

Nancy Shew Bolton

LOVE
Stumbled
IN

A 20TH CENTURY
HISTORICAL ROMANCE



Love Stumbled

In

Nancy Bolton

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Dedication

To my husband John who I miss every day.

1

Upstate NY Summer 1920s

The distant rumble of the train echoed through the warm, still air, chilling her blood like the clang of a death knell. Carrie lay on her stomach in the grassy field, her head cradled sideways on her arm, tired eyes staring ahead. She had no more tears left. For now, anyway.

A few feet away, a bumblebee hummed, exploring a head of red clover while heat rose from the ground, laced with the scent of drying grasses. If only the rumbling was from thunder instead of the train. A powerful, relentless rainstorm would pelt down and dissolve her into the earth. She'd be gone, but the pain would be, too. She closed her eyes.

The weeds around her rustled as she rolled onto her back and spread her arms out wide. The thought of a cataclysmic storm approaching almost comforted her. At least it would be a distraction. But the sky shone blue and cloudless and her longing wouldn't be washed away. Not now. Not ever. An extended sigh escaped her to join with the lazy summer air.

He's gone, moving farther away every moment.

Maybe right now his eyes were focused out the train window and onto the same spot of blue sky above her. Or perhaps they followed the skyline trail of steamy smoke left in the train's wake. For four years,

those eyes were her constant anchor, her blessing.

Jesse's eyes.

When would they look into hers again, their good humor calming her hair-trigger nerves? Soothing, comforting, loving eyes. But never ignited, never as fascinated and intent on her as she was on him. Time to let him go. He'd probably never look at her like that anyway.

A loud voice nearby intruded into her melancholic thoughts. "Over here, Sammy. She's in the grass."

Oh, no. Why couldn't they leave her alone? Just let her disappear into the solid, warm earth, firm against her back, as secure and welcoming as Jesse's smile.

She sat up and narrowed her eyes at the trio of tall approaching figures. "Yep, I'm in the grass. And who invited you? It sure wasn't me."

Sam halted near her, legs planted wide, wiry arms crossed. "Oooh-hooo, listen to our crabby cousin, Miss Pepper-pot."

He shook his head before wiping sweat off his brow with the brim of his cap. He slapped it back on his unruly dark hair and re-crossed his arms. The other two stopped in front of her, identical teasing grins on their faces. Their postures, accustomed to the rugged discipline of hard work, relaxed into casual attitudes, no doubt ready for some fun at her expense.

She'd come to live with them years ago after her mother died. They were practically complete strangers back then, the relation was so removed. Amazing how familiar they all were now. Knit together more by shared tragedy than blood. She surveyed the men.

Ugh. The three middle brothers. Nothing but trouble. They looked like men but sure didn't act like them. They'd be rowdier now without Jesse's calming

influence.

Strange, how their youngest brother exerted such an effect on them. Well, that was Jesse. It made her heart warm to picture him, his earnest gaze bent on reading the scriptures, his capable shoulders hunched over the book, drinking the words in like nourishment. Best not to think of him too much. It hurt.

Sam elbowed Silas and then grinned over at Lucas. "She thinks I need her permission to be anywhere I please on my own land. Feature that." He gestured with an upward flourish of his hand. "Rise up, Miss Carrie-Mae."

"Don't call me that. Sounds like a dance-hall girl or a flapper."

Silas crossed his arms like a mirror image of Sam, and guffawed. "Not likely you'd be mistaken for either of those with *your* gimpy walk."

Her usual easy laughter when teased about her limp failed to show up. Right now, her emotions were raw as a new bruise. Besides, if his clumsy attempt at humor was supposed to coax her out of depression, it didn't work. She didn't care about anything today. Jesse was gone. What else mattered?

Lucas placed a meaty hand on Silas's shoulder and shoved hard enough to jar him off-balance. "Shut it, Silas."

Silas scowled and shoved him back. Sam stepped between them, one palm on each of his brothers' chests. "OK, settle down."

Lucas gave a slight toss of his head at Sam, jaw clenched while his fiery blue eyes raked Silas. His gaze swept to her and then trained onto the ground. Silas shrugged at Sam, who fixed both brothers with a sharp look before he turned to Carrie. "Judd wants to speak

to you."

"Oh, boy." She shot them a fake, happy grimace, stood, and brushed off her skirt. "You boys walk on ahead. Wouldn't want to slow you up with my gimpy walk."

"I was only teasin' Carrie," Silas protested.

She'd rather try to stay annoyed with him but gave it up. She heaved out a sigh. "Doesn't matter. You boys walk on. I'll follow directly."

