. Mondays are laundry, Tuesdays are dusting and polishing."

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A tiny figure dressed all in black rose from a rocking chair near the stove. "This is Grandma Kat," Edward said by way of an introduction.

Grandma Kat barely came up to AnnaMae's shoulder. A frown etched the old woman's face as she pinched AnnaMae. "Hope she don't eat too much."

"Is this the new girl? I'm Will." A handsome young man waved from the back door. A curl of black hair fell across his forehead as he removed his hat. "My boots are covered in mud and worse, so I can't come in," he said with a broad grin. "But I wanted to say welcome." His eyes were the clear, bright blue of the Colorado sky.

A pink blush spread across AnnaMae's cheeks. She ducked her head and mumbled hello.

"I'm helping a heifer." He pointed over his shoulder toward the field. "She's birthing her first calf." Will ran a hand over his hair, pulling his hat back on. "I'll see you at supper."

A small smile tugged at AnnaMae's lips as he loped off into the pasture. It would be nice to have a friend out here in this lonesome valley.

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Grandma Kat rattled off a work schedule that would

keep AnnaMae bustling from sunup to sundown. She sighed. It was just as well. Perhaps if she kept busy, she wouldn't have time to miss Mama and the little ones. She knew Father had done what was best for the family by hiring her out and it was selfish for her to be troubled by that. Her wages would buy shoes for her brother and sister, feed them. But loneliness filled her soul. She wondered how long she'd have to stay here.

A few weeks later, Edward handed AnnaMae a small box wrapped in brown paper. "This was at the post office for you."

"What is it?" Grandma Kat sat up eyeing the package with suspicion. "Who's sending her stuff?"

AnnaMae wondered the same thing. It wasn't a special occasion, like her birthday or Christmas, and she hadn't received even a letter from her family. She read the precise handwriting of the return address. "It's from Miss Carpenter, my teacher."

AnnaMae hadn't attended school on a regular basis. Her father's search for work moved them around too much. However, her last teacher had opened a new world for AnnaMae, introducing her to the romance of the Bronte sisters, the humor of Mark Twain, and the excitement of Zane Grey. She would forever be grateful.

Dear AnnaMae,

I received word you had taken employment in the mountains and would not be returning to school. Knowing your love of the written word, I have taken the liberty of sending you two books. I believe you will enjoy reading of the grit and courage of these heroines.

Best of luck in this 'new chapter' of life.

Miss Rebecca Carpenter

Gently lifting the used copies of *Girl of the Limberlost* and *O! Pioneers*, AnnaMae laid them on the kitchen table as if displaying priceless jewels.

"The only book we read in this house is the Holy Bible," Grandma Kat declared. "Get those out of here."

AnnaMae scooped up the books and headed to her cot in the back room. "I'll put these away." She would read them after the old woman went to bed.

"Throw them out," Grandma Kat snapped. "You don't have time to waste reading blasphemous rubbish."

1917

The following summer, America entered the Great War and President Wilson federalized the National Guard, ordering soldiers from every state to report for duty. Will joined a troop in Cañon City. The boys received new

uniforms, rifles, and a grand send-off in preparation for the muddy battlefields of France. Grandma Kat couldn't travel all the way to Cañon City and AnnaMae had chores to do, so they stayed at the ranch when Edward delivered his only son to the US Army.

Edward brought back a photograph of Will, setting it on the mantel in a place of honor. AnnaMae thought he looked handsome in his uniform. Each Tuesday, she smiled at the confident soldier in the photo, gently caressing the memento as she dusted the frame.

She hadn't realized her small world revolved around Will until he was gone. Each morning, he greeted her cheerily as she piled his plate high with eggs and bacon. Between bites, he spoke with animation about the promise the day held. In the evening, as she washed dishes in the kitchen, she'd listen as Will laid out his plans for the future.

"We must expand, Pop," he told his father. "We need more land if we want to run more cattle." Will talked about raising sheep, harvesting timber, and building a lumber mill. He even suggested they stake a claim on a

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silver mine. He had so many ideas. She believed that Will Boltman could do anything he set his mind to.

He had been the brightest star in her sky. The next two years seemed dim without him.

1919

Edward's Model T kicked up dust as it approached the ranch.

"He's home!" AnnaMae couldn't keep the excitement from her voice as she slipped a clean apron over her head and cinched it at her waist. Her calico print dress had gotten short and fit tight across the bust now. It wasn't worthy of a soldier's homecoming, but it was the best she owned.

"Well, look at you," Will said as he climbed from Edward's automobile. He smiled, not the wide toothy grin she expected. A year of combat had scarred his face with exhaustion. A flinch of pain shot across Will's face as he

made his way across the yard and into the house.

Suddenly shy, AnnaMae leaned against the porch railing and smiled down at her shoes. She put one foot over the other trying to make them look smaller.

