



POST CARD

CARTE POSTALE

Love Finds You

Romeo in *Colorado* COLORADO

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laugh, cry, and open your heart to love."

~IRENE BRAND

**Free
Preview**

Gwen Ford Faulkenberry

Love Finds You
in
Romeo
COLORADO

BY GWEN FORD FAULKENBERRY

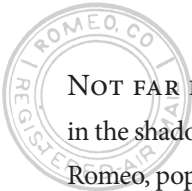


a question of returning

.....

*is this possible
are migratory monarch butterflies
and a woman humming
only slightly out of tune
in the next room over
metaphors for the same thing
can there be too many words
in the trees
too many butterflies
in the mexican pines
resting with the sun
of north american summers
under their wings
is that really the tree groaning
the weight of all that airiness
creaking in a soft breeze
head down in a mexican summer
God bless those butterflies
and what is left of memory...*

—Aaron A. Abeyta



NOT FAR FROM THE SOUTHERN BORDER OF COLORADO, in the shadow of the majestic San Juan Mountains, sits the village of Romeo, population approximately 350. Nestled deep in the heart of the mysterious San Luis Valley, Romeo boasts a history as colorful as the old west itself. It was established by settlers of colonial Spanish origin who had migrated from northern New Mexico. The village earned its place on the map by being situated seven miles from the nearest neighboring town, and thus the perfect distance for a steam-engine train to stop for water. Though it is a common misconception, Romeo was not named for Shakespeare's tragic hero; rather, it is a misspelling of Romero, the surname of an early settler. Jack Dempsey, the boxing champion from nearby Manassa, used to train in Romeo's family-run meat processing business, which is still located on Main Street today. Like a well-kept secret, the village is nurtured by its hard-working and resilient people.

Gwen Ford Faulkenberry



Chapter One

.....

Claire stood for a moment on the grand steps at the front of the austere academic building where she worked. Carefree students were ascending and descending, and Claire resisted the urge to run past them and down the cobbled pathway that snaked through two rows of giant oaks.

Instead, she took a deep breath, inhaling the aroma of fall in the San Luis Valley. The oaks, which seemed to reach out and beckon her, looked in the midmorning light like a group of old ladies gathered for tea. Except for one—the diseased tree that maintenance was in the process of cutting apart—they were all decked out in their best September finery.

Returning to her office, Claire plopped a heavy pile of papers onto her desk and sighed as she sat down. Two large sections of Composition One back-to-back was a lot of work. She took a quick look at her watch and noted that her son, Graeme, would soon be eating his lunch with the rest of his class at Manassa Elementary School.

Her screensaver—which she'd not bothered to change since arriving a few months ago—showed another lovely old walkway on the campus, which was carved between rows of giant oak trees that surrounded it like silent witnesses. The perspective of the photograph, Claire supposed, was meant to draw potential students. It invited the viewer to step onto the narrow path and stroll in the shade of the oaks. A heading above the picture read, *Adams State College: Great Stories Begin Here.*

Claire was pondering the irony of that statement in light of her own situation when the phone on her desk rang. It was the long, single ring that signaled an intracampus call.

“Hello, this is Dr. Caspian.”

“Dr. Caspian... I do so relish the sound of that.” It was Dr. Oscar Norbert Gunther III, Claire’s mentor and something of a father figure in her life.

Claire smiled. “Hi, Oscar. How are you today?”

“Very well, thank you, if a bit weary of sophomores. I’ve just come from my sophomore lecture and been reminded again, for the thirty-fifth year in a row, that they certainly are a bunch of—”

“Wise fools?” Claire smiled as she finished his sentence, remembering his back-to-term speeches to the Honors College every year. As director, he personally addressed each class.

“Indeed. True to the Greek meaning of the word. They think they know everything.”

“Well, be patient with them. If they are anything like I was—” Her voice drifted off.

“You and Rob were two of the best kids ever to come through the program, and two of my personal favorites, I’m not sorry to say. I’m just glad we could get you back here after everything—oh, I didn’t mean to say that.”