They nodded and sauntered off, Lucas flicking a soft-eyed glance at her before he followed. It was obvious he liked her a little, but she'd never like anyone but Jesse. Once they vanished out of sight beyond some pines, she started toward the farmhouse.

She'd grown so accustomed to the hitch in her stride, she didn't often think about how it looked to others. Maybe if the leg still hurt, the discomfort would serve to remind her. But the pain was long gone, and with it the constant awareness of her handicap. The way she walked crossed her mind when she went to town, but that didn't happen often. A scowl tightened her face.

I hate being stared at. Always did, even before my leg broke.

Focusing on her steps might help. Maybe if she walked along at a slower pace, the way she favored her leg wouldn't stick out as much. She tried out a kind of fancy sashay, holding her arms out a little, hands spread as if showing off a pretty dress. A laugh sputtered out at how silly she must look. If he was here, Jesse would chuckle with her and so would the other boys. Well, not Judd. He was no boy, and he never laughed about anything.

She lifted the hem of her skirt and stared at her

right knee while she walked. Except for the slight ridge along the top of her kneecap, the leg looked just like the left one, well-shaped, and strong. So why didn't it work as well?

Carrie discontinued the fancy walk, dropped her hem, and moved on with her normal slight limp, past the big chicken run and the pig wallow, where she scrunched her nose at the pungent smells, then beyond the large barns to the sprawling, porch-wrapped house. Once she stood on the porch, Silly, the cat, arched against the side of her good leg.

She leaned down and scrubbed her hand along Silly's spine, just the way the feline liked. A satisfied 'mrreow' rewarded her touch.

"Hiya, Silly."

Carrie gave her another vigorous pet, took in a breath, and stepped inside. Then she turned to enter the spacious room on the left. An array of men lounged in various locations of the sitting room. Sam and Silas sprawled on the blue settee, Lucas on the brown one, while Judd sat like a soldier in the single chair his Papa had favored. Judd's usual grim expression and furrowed brow made him appear much older than his twenty-eight years. Any day now, she expected to see gray hairs sprout through his thick brown hair.

Carrie shot a glance around the room and perched on a nearby straight-backed chair. "OK, Judd. I'm here."

"Obviously," Judd said, eliciting a chuckle from the others. He glowered at the boys and straightened a bit. "Listen here, Caroline. You've been saying how you want a job. Well, Mr. and Mrs. Esty stopped me in town after I took Jesse to the train."

Why did he need to say Jesse's name? It hurt like a

stab wound. She breathed through the spike of pain and kept her eyes on Judd's impassive face while he continued.

"Her daughter's crippled from polio and won't see anyone or let her Ma help her much. Mrs. Esty said maybe she'd let you wait on her since you're crippled, too. She'll pay you a good wage and expect you there during the week. Says you can have weekends off. I told her you'd start tomorrow."

The nerve of him. "You told her I'd start tomorrow? Why didn't you ask me first?"

Her obvious anger made no visible impression on Judd. "I'm responsible for you. You said you wanted a job. I got you one."

Sam nodded. "Yes, indeedy. That's what you said, Miss Hard-to-Please." Silas elbowed him with a gleeful expression.

Lucas stared at her. "You said once Jesse left, you'd just as soon leave, too. I heard you say it to him."

She hated all of them. Listening in on her conversations, taunting her, deciding her life for her. She *should* just up and leave. Right now. None of them would care, anyway.

Fury galvanized her off the chair. "Maybe I'll just pack up and go now. Bet you'd all love that."

She flounced out before they could answer and rushed to her tiny downstairs room off the kitchen. Cousin Sharon had put her up in there years ago to allow privacy from the passel of sons in the upstairs bedrooms, but right now Carrie wished her room was farther away. She didn't want to hear noise from any of them.

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Judd tapped his fingers together and breathed in. He figured Caroline would be a problem once Jesse left. The girl trailed him all over and hung on his every word. Poor Jesse. He'd probably been relieved to go. Caroline was old enough now to get over her crush. And the job with the Estys was a godsend. How could he not accept it? It'd do her good to get off the farm and fuss over something besides Jesse or the half-wild barn cats.

He glanced at his brothers, hoping their response to his next announcement would be better. Guiding the family was enough of a strain without resistance slowing up the process. He only wanted to move everyone ahead, away from the past.

