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Rail Runner Romance

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Esther Garcia swished her index finger across the face of her Kindle Fire. The book was a real page-turner:

Detective Donald Price and his partner, Detective Amy Yoder, had just gathered the last bits of evidence from the victim's bedroom, where blood was spattered on the walls behind the bed, and on the dresser across the room. The young female victim had the letter "A" carved under each breast, and her white Amish bonnet was placed carefully on her pubic area.

This small region of Pennsylvania had become a haven for drug dealers, and the residents were experiencing a rash of crime never seen before.

The two detectives did what they always did after they left a homicide scene...they rented a cheap motel room. Something about crime always made them crave sex. They couldn't explain it. All they wanted to do was ravish each other. This crime was no exception. Donald pounded Amy mercilessly, and she begged for more. Then she took command, tied him up, and teased him to near insanity. In the end, they were dripping with sweat, exhausted, ready to shower, and return to work. As Donald swung his legs to the floor, Amy's fingers lightly traced small spirals down his back.

Esther looked out the window, checking the progress of the train, then continued reading, her heart racing from the vivid descriptions of the brutal murder and explicit sex scenes. She hadn't been with a man for over six years, and she was now thirty-four. Her last relationship hurt her deeply when her fiancé betrayed her. Since then, she hadn't allowed herself to become attracted to another man.

She was a young woman who had a handful of close friends; but on most nights, she turned to her books for adventure, romance, knowledge, and friendship. I'm rather like a wounded falcon, she sometimes told herself.

Her seat on the train faced north, the direction she was travelling. Sandia Mountain loomed in the landscape to the east, its presence comforting.

The Rail Runner commuter train to Santa Fe approached the station at Sandia Pueblo, slowly came to a stop, and a few passengers stepped aboard. One of them sat in a seat across the aisle from her, facing south. He carried a European-style leather man bag, slung casually over his shoulder. They briefly acknowledged each other with tiny smiles, as strangers often do when their paths cross for just a moment.

The train glided from the station, and the gentle swaying could easily have caused Esther to drift off to sleep, but it was September, when the earth begins to rest, and the days lend themselves to Indian summer. She wanted to enjoy the almost- autumn landscape.

A native New Mexican, Esther lived in the center of Albuquerque, the most urban part of a desert city separated by hundreds of miles in each direction from any other metropolitan area of similar size. Sometimes, in her small adobe house, she spread her arms left and right, and imagined pushing the buildings away, and when they eroded into mud and then turned to dust, their absence created space for desert scrub to take hold again. For Esther, space offered comfort and room to breathe.

The train steadily rolled away from urban life into less inhabited high desert scenery pocked with dots of sage and yucca. As the altitude increased, golden wild sunflowers, junipers laden with berries, and tall straw-colored grasses grew from the black and crimson mesas that had no second thoughts about interrupting the brilliant New Mexico sky. Esther felt at one with the land of the Southwest, where her family had lived for generations. I hope I find a house with a view, she daydreamed as she stared out the window of the train.

The panorama infused every cell of her body. No matter how many times she rode this train, she never tired of the landscape.

Her job as a curator at The Albuquerque Museum of Art and History was over, and she had taken two weeks to find a new home in Santa Fe, close to The Museum of Santa Fe, where she would assume the position of Assistant Director. It was a respectable promotion, and a good reason to move to a place less confining than her home near the historic center of Albuquerque.

Her appointment with the realtor was at 3:00 p.m. It was just a few minutes after 11:00 a.m., so she would have plenty of time for lunch. I wonder what the realtor has lined up for me to see this afternoon.

Esther tugged at her size twelve long denim skirt, and checked her tan suede ankle boots. She liked the way she looked. Casual, yet fashionable, even if she wasn't thin.

She peeked at the man who sat across the aisle. He was reading a book. I'd say fortyish, maybe almost fifty; handsome; thick hair, with a little gray at the temples. Interesting clothing—dark jeans, neatly pressed. Who wears pressed jeans? A tan blazer. Looks like cashmere, but well-worn. Beaten up brown leather satchel. What am I doing? Stop staring. Keep a comfortable distance.

Esther turned her attention to her Kindle, and read another chapter. The gentleman across the aisle cleared his throat.