Claire knew there were probably blotches popping out on his neck like wild strawberries, and she imagined he was taking a furious puff on his pipe.

“I’m glad to be here too, Oscar. And I wouldn’t be, without your help.” He cleared his throat.

“Well, shall we go to lunch? If you’re not too embarrassed to be seen in public with a decrepit old man.”

“You will never be old, and I’d love some lunch. How about I pick you up in the courtyard?”

Ten minutes later, Claire spotted Oscar sitting cross-legged on a bench and smoking his pipe. He had on navy pants and a tweed jacket



with a white shirt and a red bow tie. His skin was smooth and tan, barely wrinkled, and striking underneath his immaculate gray beard and mustache. He peered at her approvingly with keen hazel eyes. He was wearing tennis shoes.

“Feel like walking?” she asked him.

“Ah, always,” he said, standing to his feet. “I delight in peripatetic exercise.”

Claire loved the smell of his pipe. She held out her hand to him, and he squeezed it tightly.

* * * * *

After lunch and some lively conversation with Oscar about *El Cantar de mio Cid*, a 13th-century Castilian poem, Claire returned to the English department. She left her office door open in case a student came by needing help and sat back down at her desk to grade essays. Checking her watch again, she saw that it was one thirty, which meant Graeme should be out on the playground for recess. Claire hoped he’d remembered to put on his jacket.

As she took out her red pen, she glanced at the picture of Graeme that sat in a frame by itself, like a little soldier on her desk. It was his school picture, taken this year when he started kindergarten. He was dressed in a green linen cotton shirt—the color of both his and Claire’s eyes, only several shades lighter. His dark, unruly hair was curled around his face, and his skin was tanned from the summer sun. He still had all of his baby teeth, and they looked like tiny white diamonds in his face. He was smiling, if reluctantly.

Rob was right, she thought. He does look just like me.

Claire set down her pen and gazed intently at Graeme’s smile, studying it. Running a hand through her jet-black hair, she caught a small section

between her fingers and gently twisted.

Mariposa.

The word came to her through the years like snow falling on the desert. It was quiet, like a whisper. And as Claire closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, giving in to a rare indulgence, she could see Graeme with Rob a few feet away from her in a patch of wildflowers, then Graeme toddling toward her with a fragrant bouquet.

Then suddenly Rob was behind her, kissing her neck and whispering.

Mariposa. Mi bella mariposa. My beautiful butterfly.

His rugged hands, cupped, and then opening in front of her face... The tiny Silver Checkerspot butterfly fluttering up, right before her eyes, and quivering away toward the water.

“Dr. Caspian? Dr. Caspian? Are you okay?”

From somewhere far away, Claire heard the voice of her student assistant, Christina Salazar, and opened her eyes. Christina was persistently knocking on her office door, and Claire realized that the phone on her desk was ringing—two quick rings each time. An off-campus call.

She grabbed the phone, breathless. “Claire Caspian.”

“Dr. Caspian, I’m so glad you answered. I’ve let it ring several times within the last few minutes. I didn’t want to leave a message.”

“Yes?” Claire recognized the caller as Julieta, the secretary at Manassa Elementary School, and her heart began to pound.

“Your son Graeme has been taken to the emergency room in La Jara. He’s having trouble breathing—”

“What? Why? Did you administer his inhaler?” Claire’s mind was racing. Graeme had mild asthma, and she had made sure there was an inhaler for him at school in case of an emergency. He very rarely used it, but it was there when he needed it.

“Yes. It didn’t work very well. The school nurse has taken him to the hospital. I called ahead. I’m sure Bonita is taking good care—”



Claire dropped the phone, grabbed her keys, and bolted out the door.

* * * * *

Conejos County Hospital, in La Jara, was fifteen miles due south of Alamosa and Adams State College on Highway 285. It was only twelve miles north of Manassa, where Graeme went to school. And yet when the ambulance pulled up at the emergency room with Claire's little boy, Claire was already waiting.

"Graeme, Mommy's here!" Claire ran to the ambulance when the door opened, and she saw a frightened Graeme, who was gasping for air.

