

A  
*Bride*  
FOR KEEPS

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A NOVEL

MELISSA JAGEARS



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*To my husband, who puts up with  
a lot so I can write and believes in me  
when I don't believe in myself.  
I wish I was more like you.*



# Chapter 1

KANSAS

SPRING 1876

Everett Cline loosened his grip on the mercantile's door-knob and let the door shut behind him. Kathleen Hampden waddled straight toward him, the white feathers in her hat dancing like bluestem grass in the late March breeze. In the three years she'd been married to the store's owner instead of him, couldn't she have bought a new hat?

He hadn't talked to her alone since the day she arrived in Salt Flatts with those identifying white feathers he'd been told to expect, but he hadn't anticipated her being married to Carl before she stepped off the train. Why hadn't she thrown her hat out a passenger car window and pretended she'd never been his mail-order bride?

"Afternoon, ma'am. Is your husband around?"

He glanced behind the long glossy counter cluttered with candy jars and sundry items and saw that the door to the empty back room stood ajar. The two overflowing shelves that cut the store into thirds kept him from being able to see into every corner. The fabric table was a jumbled mess, and

a few potatoes lay on the floor in the corner, escaped from their bin. Were they the only ones in the store?

Mrs. Hampden stopped three feet from him, the tang of the wood polish on her rag warring with the leather and tobacco smells permeating the room. She was such a tiny thing, even large with child. Perhaps it was a good thing she had married Carl. If she worked outside as Everett did every day, the wind would have blown her away sooner or later.

“Mr. Hampden’s away on business, otherwise he’d have rushed out at the bell. Especially since it’s you.” Her cheeks pinked.

Carl needn’t worry about him. Stealing someone’s mail-order bride was different from stealing someone’s wife.

Everett fidgeted. “He has no reason to be concerned.”

“I know.” She rubbed her swollen stomach. “But he’s still worried your good looks might make me wish I’d chosen differently.”

The skin under his collar grew warm, and he pulled at the strangling fabric. He might be a decent-looking sort of man, but a lot of good that did him.

“I hope you have better luck today than you did with me, and you know . . . the others.” She bit her lip. “I’m sure this time it will be for keeps.”

He swallowed hard and eyed her. What was she talking about? Surely another rumor about him ordering a bride again wasn’t circulating. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“It’s all right. Rachel told me.” Her voice was hushed, as if someone might hear.

He leaned down and whispered back. “Told you what?”

“About the lady coming on the afternoon train. She said you’d need prayer.”

*Rachel.*

He ran his tongue along his teeth and nodded absently. Surely his best friend's wife wasn't pulling another one of her matchmaking schemes. She'd tried to set him up with every girl in the county since the day her sister, Patricia, had left him for someone else. When matchmaking failed, she'd pushed him into mail-order bride advertisements.

If she'd gone and ordered another one for him, by golly—"I hope I haven't upset you." Mrs. Hampden's concerned tone reminded him of her presence. "I haven't told anyone since . . . well, you know how they are."

Yes, the townsfolk. Everett clenched his teeth. Every unescorted woman who stepped off the train was asked if she belonged to Everett Cline. When she answered negatively, some young man in the gathered crowd would drop to his knee and propose.

He stared at the saddle soap on the shelf beside him. What had he come in here for?

"I wish you luck." Mrs. Hampden's eyes looked dewy.

Everett squashed the felt brim of his hat in his clammy hands. *Third time's a charm* hadn't worked for him, and he'd never heard anything like *the fourth's a keeper*. There wouldn't be a fourth time for him. Well, fifth, if he added being jilted by Patricia so long ago. Was there a saying akin to *five failures prove a fool*? He was a hairsbreadth away from confirming himself a dunce. "You have nothing to wish me luck for."

"Oh, Everett, surely this time it will work."

"Really, Mrs. Hampden, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I can understand why you don't want to say anything, but I'm the last person in Salt Flatts who would tease you."

He'd let her believe whatever she wanted, because nothing

would happen. “Thanks just the same.” He smashed his hat back on and hightailed it out the door, down the steps, and toward the weathered wagon belonging to his neighbors. Was this why Rachel insisted they needed him in town even though any train porter could have helped her husband load the shipment she was waiting on?

He wouldn’t believe it. She wouldn’t do that.

