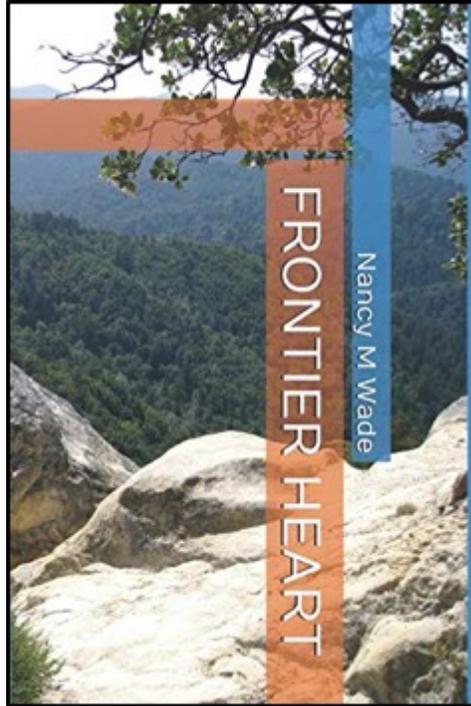


FRONTIER HEART



PREVIEW

PROLOGUE

The mist rising above the surface of the mountain lake hung like a sheer curtain shrouding the area in a pearl gray sheen. The air was thick and heavy with the moist dewy blanket. A solitary bird could be heard chirping in the early morning light. All was still and calm. Glorious riots of color painted the dense woods. Autumn in its magnificent splendor of burnished gold, bronze and lush greens decorated stands of oak, maple and pine trees. It was a breathtaking panorama that spread out before her.

Shafts of sunlight piercing through the forest illuminated the thoughtful beauty sitting by the campfire. "How did I ever get myself into this situation?" she wondered. "And what kind of man is it that lies sleeping on the hard ground nearby? What can I expect from him? Will he be kind or cold and uncaring?"

Carrie Thomas would have been surprised to know that the subject of her thoughts was at that same moment thinking of her. The rugged face with its chiseled jaw line showed lines of worry and years of outdoor living on his tan skin. His closed lids hid hazel green eyes and the disturbing thoughts going on behind them. He lay stretched out on the unyielding ground, protected by his meager bedroll blanket. Tall, almost 6'2", with muscular shoulders and arms that bespoke of hard work, he was barely covered by the woolen blanket. Troy Carson brushed an errant lock of thick brown hair off his forehead. His movement belied his slumber and swung Carrie's attention to him.

Startling bright blue eyes stared back at him. He noticed her long auburn hair was escaping from the conservative braid hanging over her left shoulder. "What was he going to do with this woman he just took to wife?" The idea of another wife so soon after Abigail's death disturbed him. "He didn't want a wife, just a servant. Well, he wasn't going to treat her as anything but a servant!" he decided, jumping up.

"Let's get something to eat quickly and break camp. We've got a far piece to travel yet and I've been too many weeks gone from the homestead now," Troy told Carrie.

Carrie picked up a small pot and went to the edge of the lake for water. It was clear and cold this high in the mountains and she filled a crude tin cup and drank thirstily before returning to camp. She set the pot to boil among the coals of the still hot fire. At least they could have some of the precious coffee Troy was rationing during their long journey. A bowl of hot porridge would fill their bellies and keep the hunger away for several hours. Troy would hunt some small game during the day to add to their meager food supply. Carrie gathered up her own bedroll of blankets and cloth satchel that contained her only possessions; all that she was allowed to keep after the auction ... **The auction.** If she closed her eyes she could still see the leering faces of the men in the crowd and the clammy hands of the auctioneer as he pushed her to the center of the platform. Memories flashed through her mind in vivid detail as she relived the horror of being inspected like a piece of chattel. Tears of humiliation rolled down her cheeks as the realization of her indentured servitude to this stranger was now her future.

CHAPTER 1

Williamsburg, Virginia

September 1791

The city lay along the banks of the James River in an orderly fashion of tree lined streets and public squares. The stately brick mansions of the former English aristocrats and the colonial governor blended with the clapboard siding of the tradesmen's homes. The streets hummed with activity as people hurried to and fro buying and selling their wares in the busy morning. The once prominent capital of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Williamsburg, was still regarded as a city of great importance within the newly born state. Volumes of trade were transacted as merchants sailed up the James River toward Richmond. Travelers shared the latest news and enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Raleigh Tavern before venturing further west into this new land seeking the prosperity and liberty that they had fought so long and hard to win. Echoes of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson's stirring speeches still rang among the brick walls of the Hall of the House of Burgesses at the Capitol building reminding all of the spirit of revolution that moved a nation and continued to surprise the world.

The cobblestone alley, too narrow to be called a street, ran east off of Market Square. Away from the hustle and bustle, here was a peaceful quiet that ingrained in the very framework of the wooden homes with their dormer windows. Flower beds filled with colorful hollyhocks and golden marigolds graced the brick path leading to the front door of one such home. The mustard yellow siding was accented by four long front windows with their panes of nine over nine and flanked by white shutters. Two

dormers peeked from the roof top. The house appeared well kept and of a moderate size, surrounded by a short picket fence. A carriage house and two smaller out buildings were situated in the rear and side yards. A small herb garden was left untended. The doors to the carriage house stood open. The stalls were empty now; no evidence of the sleek chestnut mares or the shiny enclosed conveyance that once resided there. A woman's crying broke the silence as her sobs grew louder.

An older woman sat crying pitifully, her arms wrapped about herself. She rocked slowly on the last piece of furniture left in the house. The barren walls displayed faded shadows where family portraits and candle sconces once hung. No damask draperies graced the window panes. The wool Aubusson rug was gone, the wide plank floor bare and cold. The hearth was empty, no fires burned; the mantle stripped of its pewter steins and bowls. A young girl sat cross legged on the hard wooden floor. She scarcely noticed a vicious splinter jabbing her leg as she tried to console her mother. She looked about the room that had been the center of her home, the pride of her mother's, and shook her head forlornly. One silent tear rolled down her cheek. Bright blue eyes glimmered with other unshed tears that she vowed not to show. Her mother was too distraught and must be her only consideration now. Somehow, they would work things out. Surely the town's people could not be so cruel!