A team of nurses and technicians were right behind her and ushered them in through the big open doors of the ER.

Claire, Graeme, and Bonita, the school nurse, were whisked into a smaller room where the head ER nurse placed Graeme on the exam table, hooked up a machine with a tube, and administered an Albuterol treatment to him within seconds. The gasping stopped. Inhaling the vapor, Graeme gradually began to breathe normally. Claire could see his little face and shoulders relax, and he even attempted to smile at her with the tube in his mouth.

The ER nurse beside Graeme was tall and burly and had a braid that hung all the way down his back. "So, big guy, looks like you scared your momma half to death. What were you doing, jumping jacks or something? Is that how you got out of breath?" The nurse patted Graeme on the back with a hand the size of a bear's paw. Then he turned to Claire.

"You okay? Your little boy's going to be fine."

Claire relaxed her shoulders and met the nurse's eyes for the first time. They both saw a flicker of recognition.

"No lo puedo creer! Are you Claire Caspian—the Caspian C?"

Claire blinked and stared at the man in front of her. He vaguely resembled an old friend from high school, only the Carlos she remembered had worn his hair short and was considerably slimmer.

“Carlos Caballeros?” she asked tentatively.

“At your service.” The ER nurse, still holding the breathing apparatus up to Graeme’s mouth with one hand, folded the other hand across his enormous waistline and bowed slightly.

“Well, you certainly are my knight in shining armor,” Claire said.

Bonita, who’d been all but forgotten up to that point, interjected, “You two know each other?”

“Well, yeah. You heard the lady, I’m her shining *caballero*. And she’s the famous ‘Caspian C’ of Manassa High School’s glory days. She won the state geography bee when we were in tenth grade. Put Manassa on the map!” Carlos grinned facetiously.

“Oh, Bonita, I’m so sorry.” Claire turned to her, blushing. “I haven’t even thanked you for taking care of Graeme and bringing him here. I was so worried, and everything was happening so fast. But it does seem he’s okay now—don’t you think?” She turned back to Carlos, who was taking the tube out of Graeme’s mouth and disassembling the breathing treatment machine.

“I think he’s great. Aren’t you, *hijo*?” Carlos helped Graeme down and shook his hand. “Hey, that’s a nice grip you’ve got there.”

Graeme smiled at him and scrambled up into Claire’s lap. He leaned his head onto her shoulder, spent.

Carlos brought some paperwork for Claire to fill out, and Bonita stayed to help with the details of what occurred at school. She left when that was done. Carlos, however, sat back down with Claire and Graeme in the room while they waited for the doctor to come.

“So, Claire. What are you doing back in this area? I haven’t seen you since the day we graduated. That was over twenty years ago! Where’ve you been? What have you been up to?”



Claire looked into Carlos's kind face. "Well, I went to Adams State for undergrad and then to the University of Arkansas to get my PhD."

"Arkansas? Are you crazy? Why did you go there?"

Claire couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know. Adventure, I guess."

"Adventure? In Arkansas? You always were a little *loca*, Caspian C," he joked.

"Well, I was interested in seeing a different part of the country and they had a great program for what I wanted to study, so I thought, why not? My husband's family is from there. And it actually is a beautiful place."

"What did you study? Country music?" He pantomimed playing a guitar with his beefy arms and oversized hands. Carlos clearly could not imagine Claire Caspian in Arkansas.

Claire grimaced at Carlos's generalization.

"No, comparative literature. My main focus was literature written by Spanish-speaking people who have immigrated to the United States."

"Over my head. Where'd you find this little guy?" Carlos tapped the toe of Graeme's tennis shoe.

"I found his father at Adams, where he was in pre-law. We got married and moved to Arkansas for grad school, and Graeme was born a few years later, while I was teaching at the university and his dad was working for an international law firm. What about you? Didn't you go to Colorado State?"

"I did. I had a football scholarship at the *collegio grande*. I got my degree in nursing and came right back home to work. You know, giving back and all of that. It's fulfilling," Carlos declared matter-of-factly.

Claire remembered the rusty trailer where Carlos's large family had lived and how she'd suspected—though Abuelita never told her—that her

grandmother gave them money from time to time.