“*Come on now, Everett,*” she’d said. “*You can’t avoid town forever. Surely you have supplies to get.*”

He reached into his pocket, clasped his scribbled list, and stopped in the middle of the road. Rachel wouldn’t have gone so far as to invite another woman to Salt Flatts to marry him without even telling him. Would she?

A horse sidestepped beside him, the boot of its rider grazing his arm. “Hey, watch what you’re doing.” The cowboy glared down at him, the stench of bovine overpowering the scent of the cheap cigar wiggling between his lips.

Everett turned and scurried across the dusty road and onto the boardwalk. He glanced at his list. Should he return to the mercantile and face Kathleen again or confront Rachel? Neither would be pleasant.

“Got me a letter to send, Everett?” Jediah Langston stepped out of the false-front post office and stood next to his son, eighteen-year-old Axel, who perched on a stool, absently whittling a stick. A smirk twitched the corners of the younger man’s mouth.

Everett’s hand itched to swipe the boy’s lips clean off his face, but he shook his head instead. He hadn’t personally posted something for over a year—always sent his mail in with the Stantons—but it seemed as if Rachel had decided to mail some correspondence for him.

“Surely you’re hankerin’ for another bride by now. Helga’s



been Mrs. Parker for plumb near a year. Seems to me it's about time you up and tried again."

Axel chuckled at his father's joke, and Everett scowled at the mention of his third—and absolutely last—mail-order bride.

He crammed the shopping list back into his pocket. "No letter, gentlemen."

"Axel needs a wife about as bad as I need him off of my porch." Jedidiah glared at his lazy son, who only rolled his eyes. "Maybe your next one can marry him."

Axel sliced the tip off his pointy stick. "Only if he orders a stunner this time."

Any woman dumb enough to marry that boy would have to work to support them both. Everett tipped his hat. "Good day, gentlemen."

He'd been Axel's age eighteen years ago, but he'd at least had some gumption, a promising future, and an adoring girl on his arm. Yet he was still single. A mail-order bride was probably the boy's only hope, though Everett doubted he'd ever try for one. Axel's ma had once been a mail-order bride, and when her marriage plans hadn't worked out, she'd wooed Jedidiah over real fast.

Mrs. Langston was hardly ever seen in town, and Jedidiah never talked about her but in disdain. Axel's parents' animosity toward each other didn't help the boy's disposition—as prickly as a cocklebur and as useful as one too.

Everett marched over to the train platform and scanned the crowd. Rachel was nowhere in sight, but her husband, Dex, reclined on his wagon's bench seat, hat pulled over his face. His soft snores jostled the brim resting on his nose. He couldn't know his wife had hatched another scheme. That joker wouldn't have been able to keep a straight face when

Rachel insisted they needed help. And he'd be too antsy to tease the daylights out of Everett now to be sleeping.

Perhaps Mrs. Hampden had made a mistake and assumed too much. The town loved to conspire, and though Dex was a joker, the Stantons wouldn't plot against him like that. No, Mrs. Hampden had to be mistaken.

Everett stopped at the depot's window and perused the station's chalkboard schedule. Thirty minutes until the train arrived. The bunch of wild flowers he'd picked before leaving home lay piled in his wagon bed. He snatched them and headed for the cemetery.

"Everett!" a voice called out, and he turned to see Carl Hampden hotfooting it from the livery straight toward him. The tilt of his head and the look in his eyes reminded Everett of a charging bull.

He stopped and tensed, half expecting the man to reach for a sidearm. "Carl?"

"Where are you going with those?" He pointed to the flowers.

Everett released his stranglehold on the prairie bouquet and kept his lips from twitching up into a smile. He stood but ten feet from the mercantile entrance. "They're not for your wife, if that's what you're worried about."

"Who are they for, then?" Carl backed up, but the heat hadn't left his gaze.

"I don't exactly believe that's your business."

Carl leaned closer. He'd evidently had garlic for lunch.

What did it really matter if Carl knew? "They're for Adelaide Gooding."

"Who?" Carl cocked an eyebrow.

Everett sighed. "My first bride."

"Ah, I see . . . I guess." Carl relaxed. "Well, carry on."

As if he needed the man's permission. He snatched Carl's sleeve and dug out his list. "Would you gather these items for me? I'll return within an hour."

Carl folded the note and tipped his hat.

Everett strolled through town, keeping the jonquils tucked by his side. Why did he keep taking her flowers anyway? He looked at the sad, flaccid mess in his hands. Because no one else would—and that was his fault.

