



THE DOG WHO WOULD NOT SMILE

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**A Nathan T. Riggins Western Adventure
Book 1**

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Dedicated to:
Aaron and his friends

CHAPTER 1

Nathan felt the stagecoach hit something hard, jerk to the left, and settle down to a steady bounce.

Why do grown-ups talk about us as if we weren't listening? he grumbled under his breath. For a moment voices faded in the rattle of the ride.

Then the man spoke again, "Looks like your boy's gone to sleep, ma'am."

"Well, he doesn't belong to me!" The woman's voice sounded high and shrill. "I thought he was yours."

"Mine?" the man growled.

"He entered the coach with you." She spoke the last word with authority.

"Now if I recall correctly, we all climbed aboard the stage at Battle Mountain Station," he drawled.

Even without opening his eyes, Nathan figured the man was surely from Texas.

The lady sighed.

Then the man cleared his throat. "It's not right to send a child off by himself in country like this."

"It certainly isn't." The woman's crisp reply brought the discussion to a sudden close.

Nathan Riggins kept his smoky blue eyes closed. Awake, he'd have to explain why a twelve-year-old, ninety-pound boy was riding the stagecoach through northern Nevada alone. Asleep, he would be asked no questions.

It seemed like years since he had sat on the front porch of his grandfather's Indiana farm. Everything was supposed to have gotten better after the war. Once Nathan's dad came home, life was to be perfect again. But all of that seemed so long ago, like something out of a dream.

The stage lurched forward and tossed Nathan to the rear. He wanted to scream. Long, hot, dusty, and boring. The whole trip had been that way. Nathan hadn't spoken to anyone but ticket agents and train conductors. He found himself in an adult world, where most folks looked right over the top of him, both with their eyes and their words.

Nobody ever called Nathan shy back home. But everything out here seemed so foreign. *Surely this part will be over soon.*

In Willow Creek Nathan would be with his mom and dad again. He hadn't seen them in months. What a big, happy party they'd celebrate.

Of course, he dreaded telling them about the smallpox epidemic, about Grandma and Grandpa dying. And he knew his mother would be angry that he couldn't get along with Uncle Jed. *At least they have my letter.*

Nathan promised himself that he would never take another stagecoach ride. He was either freezing or roasting, and always bouncing. A stagecoach trip is like a toothache, he thought grimly.

"Pain before pleasure," Grandpa used to tell him. "Before you eat watermelon, you've got to work the garden."

Beads of sweat dripped off Nathan's forehead, but he didn't bother wiping. He knew it would only smear the road dust that clung to his body. *Nobody cares what I look like anyway.*

Some coins jingled in his bouncing coat pocket, and he reviewed his plan. *I'll buy Mom a new hat and a little folding knife for Dad.* Nathan amazed even himself that he had traveled across the country and still had \$3.50 to spare.

He pushed up the front edge on his round-brimmed, brown felt hat and barely opened one eye to examine the other passengers.

Sitting next to him, but leaning against the far side of the coach, was the woman with the high voice. Black lace trimmed the cuffs and high collar of her long dark dress. She clutched a large green handbag in her lap. Her hat tilted toward her right ear, and her frown looked like it was painted on her face. He decided she must be a schoolteacher. For the first time in weeks, he thought about school. He would certainly miss Bradford and Nelson, and maybe even Melissa, although she could be a real bother at times.

The man sitting across from him wore a tall black hat that looked very worn. His coat sleeves were too short, and the buttons had long since disappeared.

Nathan noticed a black-handled revolver tucked into the man's belt. The gun especially caught his eye because of the gold trigger.

Nathan didn't bother looking out the window. For several days the landscape had been the same—rolling, treeless mountains and high desert basin covered with sagebrush. His head slapped against the stage wall, and the woman gasped as they rounded a corner. Back home, everyone claimed the West was full of bears, snakes, and Indians. Nathan thought he had seen an Indian at a depot in Wyoming, but he wasn't sure. Mainly, the West so far was full of nothing.

The stage slowed to enter a settlement, and Nathan sat up. Most of the structures seemed to be tents scattered about in no apparent order. One wood building had two stories. A big sign above the second floor proclaimed: "Galena Store: Outfits Big & Small."

When the stage stopped, the lady and then the gentleman climbed out. Nathan stayed put. He had no one to see and nowhere to go. But he hung his head out the stage door window and stared down the street. A cloud of dust hovered overhead as the community hustled with activity. Supply wagons, lined four deep, unloaded at the Galena Store. The wooden sidewalks glared, unpainted and not yet weathered. Everything here is so rough and bare, he thought. Just the basics.

Nathan's eye followed a young girl carrying a heavy bucket of water across the street to a tent that posted a handwritten sign: "Walker's Haircuts & Dentistry." Even though the wooden buildings and tents came in different shapes, and most were new, the layer of clay-red dust made them all blend

together. Nathan pulled off his hat and fanned his face. "It just can't be much longer," he rasped to himself, clearing the dust out of his throat. "You might as well step out, son."