“Well, you seem to have done very well for yourself. I’m happy for you.”

“I never was one of those who wanted to get out of this area—”

Carlos’s gaze suddenly shifted to the doorway, and he rose to his feet.

“Hi, Dr. Reyes.”

“*Hola*, Carlos,” the man responded warmly. He wore a white coat and worn, tan Birkenstocks.

“I’ll see you later, Claire. Take care of that boy.” Carlos gave her a pat on the arm as he left, closing the door behind him.

“Stephen Reyes.” The doctor held out his hand to Claire as he sat down on the stool across from her and crossed his long legs.

Claire noticed that he had a square jaw and big brown eyes with long lashes. She reached out and gripped his hand firmly. “I’m Claire, and this is Graeme.”

The hand he offered her was warm and strong. Big veins rippled across it, hidden just below the surface. Like Michelangelo’s *David*, Claire thought.

Graeme opened his eyes sleepily and rolled them toward the doctor before laying his head back down on Claire’s shoulder.

Dr. Reyes smiled at this, and Claire observed that one of his front teeth was chipped ever so slightly.

“Do you need me to wake him?”

“No, not now.” He was scanning through the chart. “It sounds like a pretty textbook asthma attack. Has this ever happened before?”

“Well, we lived in Arkansas when he was smaller. He had one scare, sort of like this, and I rushed him to the doctor. He’d been playing in the leaves in our yard. They thought it was allergy related.” Claire shifted Graeme’s body weight in her arms. “He had to be on a steroid for three days, and after that he took Singulair. That was in the fall. After a hard freeze that winter he didn’t have any other serious problems. We’ve just used his inhaler ever since—a time or two here and there—if he was having trouble.”



"Hmm." Dr. Reyes was writing on the chart. His head was turned to the side, and she could see just a hint of curl that reminded her of Graeme's hair. Also like Graeme's, the style was neither long nor short.

"But today the inhaler didn't cut it," he remarked.

"No, apparently not."

"Can you think of any potential allergens at his school? It says here that the attack came on at recess." Dr. Reyes's brown eyes shone as he questioned Claire.

"No. To be honest, I assumed any allergy problem would disappear when we moved to the desert."

"Well, it's not technically a desert here. But you're right. It's logical to believe there would be fewer allergens here than there were in Arkansas." He stood up. "Go ahead and lift up his shirt in the back so I can listen."

Claire noticed that Dr. Reyes's hands were gentle as he touched the stethoscope to Graeme's skin. Graeme flinched slightly at its cold surface. The doctor listened, obviously looking for something specific, but he didn't seem to find it. He motioned to Claire to shift Graeme so he could listen in the front.

"Nothing there either," he said. "That's good." He unhooked the stethoscope from his ears and let it fall around his neck.

"What were you looking for?"

"A heart murmur, wheezing, anything else abnormal."

Dr. Reyes looked at Claire for a long moment and then sat back down on the stool. "I think we better set your son up with a pulmonologist."

Claire felt the color drain back out of her face. "Why?"

"With the history you've described, it seems to me that Graeme may be developing a more severe form of asthma. It's not uncommon for this to surface at his age. I can't tell just by listening, so we'll need to let a specialist look at him and determine treatment. If his inhaler no longer works to control his asthma, he could be in danger pretty quickly—just like he was today."

Claire rested her chin against Graeme's head. "Oh."

"Would you like me to set up that referral for you? I know it's a drive, but I'd really recommend you take him to Salida. There's an excellent pediatric pulmonologist there."

"Sure," she said. "I guess."

Dr. Reyes turned from the chart where he was scribbling some notes and peered curiously at Claire. She looked down then, and while her right arm was holding onto Graeme, her left hand stroked his back, up and down between his shoulder blades.

He spoke softly. "Your little boy will be okay. I just want to get him the best care I can."

Claire looked up at him, and they stared at each other for a long moment.