He stepped through the gap in the waist-high stone wall, marched straight up to Adelaide's grave, and laid the flowers at her feet. "I'm afraid they're wilted, but they're better than what you have." Which was nothing. He lowered himself to the ground and stared at her headstone. He hadn't even known what birth date to engrave for his first mail-order bride, but he'd done his best. Even wrote an epitaph: *Long-awaited and Missed*.

Everett glanced around to make certain no one else was near. "Have you heard any talk about me lately? Seems Mrs. Hampden thinks I'm crazy enough to try marrying up again." He grabbed a twig and scratched at the dirt. "I wish you'd held on for a few more hours. At least so I could have told you that I . . ." He tossed his stick. Had he loved her? He would have. But he no longer had any stir of feelings for this woman he'd never met.

Closing his eyes, he conjured up the one image he had of Adelaide. Wrapped in a rough woolen blanket, her face white as clouds, hair dark as a raven's wing, and her mouth, crooked and stiff as a fence post. The fever had stolen her breath and his hope.

The low hum of metal wheels against iron track rumbled from far off. With the toe of his boot, he shoved a stray jonquil back into his jumbled pile. "Maybe if I'd lived along

the Mississippi, I'd have had better luck ordering brides by steamboat." He snorted, and a gray-green pigeon above him fussed. "So you don't think so?"

A whistle sounded. "Rachel's always wanted a pianoforte. Please let it be a piano." But she'd asked Mrs. Hampden for prayer . . . and surely nothing she could order would be so heavy she'd beseech God's assistance. The tremor of the approaching train pulsed through the soles of his feet.

What if there was another woman on that train coming for him? He clenched his trembling fingers. Patricia had jilted him. Then Adelaide arrived dead, Kathleen disembarked married to the shopkeeper, and Helga left him for another man with a better farm within a week of arriving. He couldn't begin to imagine what a fourth mail-order bride might do. But he wouldn't allow another bride to make a fool of him again.



She'd made a mistake. A huge, irrevocable mistake.

Julia Lockwood stared out the train's window, watching the flat Kansas land sail behind her, mile after mile. Nothing but waving grasses, clumps of trees, and a few outcroppings of rocks. The vacant prairie lands wouldn't conceal the past she ran from, and the man awaiting her wouldn't make it better—only worse. What had possessed her to believe this was a good idea? She set her bag aside to stand.

"Young lady, you are making me queasy with your ups and downs, to-and-fros." The buxom woman across from her swished a fan violently. "Please, for once sit still."

Julia hesitated, hovering above her seat. Her nerves wouldn't obey the woman's pinched-mouthed decree. "I'm sorry. When I return, I'll try not to get up again."

The woman huffed. "Yes, do."

Holding in her split pannier overskirt, she swayed easily through the center aisle of the railroad car. A few days of travel had made her an expert at walking in a moving train. She grabbed a strap hanging from the ceiling to make room for a young frizzy-haired girl to pass.

The porter at the front of the car straightened. “May I do something for you, miss?”

“Nothing, Henry. Unless you can make this car go faster . . . or slower.” She bit her lip. “How much longer until Salt Flatts?”

“Not too long. Just a hop and a skip. We’ll be there before you know it.” His smile stretched across his face, slicing his dark skin with a glimmering white. “I reckon you’ll be just fine, miss.”

Just fine? When she’d agreed to marry a man with whom she’d never even exchanged a single letter? No. Not fine. The thought of being close to any man again made her stomach churn.

“But one thing I’d be doing is stop playing with that there brooch. You’re going to be wearing off its shine.”

She released her mother’s portrait clipped to her collar, her fingers red from rubbing the gold filigree frame. “Perhaps I am a bit nervous.”

“I suspect you don’t have to be anxious for nothing.”

If only that were true. But there was nothing to be done now. She couldn’t very well jump off the train. Oh, why hadn’t she gotten off at the last stop? Stiffly, she returned to her seat.

The large woman across from her glared from behind that ever-swishing fan and sighed.

Her husband leaned forward. “You worried about meeting someone?”

Julia nodded, wishing her whole life didn’t depend on a

man she'd never met. Why had she handed some stranger a hold over her? She wanted to see Rachel Stanton, the woman she'd corresponded with for the past few months, but she should have come simply to visit Rachel. Instead, she'd panicked and promised her life away in matrimony when Rachel had mentioned her husband's friend would be interested in a mail-order bride. Would Rachel and Dex Stanton offer their hospitality if she didn't follow through with marrying Everett Cline? The sourness in her stomach crept toward her throat.