"When I left, you were just a kid. Now you're all growned up." He paused at the porch step to take her in.

"I'm sixteen." A blush flooded her cheeks. What a ridiculous thing to say, she thought. A self-conscience hand smoothed a tendril away from her face. AnnaMae had taken extra time braiding and pinning her hair this morning. She hoped he had noticed.

"Stop lollygagging girl. Get back to the kitchen and let Will in the house," Grandma Kat ordered.

"Would you like a cool drink? I made cookies and a cherry pie," AnnaMae offered. She doubted anyone missed their doughboy more than she missed Will. But her welcome home efforts seemed small and childish for a man who had traveled across the world. Other soldiers were honored with a brass band and a parade. Silly girl had made a pie.

"I sure did miss buttermilk. Do we have any?"

"Yes." AnnaMae raced to the well house where heavy jugs of milk, cream, and butter sat in the cool spring water. By the time she had poured him a glass and arranged three snickerdoodles on Grandma Kat's best plate, Will had laid down to rest.

She tapped at his door, but there was no answer. "Will?" she called softly and eased the door open.

He lay on his back, eyes screwed tight, as if barring unwanted sights. His fists clenched the gaily colored quilt.

"I brought you some buttermilk."

Ragged breaths shuddered in his chest. He was not asleep.

Worry flooded AnnaMae. This was not the energetic, optimistic Will she knew. She slipped closer. "I'll leave these here on the night table." As she set down the cookies and milk, her skirt brushed against the back of his hand.

Will gasped, his eyes springing open. "AnnaMae, you gave me a start. You should've knocked."

She ducked her head and mumbled an apology.

"What?" He grabbed her hand. "What did you say?" He was nearly shouting.

"I'm – I'm sorry. I brought buttermilk." She shouldn't have bothered him. Foolish girl, she scolded herself.

"What's going on in here?" Grandma Kat glowered from the doorway.

"My head hurts so." Will closed his eyes as pain creased his features.

"I'll get you some headache powder," AnnaMae said.

"Can you get me some headache powder?" He looked desperately at AnnaMae.

"Of course, Will." Anything for you.

Dinner hadn't been the celebration AnnaMae had imagined, but rather a quiet affair with Will not his boisterous self. As she finished the dishes, she saw him wander out to the big cottonwood tree behind the house. The sun had dipped behind the peaks painting the evening sky red, orange, and yellow.

She dried her hands on her apron and slipped out the back door. "The sunset is so pretty this evening. Were there nice sunsets in France?"

Will stared as the last rays of light colored the clouds.

"Mind if I join you?" She sat down on the grass beside him.

"AnnaMae," he exclaimed. "I didn't hear you." He sighed. "It sure is pretty here. There were no sunsets like this in France."

She had said that, just like she had offered to get headache powder. To the eye, Will looked fine, but something was not right. AnnaMae fiddled with the tie of her apron, wrapping it around her fingers, unsure what to say.

"I missed this old valley."

She nodded. She had grown to love the area, too. Despite Grandma Kat's endless demands and cantankerous nature, AnnaMae never tired of waking to the sunrise on the white and blue peaks, the cerulean sky at noon, and the countless stars in the black velvet night. She'd never seen anywhere as beautiful as the valley's green pastures ribboned with clear streams. Nor had she lived anywhere for this long. Over the past three years, the Wet Mountain Valley had become AnnaMae's home.

"And I missed your cooking." One side of his mouth turned up with a half-hearted smile. "All the little things you do...your quiet ways."

AnnaMae allowed herself a small smile and smoothed her skirt. Secretly she'd admired Will's boldness, his big plans. She wasn't sure she even knew how to think big. She was a timid mouse.

He turned back to the setting sun. "I don't remember the sky shining much in France. It was always cold and muddy. The only red skies I saw were caused by fires and explosions. Now I can't stop hearing the explosions." He stood, picked up a rock and threw it as hard as he could,

as if chasing away a bothersome pest. "My eardrums got blown out." Will sat back down. "Oh AnnaMae, no girl will want a fella who is deaf as a post at twenty-three."

AnnaMae touched his arm. "Only the poorest sort of girl would be put off by a man's hearing. Loads of soldiers came home missing arms and legs. No woman is going to look in your ears."

Will gave a sad, rueful chuckle and pitched another rock, not as angry this time.

"William Boltman, you're destined to be one of the most important men and biggest landowners in this part of the state. Females from three counties will line up to catch your eye." This rare audacity stole her breath. She'd never spoken so brazenly in her life.

But Will had turned his head and hadn't heard her.

Each week, a little more of the old Will returned. He worked all day at the ranch with his father and spent every free hour at his own homestead. He had a couple of years left to "prove-up" the place before the government would grant him the deed. He built a sturdy cabin and dug a well. He put up a corral, sketched out a good-sized barn, and planned to buy some heifers.

