

A *Bride*
IN *Store*

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Melissa Jagears, *A Bride in Store*
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*To Easton and other EB Butterflies:
I pray God grants you and your families
extraordinary perseverance and wisdom.*

Chapter 1

KANSAS, 1881

The *thwack* of the train door jolted Eliza Cantrell upright. Acrid coal smoke whooshed through the muggy passenger car.

“Now, don’t nobody get any ideas,” a menacing voice growled.

The one time she traveled by train, it had to be robbed? Her breath froze like jagged ice in her lungs as she dared to glance over her shoulder.

“We ain’t gonna harm ya none, iffen you cooperate.” A lanky man with a blue bandanna covering his face waved two pistols above the crowded seats. “The train’s near-empty safe didn’t make us happy, so if you’d hand over your money and valuables, we’d be much obliged.”

Two more masked men with their hats pulled low slipped in behind the leader. One was hardly taller than a boy; the other’s wild white eyebrows and whiskers obscured the visible portion of his face.

Eliza gripped the edge of her seat and shot a glance across the aisle toward the Hampdens. Carl hadn’t seemed the heroic type during the hours Eliza had conversed with his wife, but surely concern for his family might bolster him into action?

Carl sat slumped beside Kathleen, who clung to their two children.

Eliza scanned the rest of the crammed seats. No men stood to face the robbers, and at the front, a porter lifted his hands in surrender.

“Let’s do this nice and easy and we’ll leave happy. And you want us happy, unless you fancy ending up like your expressman.” The lines around the lanky leader’s eyes bunched as if he were smiling under his filthy mask. “We tossed him out the window.”

The woman behind Eliza moaned.

Eliza peered down at her handbag and swallowed. Could she hide her money without getting caught?

“I’ll take that wedding band and whatever else you got.” The short robber thrust a bag under the nose of a man sitting across the aisle two rows behind Eliza.

She had to do something quickly. She wore no jewelry, but her every last dollar was in her bag. Her brother certainly wouldn’t cough up more money if she lost what he’d unwillingly given her in the first place, and of course, she wouldn’t bother to ask her mother for any help—not that she even knew where her mother was.

Easing open the clasp of her leather traveling bag, Eliza rocked with the sway of metal wheels whirring over iron rails.

The lips of the elderly woman beside her moved in harried prayer. Prayer.

God, I know I haven’t been talking to you much, but if you care . . . I need some time.

She looked over her shoulder.

“I’ll take that necklace.” The lead robber pointed at a woman two seats back who whimpered while fiddling with her chain’s clasp.

The short robber was still standing in front of the passengers in the back seats, and the older robber with the shotgun was leaning against the wall keeping an eye on the crowd.

Eliza turned and fished out her money clip with jittery hands. Should she put a few dollars back in the bag for them to find?

The tall robber knocked the back of her seat.

Eliza pushed the entire wad under her leg.

The thief stopped beside her, a gun in one hand, his empty palm out. “Your turn, pretty lady.” His voice was strange and gravelly.

Had he called *her* pretty? She shoved a soggy wisp of hair off her cheek and anchored it behind her ear, her hands shaking. Turning over her handbag, she dumped out the letters from the soon-to-be husband she’d never met, crackers wrapped in a handkerchief, unfinished needlework, and her embroidered purse. She opened its clasp. Three pennies, a nickel, and a half dollar fell into her lap.

He kicked her foot. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“That’s all I have.”

The robber’s eyelids narrowed over his light blue eyes. Blond stubble meandered up the sides of his face above the bandanna. “Fifty-eight cents?” His eyes raked down her body, and she hunched as if she could hide from his licentious leer. “That’s not homespun you’re wearing, though it ain’t pretty.” He leaned closer, his body odor overwhelming. “You got more than that.”

She dug her fingers into the seat cushion. “I’ve got nothing for you.” She pressed her teeth into her lower lip. Surely God would understand her evasiveness.

He squatted, shoved aside her skirt, and glanced under the seat. “No carpetbag?”

“I only have two trunks in the freight car.” She moved her legs farther to the left lest he touch her again—or ask her to move her legs the other way. Despite being covered with layers of skirt, flesh, and bone, the wad of bills felt conspicuous.

The robber stood, swiped the coins off her lap, and deposited her measly change into his breast pocket. He thrust his empty palm toward the old woman beside her. “Stop with the mumbling, lady. Give me your ring.”

Eliza pressed against her seat, creating space between his hot sweaty body and her offended nose.

Mrs. Farthington stopped praying, her damp eyes pleading. “This was my late husband’s. Please, sir, if you’d only allow me—”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me. Just hand it over. Didn’t you hear the part about keeping us happy?” The cheek muscle beneath the robber’s eye jumped.