"Sam, Silas, I've got news for you, too." Judd leaned forward, his eyes trained on the two. How alike they were. Ten months apart, born in the same year. 'Irish twins,' as Papa used to joke, marveling at their similar personalities and faces. All grown now. Hard to believe Sam was twenty-one, soon to be followed by Silas. Even so, they were never serious, always teasing each other or Carrie.

They stared at him like two owls, still and silent for once.

"Mr. Esty is starting an auto business selling cars. He says he wants to hire men to fix what he sells. I told him you boys do a good job tinkering on the truck." He nodded and crossed his arms. "Said he'd hire you both. How about it?"

Sam exchanged a solemn look with Silas. "Shoot, Judd. We've had a lot of fun road-building. We figured on doing that some more this summer. It's good money."

"Short-sighted money, though. Once the roads are

built, that job's dried up. If you fix cars, you could do that 'til you drop over."

"Hmm." Silas stroked the slight dark stubble on his chin. "That's a mighty smart point. Could get a good deal on a keen car, too. Get one on hire-purchase, and with both of us working, pay it off quick." He grinned at Sam and gave him a shove. "And...the female of the species sure loves shiny new cars."

Sam and Silas chuckled while Judd shook his head. "Seems to me it's the males that get steamed up over new cars."

The two broke into delighted guffaws. Judd stared at them and wondered what it would take to sober them. Life had thrown enough thunderbolts at their family to calm anyone down, but not them.

Sam glanced over at Lucas then back to Judd. "OK, we'll give 'er a try. What about Luke?"

"Luke likes the farm, same as me. We'll handle it together."

"Don't you want a job in town, Lukey?" Silas grinned and bobbed his eyebrows up and down. "You could keep your eye on Carrie. Earn enough to squire her around to fancy places." He elbowed Sam. "Make her forget Jess."

Lucas stalked out, his jaw muscles set, face stormy. Sam and Silas chortled.

Judd sighed. "Leave him be. He misses Jesse as much as Carrie does."

Sam bolted up and beckoned to Silas. "We'll go cheer him up then. Bet Jesse hasn't wasted much thought on any of us. Head all full of missionary work."

"Let's teach Luke the new song we heard yesterday on Gus's radio," Silas said.

“Sure thing.” They tramped out, sharing part of a song in cheery falsetto voices. “Every morning, every evening, ain’t we got fun...?”

Judd couldn’t help a momentary half-grin. Those two always managed to find fun somehow. Somewhere. He stood and made his way to the kitchen for a glass of milk before he’d start patching the barn roof.

Out of habit, he averted his gaze from the family pictures arranged on the walls of the hallway. In the kitchen, he glanced at Carrie’s closed door. Maybe he should try and smooth out her mood, make sure she’d take the job.

No. After supper would be smarter. Give time for that temper of hers to cool off. Besides, he didn’t share Jesse’s gift for peace-making. That activity always seemed too much like coddling. People should just do whatever they were supposed to and forget the rest. Who cared about feelings? Duty ought to take the front seat, and the rest be darned.

He’d half-downed a glass of milk when the creak of her door made his shoulders tighten. *Great*. He lacked patience for any nonsense, much less hers. He finished the glass and set it on the counter.

“Rinse it out now while it’ll wash easier.” She barked out, sharp and quick.

“Leave it for me to wash if it’s too big a chore.” He stepped toward the back door.

“Got to do everything your way, don’t you? And everyone else can just follow your orders.”

Why did he need to deal with this now? The roof deserved his attention. He turned to face her and decided to make his words slow. Maybe he’d sound reasonable that way. “You said you wanted a job.

Sounds like you're a good fit for this one."

She pursed her mouth and placed her hands on her hips. "I see. Because I'm 'crippled, too?'"

So that's what stuck in her craw. "Calm down. Look, it's nothing to write home about, having a gimpy leg. Plenty of ex-soldiers are stuck with them. And a lot of 'em can't even walk. Besides, that's the reason she wants you for the job, so count your blessings. Isn't that what Jesse would tell you?"

Her cheek twitched like he'd hit her. She recovered fast and picked her anger back up. "Except he'd mean it. All you care about is me bringing money into this house."

"You're hopeless. Pick a fight with someone else. And keep all your money. It's no great shakes to me. I've got work to get on with." The screen door swatted shut behind him. He hurried to the barn, glad for something useful to do. He'd begun to hate talking. If he didn't need to speak to keep things moving along, he'd just as soon be silent and stay free of everyone's mess.

~*~

Carrie almost threw the milky glass at the wall by his head when he traipsed out the door, but since nothing made an impression on Judd anyway, what would be the point? She'd end up with a mess to clean, and one less glass to use. And Jesse would still be gone.