There wasn't much that could be done for a cowhand who was hard of hearing. AnnaMae always got his attention before she spoke to him, touching him on the arm. She looked directly at him and spoke in a slow and clear voice.

AnnaMae worried Will was working himself into the ground. She made sure he had a hearty breakfast every morning and a sweet treat for dessert each evening. She packed a lunch pail for him to take when he worked at his cabin. She was always thinking of ways to be more helpful.

However, the more AnnaMae did for Will, the less Grandma Kat liked it. Dirty, hard outdoor work was added to the girl's list of chores, mucking out the barn, digging post holes for the garden fence, and bucking heavy bales of hay into neat stacks in the barn loft.

1921

Aaoogha! The unusual honk of a Model T horn blasted the afternoon air.

"Yoohoo," A statuesque woman wearing a large traveling hat waved as the automobile chugged into the yard.

AnnaMae stepped from the barn and blinked with disbelief. "Aunt Belle?"

"The one and only." The driver hurried around to open

the car door. "Good heavens child, what are you wearing? What are you doing?"

AnnaMae hadn't minded when ordered to clean and oil the horse tack. It was hot and dusty in the barn, but the work wasn't terribly hard. It got her out of the house and away from Grandma Kat's constant glower. Unfortunately, Will wasn't around the barn this afternoon; he had gone to Pueblo to buy heifers.

AnnaMae pushed the hair out of her eyes with the back of a grimy hand. She looked affright. Aunt Belle, however, looked like a million bucks. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I bought an automobile," the fashionable woman said with a dramatic sweep of her hand. "So, I simply had to take a driving tour. Well, Simpson is doing the actual driving." She nodded toward the capped man polishing the high black fenders. "It's so hot in Kansas City. I thought I'd head to the mountains. Your mother wrote me you were working up here, so I got a map, headed to Westcliffe, Colorado, and started asking people for directions to the Boltman homestead." She clasped her hands at her ample bosom and gave young AnnaMae a satisfied smile.

Belle owned a successful restaurant and boarding house in Kansas City. AnnaMae had seen her mother's sister only a handful of times, but the woman had made a lasting impression on the girl. Belle was the smartest woman she'd ever known and the best dressed woman she'd ever seen.

AnnaMae was delighted her flamboyant aunt was visiting; however, she wasn't sure Grandma Kat would be happy. She gave a nervous glance at the house and saw Kat glaring from the window. There was no pleasing the old woman, so AnnaMae decided to err on the side of hospitality.

"Please come into the house. Would you like a drink? Can I get you a bite to eat?" As the two approached the house, AnnaMae tried to warn her aunt. "Grandma Kat can be, um, difficult."

"So can I," replied the formidable woman. "I'll introduce myself while you go wash up."

When AnnaMae returned to the sitting room the two redoubtable females were staring hard at each other.

"I don't like this one bit," Aunt Belle announced. "Get your things. You're coming with me."

"Where?" AnnaMae was confused.

"To Kansas City. You can work in my restaurant."

"But this is my job." It was more than just employment. It had become her home. Will lived here.

"This old woman is taking advantage of you. That ends

today. I can help you build a better life."

AnnaMae's mind spun faster than a Kansas tornado as she jammed her few possessions into her old carpet bag. Getting away from Grandma Kat was the answer to her prayers. Working in an elegant restaurant in the big city sounded exciting. Maybe she could become as self-sufficient as Aunt Belle. But Will...she couldn't imagine living without him.

"Hurry up child. I don't want to spend another minute with that hateful woman."

There was no time to say goodbye to the man who held AnnaMae's heart.

"AnnaMae, telephone call for you!" came the shout up the stairs of the boarding house. AnnaMae had never received a telephone call before. She raced down to the small table in the front hall. A red-headed girl handed her the candlestick phone.

"Hello?"

"AnnaMae? It's Will."

Her heart flipped in her chest. "Where are you?"

"What?"

"Where are you calling from?" she asked, remembering to talk in a loud, slow voice.

"The post office in town. I decided what I had to say couldn't be said in a letter." The line crackled and hissed. "I miss you. I want you to come back."

"I'm working here now. It's a good job."

"You have a beau?"

"No."

"What? You have to speak up"

"No," she shouted into the mouthpiece. There would never be anyone she loved as much as Will.

"Come home." She didn't answer; he went on. "I want to marry you."

A defeated breath escaped her chest, part laugh, part sob. "Oh Will, Kat would never allow that."

"You aren't marrying Grandma Kat. You're marrying me." He said it as if it were already accomplished. "I've got big plans for my land. I'll take good care of you."

AnnaMae could see it in her mind, a true home, a real family, and Will. But it was only a dream, just a beautiful dream.

A voice from behind her called, "AnnaMae, it's time to leave for the evening shift."

She sighed. "I've got to go." It was too late. The dream had floated away.