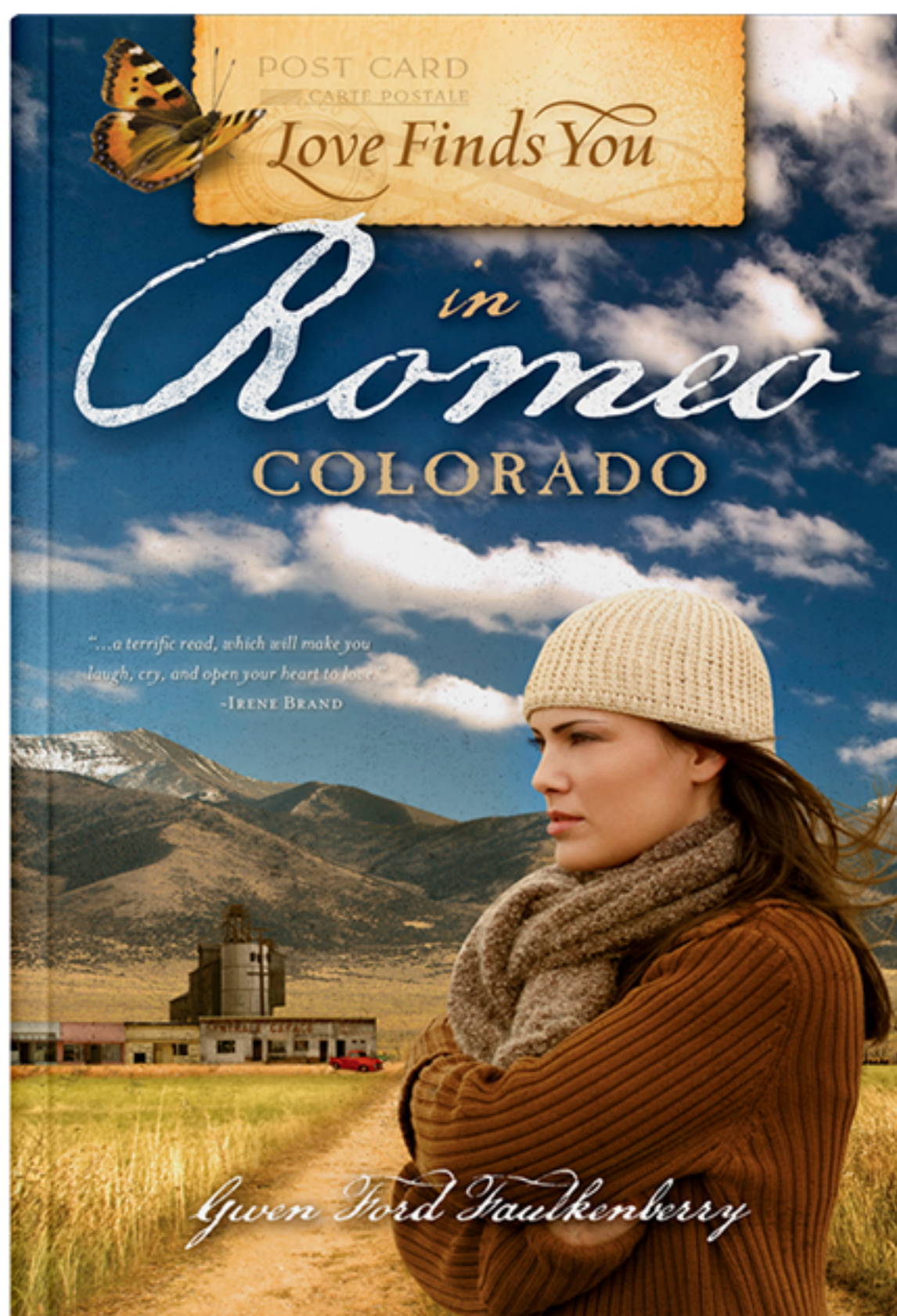
"Thank you," she said, meaning it.

"I'll have Carlos call in the referral right now if you'd like. Is the first available appointment all right with you?"

"Yes."

He stood to leave. Claire noticed that he wasn't wearing a ring, but not because she was looking for it. She was looking at the gentleness in his hands.

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