When they'd said good-bye, she'd comforted herself with the thought that Jesse was happy. No, more than happy. Thrilled to leave and start missionary work. After she'd lost sight of him, riding

away in the truck with Judd, the memory of his happiness began to drag at her. Maybe if he'd been as heartbroken as she was, pining at the thought of leaving her, it would somehow satisfy the hollow rift in her heart.

Her shoulders drooped, and she shambled to the counter and rinsed the glass clean. No. It would be worse to imagine him miserable. Unwanted tears sprang out. She set the glass upside down on a dishcloth and rushed into her room, slamming the door. She flopped face down on her bed and moaned her distress into the pillow.

"I don't want to be brave, Jesse. I don't want to smile. You're the reason I wanted to live and now you're gone. And I have to take some dumb job looking after a rich girl in town. Probably spoiled to boot."

Energy drained from her while she viewed her hopeless, Jesse-deprived future. Mama would want more for her than this fruitless, hobbled existence. How sad she'd be to know where her daughter ended up. Maybe it was one of Mama's blessings, being dead.

2

After almost four years of fixing large daily meals, making bread was the only thing Carrie really excelled at and looked forward to. Any kind of bread. Meals based on bread. Ideas always flooded her while she pondered available ingredients. Most of her experiments turned out tasty, and all the fellows complained that she should write down the recipes, so she could reproduce her best efforts.

But who wanted to make the same old tired recipe every time when experimenting was so much fun? Tonight, she'd make something special, take her mind off Jesse's departure. She'd knead up a batch of savory dough with added herbs, fill pockets of it with some chopped beef hashed with onions and potatoes, pinch the edges together and whisk melted butter on the tops. Along with the mound of turnovers, she'd serve some boiled, buttered green beans on the side. There'd be leftovers for morning, saving her the chore of fixing breakfast.

Breakfast. Ugh. How could anyone wake up hungry? The last thing she wanted in the early morning was food or to get busy with pots and pans. A glass of milk would do her fine. Neither she nor Mama ever cared much for breakfast, and her memories of Papa were so dim, she didn't remember his preferences for morning food.

Free of early meal duty tomorrow, she could take her time preparing to meet her new employers. Why did Judd stick her with a handmaid's job? She'd much rather work in a bakery or a kitchen. He sure didn't care to figure out what her preference might be. She'd probably be required to stomp up and down stairs all day, with everyone watching her limp and commenting on it behind her back. Well, she'd learned how to ignore people and their easy meanness. Jesse taught her that.

Baking always calmed her and brought a song to her lips. She whistled "Love Lifted Me," and a bittersweet pang fluttered inside at the notes of Jesse's favorite hymn. Yet, it pleased her to whistle it while she assembled the evening meal. Kneading the dough became a joyful accompaniment to the song, and she paced her motions to the lilting rhythm of the music. After she slid the first batch of turnovers in the oven, she sat on the front porch to escape the kitchen's heat.

Silly hopped on her lap, and Carrie rocked, eyes closed while she stroked the cat's back. The cooling breeze drifted over her and she focused on the various bird calls in the trees, mimicking them with a whistle or warble, and cracking a smile when they answered her.

Baritone chuckles followed by shrill, mocking whistles interrupted her duet with the birds. She didn't need to open her eyes to know who approached. Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Silly vaulted off Carrie's lap, leaving behind a painful dig in her leg from the frantic cat's claws.

"Yeeouch." She rubbed her leg and glared at Sam and Silas. "Why do you scare the cat whenever she's sitting on me?"

Silas frowned and stared at the cat's speedy retreat. "She's got no cause to be so skittery with us. We've never done anything to her."

She scowled, head tilted. "Huh. Never? How about the times you squeeze milk at her and douse her fur? You suppose she likes that?"

Sam cackled and elbowed Silas. "Yeah, I've seen you do that when you're milking."

"So what? She licks it all off, doesn't she? And comes back for more." Silas grinned. "Gus says girls are just the same as cats. They like getting teased, even if they act like they don't."

His snide, knowing look directed her way, coupled with his raised eyebrow, ignited her anger. "I'm sure you and Gus know just *everything* about cats. And girls. Don't you?" She rose and turned to the screen door. "Guess that's why they run from you."

The closing door punctuated her parting shot, followed by Sam's mocking laugh. She wasn't sure if it was directed at Silas, her, or both. She shook her head. What buffoons they were.

Lucas sauntered in the back door just as she removed the pan from the oven. He sniffed the air. "Boy that smells good."