"It's not too late," Will said, as if he could read her thoughts down the telephone line. "I'm wiring you the money for a train ticket to Pueblo."

The bride-to-be spotted her betrothed waiting on the platform as the train pulled into the station. Will's stylish fedora stood out among the farmers' straw hats and the cowboys' sweat-stained ones.

"Aren't you something special," he said with a big grin.

Aunt Belle had not been keen on the idea of AnnaMae returning to Colorado to marry Will, but she had bought her niece a beautiful dove grey traveling suit. White gloves covered her hands reddened from dishwashing. AnnaMae thought her man looked dashing as well in a striped shirt.

Will never stopped talking during the drive across the hardscrabble plateau, up into the mountains, and around switchbacks curves. He laid out their future. "We'll have a dozen kids. You can name the girls and I'll name the boys."

Her cheeks ached from smiling when they pulled up in front of Edward's ranch house.

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AnnaMae expected Kat to be wild with anger when Will brought her in, but the old woman's deeply-carved frown twisted into something like a smirk. "You can't marry her."

A sickness rose in AnnaMae's throat. She shouldn't have gotten her hopes up. She should have known better.

"I see no reason why I can't." Will smiled but there was an edge in his tone.

"AnnaMae is already married...to your pa!" The wicked old woman cackled.

Will looked as if a German shell had exploded in his face.

"You said it meant nothing." AnnaMae cried. She swallowed back bitter vomit that threatened at the back of

her throat. She was naive to have trusted Edward. He'd told her it was best for Will.

"When you were overseas, your pa took her to the courthouse and filled out a marriage license. He's gonna use that to file for another homestead." Grandma Kat crossed her arms with finality.

"I did it for you, Will." Edward stood at the back door. "This is your dream. Between you and me, we could own close to five hundred acres."

"The government thinks she's already married," Kat crowed. "And polygamy is illegal."

"You should have told me," Will said.

AnnaMae was unsure to whom he was speaking. She covered her face so he would not see her shame. All her hopes lay trampled at her feet by Edward's scheming, Kat's meanness, and her own foolishness.

"You see, it's too late." His arm went around her waist, pulling her close. "We are already married. A justice of the peace married us on the way home. AnnaMae is my wife now."

The lie sprung from Will's lips like the false song of a mockingbird. AnnaMae sagged against him, overcome with relief and happiness.

Will pointed a finger at his father. "I suggest you burn that marriage license, because polygamy is illegal."

Without another word, they left the ranch house and went to live in the cabin Will built on his homesteaded land. It was small, but it was home. From that day forward they acted as if a justice of the peace had spoken the words over them. Will's voice rang with pride whenever he introduced her as his wife.

Grandma Kat declared the young couple would burn in hell and moved to Kansas to live out her days with another, more righteous son. Edward failed to make improvements to AnnaMae's land and lost the homestead claim. The gossip around town died out after a few years.

1947

It took a good part of the day for the heavy trucks to make the trek over Raton Pass. Talking was difficult over the rumble of the engine, with Will being so hard of hearing. However, it gave AnnaMae time to reflect.

Although Will and AnnaMae's life had not been easy, it had been good. Like a yoked team, they pulled through every difficulty together. They'd never spoken marriage vows. They had lived them, loving and honoring each other every day for over twenty-five years. Will built the big things—houses, businesses, ranches. She did the things

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that made a home—babies, clean laundry, warm fires, cherry pie.

For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer. Will had made and lost fortunes over the years. People called him a plunger jumping from one venture to another, but AnnaMae's children never went hungry.

In sickness and in health. They had six big strapping boys. She never did get to name a girl.

Until death do us part. Will saved her life when a sawmill accident took her left ring finger. When a drunk doctor cut her badly as she struggled to birth a stubborn baby, Will rushed her to a hospital.

Edward was dead now; they could make their marriage official. Will bought her a thin gold band. She would wear it on her right hand.

The trucks pulled to a stop in the center of town.

"See that building?" Tom pointed to the blond brick of the Colfax County Building. "That's where Donna and I got married."

"Says you," Johnny teased, earning himself a slug in the arm from his older brother.

"Tom," Will called, putting an end to the nonsense. "Your mother and I have some business to attend to. You boys head to the sale barn and start unloading the hay. We'll meet you there."

Her husband held out his arm and AnnaMae slipped her hand through. They headed toward the justice of the peace office at the side of the building.

Today they would recite aloud the vows, sign the papers, and have their marriage officially recorded at the courthouse. William and AnnaMae Boltman would become husband and wife in the eyes of the law.

It was not too late. Love is never too late.

AUTHOR

Kimberly Burns



Kimberly Burns writes historical fiction inspired by the colorful characters of the old west. Her two published novels and four short stories have received numerous awards. She and her adventurous husband divide their time between Florida, Virginia, and the open road.