"A fella, I suppose?"

Feeling color invade her cheeks, she shrugged.

"Stop worrying. No fella'd be sorry to see a girl like you step off this train."

No. No lonely fellow would. That was part of the problem. Maybe she should have worn her day dress instead of her best silk.

Henry walked the aisle, touching headrests as he passed. "Next stop, Salt Flatts."

Her heart doubled its rhythm. A friend awaited her . . . but so did a man. Last chance. Stay in the seat or meet her potential husband? He'd want an intimacy from her she wasn't ready to give anytime soon. She wrapped her arms about her waist and suppressed a moan. What choice did she have?



The locomotive's gleaming chimney loomed. Its acrid smoke rolled over the prairie land surrounding Salt Flatts, marring the gray-blue sky. Everett paced on the crowded train platform, wondering if Rachel had indeed set him up. He scanned the crowd. No sign of her yet. Surely she'd be waiting for the woman she intended to foist upon him if there were

one. He blew out a breath and ambled toward the Stantons' wagon. He'd know soon enough.

The train's whistle scattered the birds pecking in the grass next to the tracks, and the hissing iron monster slowed. Rachel scurried across the road and up the plank ramp. Her three-year-old, Emma, bounced on her hip and waved wildly at the train.

The pullman's door opened, and Everett stared at the line of silhouettes behind the passenger car windows. Several men disembarked before a skinny woman stepped onto the rough wooden platform, her curly orange-red hair trailing across her blemished face.

Rachel looked straight at the tall girl, and Everett tensed, but Rachel didn't hail her. The young woman scurried to a waiting wagon and embraced an elderly man.

Everett rubbed at the tension in his neck.

More men poured out of the passenger car, and finally the porter exited and sauntered toward the depot. Everett released his pent-up breath and chuckled at himself. He'd allowed Mrs. Hampden's foolish notions to mess with his head.

"There you are." John, Rachel's youngest boy, rushed toward him. "Are you ready for the surprise?"

A surprise for John or a surprise for him? His breath grew shallow, and he squatted to the boy's eye level. "Do you know what it is?"

John shook his dark head. "No. Ma won't tell me. Would you ask her?"

"You're too impatient. We'll find out soon enough." He rubbed the boy's head and forced himself not to walk straight toward Rachel and ask. If John was anxious, then the surprise had to be for the family, not him. Rachel wouldn't have hinted to the children about a scheme to match him up with a stranger.

“There she is.” Rachel’s call ended in a high feminine squeal. She handed Emma to Dex and darted into the crowd. Dex threw him a glance before covering up a grin with his free hand. Too much amused twinkling danced in his best friend’s eyes.

He’d been hoodwinked.

Everett slowly pivoted toward the train. A petite, fashionably dressed lady wrestled an oversized valise through the pullman’s door and climbed cautiously down the stairs. Her ivory skirt was extraordinarily full in the back. A red sash cinched her waist, enhancing its tininess. She fingered a brooch at her neck and brushed at the veil whipping against her forehead in the wind. Dark wavy hair fell from under her straw hat, framing her perfect lips and tiny nose. He had never seen a more beautiful woman. Not even Patricia, the prettiest gal who’d ever set foot in Saline County, could compare.

The woman gestured toward Rachel with a wad of papers in her hand and a question in her shoulder shrug. Rachel’s hands flung out, and she swallowed the woman in an embrace. Though one was dressed in worn homespun calico and the other in ruffles of shimmering stiff fabric, they started chattering like long-lost sisters.

He pushed down the jolt that traveled up from his toes. This stunning friend of Rachel’s would never need to become a mail-order bride. She was not here for him.



Julia pulled away from Rachel’s third warm hug, which couldn’t calm the storm of emotions swirling within her chest. Though she rejoiced to hold this dear friend in her arms for the first time, she couldn’t help looking around the crowd



for him. Her heart thudded at the base of her throat. “I can hardly believe I’m here.” If she hadn’t seen Rachel waiting on the platform, almost bouncing with anticipation, she would have slouched in the leather passenger seat, dug out the last of her money, and rode the tracks a little farther.

“Me neither.” Rachel hugged her again. “I never realized how much I missed having a bosom friend until I started writing you. We’ll take you home and talk all night and meet the neighbors and . . .”