“Excuse me. Do they have Wi-Fi on this train?”

Her mouth curved slightly up at the corners as she said simply, “Yes.”

She wanted her privacy, but found herself asking, “What is that orange book you're reading?”

He took a yellow highlighter from his pocket. “Oh, I’m proofing a book for a friend of mine. He asked me to highlight anything I find that needs to be corrected.”

“You’re an editor?”

“At times I do some editing, yes.” He eyed her Kindle.

What are you reading?”

“A murder mystery that also has romance.”

He tilted his head back slightly. “Really? Sounds interesting.”

“It’s set in Pennsylvania, not too far from Amish country.

His eyebrows furrowed as he leaned forward again. “What’s the title?”

“It’s called The Lancaster County Murders.”



The man stared out the window. Can you believe it? She’s reading my book. What are the odds? On a train, out in the middle of nowhere, I would come across one of my own readers! And where the hell did she find romance in my story? There’s none of that crap in my detective novels!

He turned back to her. “I beg your pardon? You say there’s romance in that story?”

“Certainly. There’s violence and gore, but the two detectives, a man and a woman, are clearly attracted to each other, emotionally and physically. It is quite apparent to me.”

He shifted his upper body to face her more directly. “A detective story would be all action, with none of that soft fluff that comes with romance.”

Esther abruptly closed the cover of her Kindle. “Romance has a place in many stories. What’s wrong with having ‘soft fluff’ in a novel that is so brutal? In this book, the author has the two detectives look at each other across the table at meetings, occasionally brush their fingers together as they pass in the hall...actions that indicate romance. These little moments give the reader hope for a happy ending for both of them.”

“Oh, does the story end happily?” he teased, sitting back in his seat with his arms crossed in front of him, like a cat playing with a mouse.

“I don’t know, but I do know the two detectives in the story, Price and Yoder, have a passionate date after they investigate a crime scene. When the criminal is apprehended, Detective Price always drops a pink rose on Detective Yoder’s doorstep. That is the romance. The author does an excellent job of building sexual tension throughout the book, and I find it compelling reading.”



Esther placed the Kindle on the seat next to her. What are you doing, Esther? Shut up, you've said enough. This man is a stranger! She turned her head away and looked out the window.

Turning to gaze out his window, he asked, "Isn't the scenery here beautiful?"

"Yes, it is."

"Do you go to Santa Fe often?"

Esther looked at him, wondering how much was too much to tell him. "Whenever I can," she replied after a pause. "I've taken a job as an assistant director at one of the museums in town, and will be looking for a house this weekend." She pointed to her suitcase. "I expect it will take a few days to see the houses my realtor has lined up for me."

He looked back at Esther, noting her glossy black hair that fell just below her shoulders. "Will your family be joining you in your search?"

"Family? No, it's just me. And what about you? What brings you to Santa Fe?"

"I'm here on business...from Chicago. New Mexico is one of my favorite places to visit."

"Are you traveling alone?"

The man hesitated, and looked down at his hands. He fingered his wedding band. "My wife died in the North Tower in Manhattan on 9/11."

Esther's hands flew up to her mouth. "I'm so sorry," she gasped.

"But she loved visiting New Mexico."

"Yes," she responded. "It is beautiful here." Embarrassed at her social gaffe, she started reading again; but within a few minutes the train slowed and approached the last stop on the line. She turned off her Kindle, stood up, and put on her long beige jacket, then raised the handle of her overnight roller case. The man also got up, adjusted his satchel, and reached into his interior blazer pocket.

"We never introduced ourselves. My name is Colm. Colm Rivers." He handed her his card with his contact information. "I'll be in Santa Fe until tomorrow afternoon. Do you have time for coffee? I'd love to talk to you about the book you're reading."

Esther took his card, read his name, and then looked up at him. "I'm Esther Garcia. If I have time between my appointments, I'll call you. Maybe."

"That would be nice," Colm said as he brushed aside a curly lock of hair that had fallen down his forehead.

He has a charming boyish dimple, Esther thought. She immediately disciplined herself. Don't let yourself get carried away! Remember what happened the last time you fell for a man. He turned out to be a jerk. Keep it simple. If you meet him for coffee, make it short and sweet and be on your way.