Nathan spun his head around to see Mr. Mallory, the stagecoach driver, standing beside a short man wearing glasses, who was tugging to loosen his black bow tie.

"Son, Henry has word from our boss that we are supposed to drop the run up to Willow Creek. We won't be going up there."

"But you can't do that! I paid for a ticket clear to Willow Creek," Nathan protested.

The man called Henry responded, "Well, young man, I'm certainly sorry. But they shut down Willow Creek two weeks ago. We ran a mail stage up there Friday, but we took no passengers and brought none back. Everyone is gone."

"Gone? A whole town gone?" Nathan shouted. "I'm afraid so," the station agent added.

Nathan fought back rising fear and anger. "A town is a town! They don't just come and go like a circus!" Mr. Mallory explained, "It happens all the time out here whenever the gold and silver is gone. Most all the folks hurried to a place called Jersey. Rumor has it that the gold strike's big there. They want me to run the stage on down to Jersey. You're welcome to ride along."

"But," Nathan protested, "my parents are waiting for me at Willow Creek!"

Henry pulled an engraved, gold-cased watch out of his vest pocket. "Well, Mallory's got a full load of passengers to roll out of here in less than one-half hour. You be here at the stage, and I'll let you ride up on top."

"From what I hear, son, there's not even a dog left at Willow Creek," Mallory added. "You'll have better luck finding your folks in Jersey, or Austin, or even Lander Hill."

"You don't understand," Nathan shouted. "I sent them a letter and everything. I mean, they will be expecting me to show up. They won't move without me. I'm their son!"

Mallory banged the dust off his trousers with his hat. "Suit yourself, boy. Maybe you can find a wagon headed for Willow Creek and ride along. But I doubt if there is anybody on earth who's going up there now." The two men drifted inside the stage office, and Nathan walked around to the back of the stagecoach and unfastened his satchel. *Lord, this isn't fair. Nobody warned me that whole towns move.*

He banged the small suitcase down on the wooden sidewalk, and his eyes searched the street. Teamsters shouted from their wagons; men on horseback crowded the street; men carrying supplies on their backs scurried by.

The girl he had seen carrying the water walked over and stared down at his feet.

"Yeah, what do you want?" Nathan scolded. "Where did you get them shoes?" she asked.

"In Chicago. They're the latest style. I don't suppose you've ever been to Chicago," he boasted.

"I've been to Virginia City three times," she shot back. "And I ain't never seen shoes like those." She started to walk away. Nathan regretted being rude to the only person his age he'd talked to for more than a month.

"Hey, wait! Listen, I need to get to Willow Creek. Where can I get a ride?" he asked.

"Ain't nobody up there. Ain't nobody going up there." She brushed the front of her long dress and turned to scoot back across the street.

For the first time, Nathan noticed her bare feet. "Well, my mother and father are there! And I'm going there!" he shouted.

His confidence faded the minute the girl was out of sight. It was just another town full of strangers. Finally, he waited in line to talk to one of the clerks at the Galena Store about hitching a ride on a freight wagon.

"Willow Creek? Son, that town is gone! Now trot on out of here. I've no time for chats."

Nathan crossed the street and talked to a man leaning against an empty corral where a sign said: "Horses for Sale or Trade." The answer was the same. Gathering up as much courage as he could, he walked up to a well-dressed stranger and asked him to help. The man ignored him completely.

Nathan was still hurrying about looking for a ride to Willow Creek when the stage rolled out for Jersey. The only person that would talk to him was an old man sitting on the wooden bench in front of the Welsh Miners' Hall.

"So you're wanting to go to Willow Creek?" He squinted and shaded his eyes with his sun-tanned hand.

"I can't find a ride. Why is everyone so rude?" "Gold." The old man grabbed Nathan by the shoulder and stuck his face up close. "It drives them all crazy." Startled by the sudden move and the smell of the man, Nathan pulled back. "Eh, just how far is it to Willow Creek anyway?" he asked.

"Well, you go back down Duck Creek a mile or so and then slant off to the left until you come to a crossroad. At that point take a left and start climbing uphill. It's maybe fifteen more miles."

"More than fifteen miles?" Nathan groaned.

"Yep."

"But," Nathan grumbled, "I couldn't walk that far before dark."

The old man shook his head. "Nope, I don't reckon you could. Maybe you should buy yourself a horse." "How much do they cost?"

"Twenty, twenty-five dollars." He shrugged. "Not including the saddle."

"Well, I can't afford that," Nathan complained. The old man once again stuck his nose in Nathan's face. "Don't matter, there ain't none left to sell anyway." Nathan jumped to his feet. "Well, I'm going to walk then."

"I guess you could hike over Big Belle Mountain," the old man suggested.

"Where's that?" Nathan quizzed.