She set down the pan, smiled, and began work on more turnovers. Lucas parked in a chair at the table and watched her hands. "I remember your mama was really good at making pies and such. At family picnics, everybody wanted a piece of whatever she brought. She teach you to make these doohickeys?"

Carrie stopped work a moment to give him a roll of her eyes. "That the best you can do? *Doohickeys*? Don't they look like turnovers to you?"

Brows raised, he studied them. "Guess so. But they

aren't sweet like turnovers."

"No, but meatloaf looks pretty close to loaf cake, and it's not sweet."

"That's true. Turnovers then. So, did your mama teach you?"

Though it still pained her to think of Mama, she relished the chance to talk about her. "Mama taught me how to make bread and told me I had a knack for it."

Her mind wandered back to days spent with Mama, watching her cook, and sharing the small triumphs while she learned. Memories warmed her and loosened her tongue. "I wish she could know how good I am at it now. With her gift for pies and cake, and mine for bread, maybe we could've run a bakery together. That would've been wonderful."

Lucas rumbled out an indeterminate sound. "Two women running a bakery? Never heard of that."

Carrie's wistful, nostalgic mood shattered. How backward. Was Jesse the only man in this family with any foresight?

Quenching a sharp retort, she kept her voice airy. "It's the twentieth century, in case you forgot. Women can do pretty much anything these days. Vote, get a job. Why, I read a story the other day about women policemen in California."

Lucas sputtered out a laugh. "You just called them policemen. Wouldn't they be *policewomen*?"

She scowled at his smirking expression. "Ha-ha. You know what I mean."

She finished loading the second pan of turnovers and shoved them in the oven. Apron off, she stalked into her room and shut the door. They all got on her nerves today. Without Jesse's buffering, kind presence,

they were all free to be as unrestrained as they wanted. And this was the fruit of it. Teasing, disrespectful, dismissive treatment. Maybe she'd find out if the Estys wanted her as a live-in maid.

She inhaled a deep breath and released it, her shoulders slumping. Jesse wouldn't like that. He said he'd try to be back for a visit in a few months. If she gave up on his brothers, didn't help out with her wages, and turned her back on them, he'd be so disappointed with her. They'd taken her in, the way decent families do, and treated her like a little sister, teasing and all. And she did love them, despite how much they frustrated her.

Carrie stretched on her bed and stared out the window. The bright blue of the afternoon sky faded to blue-gray now, reminding her of the color of Jesse's eyes. Under his almost black eyebrows, the contrast with his eye color always captivated her. And his gaze wasn't guarded and formal, like most people. He looked right into her eyes, open and welcoming.

She'd never noticed that accessible look the few times she'd interacted with him at yearly family picnics. Mama warned her some of the family thought him a bit strange due to all his illnesses as a child. He always seemed healthy and normal to her, but then she never interacted with him or her other distant cousins until they were older.

Maybe folks thought he was odd because Jesse didn't join in with his brother's pranks. Carrie thought it made him admirable. It was easy to be thoughtless and cruel, holding up a writhing snake and chasing girls, or yanking on their braids the way his brothers did. Well, not Judd of course. He was already grown and married at the last few picnics she attended.

A loud knock sounded on her door, followed by Judd's raised voice. *Speak of the devil.* "Want me to take out that pan of food? They look done."

"No, Judd. I'll do it." She rose up, smoothed her dress, and headed for the door. She figured he'd be itching to eat. The smell of food cooking always brought the men out of the woodwork, milling around the kitchen and getting in her way.

Sure enough, they were all in there, eyeing the food. She shooed them with her hands. "Out, out. I'm not done yet."

Sam gave her an elaborate bow. "Guess we better buzz off."

They grumbled and trooped out. She tied on her apron and pulled the pan out of the oven. The lovely browned tops looked perfect. Slight curls of fragrant steam rose from the turnovers. She checked the pan of green beans, poured off the cooking water and added a big dollop of butter to melt while she placed the turnovers on a large platter.

Once she transferred the beans to a covered casserole and arranged everything on the kitchen table, along with a large pitcher of milk, she called, "All right. Come and get it."

Once seated, they bowed their heads, and Carrie realized with a sinking sensation that Jesse wouldn't be offering the nightly blessing. The others must have come to the same realization and an awkward pause ensued. Judd's distracted voice filled the silence. "Father we thank You for this food. In Jesus' name, amen."

Embarrassment for Judd's awkward, stilted prayer made her avoid looking at him. Jesse's prayers were so warm, and natural, as though God was his best friend.