It was now midday. Colm bid her farewell, and she slipped his business card into her jacket pocket.

Once she was off the train, she walked toward her hotel. Colm Rivers. That name sounds so familiar. But I've never met him before. What is it about that name?

Just one block from the hotel, she stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk. Colm Rivers! He's the author of *The Lancaster County Murders*! She stood by a storefront and searched her pocket for the business card he gave her, but her jacket pocket was empty. She ransacked her purse. No business card. I must have dropped it on the train! She ripped her Kindle from her bag, turned it on, encouraging it, in her mind, to be speedy, and launched the book. It's him! I can't believe it! Why didn't he say anything? She returned the Kindle to her purse and continued walking. Was I too critical of his book? Is that why he wants to meet for coffee?

"Damn!" she sputtered aloud. "Is he interested in me or his book?"

At the hotel, she checked in and left her suitcase with a porter. Off the hotel lobby was a little French bistro, where Esther found a window table. She took out her smart phone, and did a Google search on Colm Rivers. He was doing a reading and book signing at Words at High Altitude bookshop, just around the corner, at 2:00 p.m.

Should I go? There might be enough time.

After lunch, she went to the ladies room, combed her hair, washed her face, and refreshed her makeup. Why am I making such a big deal about this?

She left the hotel and walked to Words at High Altitude. She had passed this bookstore several times on previous visits, but had never gone in. On the window front were Colm's photo, and an image of *The Lancaster County Murders* book cover.

Esther listened to his talk, but stood off, near some bookshelves, where he wouldn't see her. She didn't want to call attention to herself. Then she heard Colm say, "I met a lovely lady on the train from Albuquerque, and she said she found romance in the book."

At the end of his talk, he sat at a table to autograph books. Esther stood in line, but since she had only an electronic copy of the novel, she removed the stylus from her phone, and launched a notepad application for Colm Rivers to sign. She noticed he spoke to each person, and personalized his note in each book. When it was her turn, he grinned at her. "I guess you're taking me up on my offer for coffee. It's good to see you again."

"I can't, I'm sorry. The rest of my afternoon is booked, but will you please autograph a note on my phone?"

Colm took the phone and stylus from her, wrote something, and then saved the note. "Look at what I wrote later."

Take a chance, Esther. "Colm, are you free for dinner tonight?"

"No, I already have plans. I'm sorry."

She briefly turned to gaze at the people clustered around the table. Then she turned to him and smiled, "That's okay, it was nice...."

“Why don’t we meet for drinks later tonight?” he interjected. “You have my card, don’t you? Call me when you’re free.”

“I think I left the card on the train.”

He glanced up at her. “Here,” he said. He handed her another card. “Give me a call if you’d like to get together later. I’d very much like to see you.”

She nodded, her eyes crinkling at the corners. She wrote her cell number on her old business card, handed it to him, and then walked away.



Esther visited two houses that afternoon. One was in town, and didn’t offer any more space than her city house in Albuquerque. A second was about a mile out of town, in the Bishop’s Lodge neighborhood, and offered a partial view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, just to the east. She would be seeing three more houses the following day and hoped she would find one with a wider panorama, and more land.

After getting the key to her room at La Fonda, she settled in, took a shower, and changed into a blue v-neck dress. At dinner, she sat at her table in the hotel’s enchanting restaurant, which was oozing with southwestern charm, including live mariachi music. Colorful tiles decorated the floor and walls, and the very high ceiling—an enormous translucent skylight—made the space seem airy, almost as though everyone was dining al fresco. Couples were seated at tables interspersed among greenery, pottery, and sculpture. Small groups laughed, and families chatted. All around her, people were engaged with each other, and some were holding hands. She never felt more alone than when she had to dine by herself in a romantic restaurant like this one.

As she finished her meal, she received an incoming message on her phone. She clicked the icon, and there was a photo of Colm and an attractive young woman. The message said:

I’m out with my daughter and almost finished with dinner. It’s her birthday, and like all young people, she can’t wait to get away from her old man and meet up with her friends from the college campus. Would you like to meet somewhere? I’m staying at La Fonda.

La Fonda? Esther looked closely at the photo, matched up the greenery and colorful tiles, and turning around, spotted Colm at a distant table. She texted back:

I’m here! Meet me at the hotel bar in thirty minutes.