Rachel’s banter was infectious, but her friendliness didn’t stifle the need to know what her future husband expected. “Won’t Everett want to, uh, start things right away?” A few hundred feet away a white steeple loomed over rows of buildings, making her feel faint. She tried to imagine riding straight to the church and marrying, but she just couldn’t do it. “Do you know what he has planned?” Julia gripped Rachel’s arm, anchoring herself from rushing back to the train.

“About Everett . . . I’d not bring up the marriage plans until he does, and he’ll probably give you plenty of time.” Rachel rubbed her lip and averted her gaze. What was she keeping from her? “My advice is to act as if you’ve come to court rather than run him to the altar.”

“Who’s your friend, Mrs. Stanton?” The sound of undisguised male interest caused a shiver to run across Julia’s back. She wet her lips and turned toward a group of young men, the one in front a tall, scrawny thing with blond whiskers and very pink lips. He looked down at her with an amused glint in his blue eyes. Was this Everett? He was younger than she had imagined and not entirely unpleasant to look at, but his body appeared fragile for a farmer, and the flash in his eye matched his unsettling roguish tone. “You wouldn’t happen to be here for Everett Cline?”

What an awkward way to greet her. “I, um . . . yes. And are you he?”

Rachel crossed in front of her with hands jammed on her hips. “Now, you all go on and get.”

The young man’s face changed from amusement to bewilderment. “Don’t tell me she really is here for Everett.” The four young men behind him snickered.

“None of your business, Axel. If you please, find somewhere else to be.” Rachel pointed toward the depot, but the group had fallen dumb and stiff.

Axel cocked his head. “Then she is?”

Rachel didn’t answer, and he let out an impressed huff.

Was there something so appalling about Everett that Axel couldn’t believe a woman would marry him? Maybe that’s why he needed a mail-order bride. But surely Rachel wouldn’t have matched her with a dreadful man.

Rachel stared at Axel as if he were only knee-high instead of towering over them both.

Julia rubbed her arms, suddenly cold and hot at the same time. Every eye in the small group of men focused on her. Men had ogled her before, but this was ridiculous.

“Excuse me, gentlemen.” A man taller than Axel pushed through the group, a girl with fluffy blond ringlets hooked on his arm. “You heard my wife—find somewhere else to be. I’m sure you have better things to do than detain our guest.”

The men behind Axel poked each other, talking under their breath. Everett’s name was the only word she caught. Was he here? Why hadn’t he shown himself?

Axel smiled wide. “I hadn’t any faith in you, Everett, but you pulled through. She’s a beauty.”

Julia stepped to the other side of Rachel and tried to see to whom Axel was speaking. Oh, why did she have to be so short?

Axel tipped his hat toward her. “I look forward to getting to know you better . . . Miss . . . ?”

She gave a tiny nod. “Lockwood, and I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to get acquainted.”

“Of course you will.” Dex patted the boy’s shoulder dismissively and then turned to her. “It’s nice to meet you at last, Miss Lockwood. I’m Dex.”

“At last?” The incredulous murmur of a deep male voice sounded behind Dex.

Julia looked straight up at Rachel’s husband. The top of her hat didn’t even reach the bottom of his chest pocket. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Stanton.”

“Call me Dex. And I’m assuming you’re rather interested in the gentleman behind me.”

She thought her cheeks had been hot a minute ago.

“The finest neighbor any man could have.”

A tall shadow of a man walked toward her, but it was no stranger who lifted his hat. *Theodore*. No. It couldn’t be. All heat drained from her face and pooled on the platform at her feet. The ensuing shock of cold stopped her breath.

He’d said he’d find her no matter how far she ran, but she hadn’t believed him.

She pressed her hand against her heart, galloping in vain against her chest.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Lockwood. I’m Everett Cline.”

She blinked hard at him and reached for Rachel to keep herself from falling, from running.

He frowned. “Is everything all right?”

His voice was wrong and his hair parted on the left and the front tooth didn’t overlap. She worked to wet her mouth enough to speak. “Mr. . . . Mr. Cline?”

“I believe so.” His tickled smirk released the breath stuck

in her lungs. The set of his jaw was similar, but not when he smiled. Not Theodore. She released her vise grip on Rachel, who looked at her as if she'd lost her wits.

Like Theodore, Everett had beautiful dark blond wavy hair, a prominent brow, and laugh lines around the eyes. He was certainly handsome—just like the man her father had chosen for her to wed.

How could she marry someone whose appearance reminded her of a man she never wanted to lay eyes on again?