"See that mountain over there? Sort of looks like a little tower in the middle? Well, that's Big Belle. From up on top, you can look down and see Willow Creek. It would cut the trip to about twelve miles, but there's no trail that way."

"I could get there before dark!" Nathan crowed. "Maybe, maybe not. It's a tough, hot climb this time of the year. Take my advice," the old man added, "pack some extra water. Ain't no springs on Big Belle."

"Any mountain lions up there?" Nathan asked.

The old man slapped his knee and laughed. "No lions, tigers, or elephants!"

Nathan thought about the rumors he had heard. "How about snakes and Indians?"

"Well, that's another story. I doubt if you'll see either one, but you never can tell. It's a pretty safe trip except for the heat, like I said."

Nathan started to walk across the street. Then he turned back to the old man. "Is Willow Creek really empty?" he asked.

"Nah, Mrs. Fromly will still be there. Probably Earl Thunder, too. I haven't seen him pass through here yet." "And my parents," Nathan added.

He bought a canteen at the store and filled it full of pump water. Then he bought several sticks of beef jerky and one peppermint candy. He stuffed all of his purchases in his satchel and hiked out of town towards Big Belle Mountain.

For the first time all day, Nathan allowed himself to relax. "Twelve miles won't be all that bad," he mumbled aloud as he pushed past some sagebrush. "I once hiked eight miles to the county fair with Bradford Oakes."

The memory of a hike down a tree-lined Indiana lane only made the journey here seem more harsh. A hot summer wind blasted across the high desert mountains, and the sand stung his face. Nathan had hiked no more than a mile when he tossed down his suitcase and rested beside a tall gray, strong-smelling sage. His feet burned from the heat of his shoes, and he remembered the girl back in town. "If she can go barefoot, so can I," he insisted to the empty desert. But after a dozen painful hops on the hot sand, he collapsed and carefully tucked his swollen feet back into the tight shoes.

Nathan trudged along until he finally made it to the base of the mountain. He could look back down the sloping basin and see Galena in the distance. His knees and legs were starting to ache from walking through the loose sand and dirt. Nathan pulled out a piece of jerky and scrambled higher. He leaned against the brisk wind and tried to keep his chapped lips shut tight against the blowing sand.

Looking back over his shoulder, Nathan came to a sudden stop. Someone or something was following him. A chill ran down his back. His arms tingled.

A wolf! I know it's a wolf. I've seen pictures before.

He grabbed up a pointed stick.

He kept climbing the mountain with one eye on the animal. Whenever he stopped for a rest, it stopped. When he ran, the animal ran. But it never came any closer to

Nathan. After about an hour, the animal disappeared from sight, which both relieved and worried Nathan.

But he had worse problems. Blisters on his feet rubbed hard against the leather shoes. He dreamed of a cool pond to soak his feet in and a soft, smooth pair of shoes.

Nathan pulled himself up on some large boulders that had been dug out of the mountainside and lay scattered in a semicircle around a fairly deep pit. He plopped down and gulped water from his canteen. The bright orange sun had already begun to rest on the mountains behind him.

I'm going to have to spend a night out here on this mountain.

He peeled his shoes off again and inspected his feet. The puffy skin bled where the blisters had rubbed raw. Grabbing an old shirt out of his leather case, he ripped it into strips and bandaged his sores. Nathan shoved his shoes back on and plodded once more up Big Belle.

This is really dumb. Who do I think I am? I'm just a boy. I shouldn't be out here in the middle of nowhere.

By the time he reached the crest of the mountain, it was so dark he could not even see where Willow Creek was. Though his heart pushed him to go on, his body gave out.

He circled a pile of rocks, mumbling to himself. "I can't hike after dark. I can't stay up here alone. But I can't go back."

Lord, if this is a really bad dream ... well, this would be a good time to wake up.

In the far distance he thought he heard a wolf howl. He decided to wait the night out against some rocks. He scrounged a few sticks to make a small fire. In the approaching darkness, he could not see a tree anywhere.

He saved one piece of jerky for breakfast and drank all but a couple swallows of his water. Then he sucked on the peppermint stick as he leaned back. The night air chilled him, but he enjoyed its clean taste, free from the constant cloud of dust on the endless stagecoach ride. First one star, then another blinked in the sky. The low sage and the occasional rock blended in the blackness of the night, limiting his view to the edges of the little fire.

Nathan had not once, even in the past few weeks, felt so alone. Indiana was far away. His parents were nowhere in sight. Home, school, church, friends—even Galena, Nevada, felt distant.

Lord, it's me, Nathan T. Riggins and I hope You're watching. I know there aren't many people out here, but they're important ... sort of.

He reached down for a stick and stirred the fire. He fumbled in his satchel for his hunting knife. Then he rolled up his overcoat into a pillow. Nathan laid the knife within arm's reach.

Though the small fire warmed him, he shivered as he imagined someone, or something, might be waiting just outside its light.