He responded:

See you shortly. Please read what I wrote when I autographed your phone.

Esther scanned the apps on her phone for the one where Colm recorded his autograph, opened it, and read:

You have beautiful hazel eyes. And you're right. Romance makes a story better, even a macho crime story.

My best,

Colm Rivers

She quickly took out a mirror and refreshed her lipstick, aware her pulse had accelerated, and that she hadn't been so excited about meeting with a man in years.

As she signed the meal to her room, Colm appeared with his arm loosely draped around his daughter's back. He immediately noticed Esther. "Oh! You meant you were here in the restaurant? We all could have sat together."

He introduced his daughter, Marie, explaining to her, "This is the delightful woman from the train I told you about." Esther and Marie acknowledged each other with a "Hello." Colm then kissed Marie on the cheek. She looked at her father, then at Esther, and taunted him with, "Dad, behave yourself!" before she walked away.

Colm stood at Esther's table. "May I join you?"

"Yes, I like it better here than at the bar, anyway."

"Would you like another glass of wine, some dessert, a cordial?"

"Yes, another glass of wine would be nice."

They ordered a bottle of St. Clair Mimbres Red.

Esther twisted her napkin. "I am so sorry about your wife. It must have been awful for you and Marie."

"It was," Colm said, quietly. He took a sip of wine. "I hated life after that awful day, but I had to remain stable for Marie. I joined a support group. That's how I started writing. I wanted the people who attacked us to pay for what they did. I wanted justice. But, I couldn't get it, so, I started writing crime novels where the bad guys always lose."

"I know a little of what it's like to lose someone you love. My fiancé left me for another woman just before our wedding. Since then, I immerse myself in books and enjoy romance within the pages of novels."

"But, I don't write romance, Esther. On the train, you mentioned the rose Donald leaves for Amy. That isn't romance. It's their inside joke for solving the case."

"Are you sure that's all that rose means? The romance is there, even if you don't intend to express it. You write about gritty sex..." She lowered her gaze.

“But there is also tenderness there. The tension between your characters...they want more than physical contact.”

She reached for the bottle of wine just as he did, and their hands touched. She felt a surge of pleasure run up her arm. Outside, fireworks burst in the night sky. Colm jumped in his chair.

“That’s Zozobra,” Esther explained. “It’s a festival where they set fire to a sixty-foot tall effigy of Old Man Gloom. It symbolizes the burning away of the hardships and sorrows of the past year.” She added shyly, “Sometimes it gets a little rowdy.”

Colm took the bottle, and poured her another glass of wine. “So, it releases people from their troubles, huh?” He leaned back, stretching out his left foot. It brushed against hers. Esther moistened her lips.

They continued talking...talking as though they had known each other forever...talking well past the time when all the other diners left.

A waiter approached their table. “Excuse me. The restaurant is closing.”

Esther reached for Colm’s hand, and he readily grasped it.

“Would you like to continue our conversation elsewhere?” he asked tentatively.

Esther took a leap, “How about we go to my room?”

They walked out of the restaurant hand-in-hand and took the elevator to Esther’s room. As she opened the door, she turned to Colm. “I want to show you something.”

“What is it?” he asked.

The door now fully ajar, Esther stepped inside and turned to face the author, Colm Rivers: the man who built romance into his bloody crime stories, without realizing it; the man whose hand felt natural in hers; the man who was so easy to talk to; the man who lost the woman he loved.

Colm stood squarely in the doorway, not quite over the threshold into the room. He cupped his hands around her face and kissed her with great tenderness. “So what is it you want to show me?” he whispered.

She grasped his shoulders firmly and drew him into the room, slipping her hands inside his jacket and around his waist. She nudged the door closed with her foot. Within a moment, before he had a chance to realize what she was doing, she removed his jacket, led him playfully to the edge of the bed, and tapped his chest. He willingly and playfully fell, face up, onto the bed.

“What I want to show you, Colm, is exactly what sexual tension looks like.”

She straddled him, kissed his eyes, ran her tongue around his ears, nuzzled his neck, and finally reached for his belt.

He did not resist.

Outside, police sirens wailed through the quaint, historic streets of Santa Fe.