Eliza tensed. Surely he wouldn’t throw the widow out the window.

“*Now*, old woman.” He jiggled his open hand.

Eliza stared at the scar beside his pinkie and ran her tongue over her teeth. How she’d like to sink her teeth into the faint half circle.

The widow pulled the thick gold band off her thumb. The robber snatched the pretty piece and slid the ring onto his finger atop two others. “Hand over your cash.”

The old lady fumbled with her reticule’s drawstrings.

He leaned over, reaching for the widow’s purse, but a sudden lurch made him grab for the shelves above them instead.

“What’s this?” His hand grazed Eliza’s leg, and the wad of cash slipped from under her thigh as he pulled out a bill. He waved the dollar in front of her. “No money, eh? Just a poor girl down on her luck?” He grabbed her by the waist and hefted her out of the seat.

She shrieked as he tossed her over his shoulder as if she weighed no more than a bag of oats.

Holding her with one arm, he dipped down. “Look, fellas. I found the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

“Let me go!” She flailed her fist at his head, but he dumped her back onto the seat before she could make contact.

His eyebrows rose as he ran his thumb across her thick wad of cash. “Mighty obliged.”

If things didn’t work out in Salt Flatts, what recourse would she have without a penny to her name? She snatched at her money, and the robber gave her a murderous look.

He leaned down until his eyes were so close they seemed to merge into one. “You realize I oughta make an example out of you so others don’t get any funny ideas.”

His hot slop-pot breath made Eliza want to turn away. Instead she narrowed her eyes at the man inches from her face.

He drew back and cocked his head, then gestured with his arm to the other passengers. “I don’t care if you’re a woman, a child, a saint, or a sinner,” his strange, gravelly voice boomed. “You will not hold out on us.”

He raised his hand and cracked his pistol against her cheek, setting fire to her face. Her body hit the plump side of the woman beside her, and the sunlight dimmed. Eliza pressed her palm against the pain, moaning deep and low to keep from crying out.

Across the aisle, the Hampdens’ son, Junior, whimpered.

Eliza forced herself upright.

The robber shouted at the passengers up front. “Now, let that be a lesson to ya. If anybody else don’t cooperate, losing your valuables won’t be the worst thing about today.”

Blood oozed between Eliza’s fingers. Gritting her teeth, she crossed her ankles to keep from kicking the vile man in the shin. The brand-new patch on his trousers would make an excellent target.

The Hampdens’ one-year-old daughter, Gretchen, broke into a full bawl as the man pivoted toward them. Kathleen’s desperate shushing only made the baby’s sobs more frantic.

Eliza ignored the impulse to slam her bootheel down on the robber’s instep before he walked away.

The white-haired bandit stomped forward, the fringe of his leather jacket swaying. “We’re coming up on Solomon’s Bend.”

Through the window, Eliza spied a line of trees on the horizon, indicating a river’s bank. A cluster of saddled, riderless horses grazed in the waist-high prairie grasses.

The small thief rushed to gather the loot from the remaining passengers on the car’s left side while the blond thief made quick work of the right. When they reached the front, the leader drew his hat down farther and tapped his foot impatiently.

Gretchen's shuddering breaths and the muffled sob of a lady in the back were the only sounds besides the rhythmic chug of the train and the drone of its wheels.

After handing her crying daughter over to her husband, Kathleen reached across the aisle, a handkerchief dangling from her hand. "Here, Eliza."

Eliza frowned despite the ache in her cheek and took the offered linen square. Blood would ruin its pristine white lace, but she couldn't find her own handkerchief. "Thank you."

"You gave it a good try," Kathleen whispered.

"No, it was stupid," muttered Carl. "She could have gotten herself killed. Could have gotten us all killed."

At the front, the littlest robber pocketed his last trinket, and the older robber backed up until he bumped against the other two. "Have a nice trip to Salt Flatts, folks."

When the train slowed to take a sharp bend, the gang spilled out the front and barred the door. One by one, they jumped and rolled into the sea of green grasses.

Several women burst into sobs, and Mrs. Farthington's prayers turned grateful.

Eliza put more pressure on her pulsing wound and slumped in the seat. Once again God had seen fit to take away everything she had. Why had she even bothered to pray?



The bell above the door to the Men's Emporium jangled madly, stealing William Stanton's attention from replacing a Winchester's loading gate.

The train depot manager's son, Oliver, stood out of breath at the front of the store.

Will sighed. Not a customer. Wiping his grimy hands on a towel, he sidled around the ammunition bench at the back of the store. "What can I—"

“Pa needs you at the depot, right quick.” The boy—not much more than a collection of animated elbows and knees—beckoned him, looking ready to dart back outside within a breath. “The train was robbed, and a lady needs you to give her stitches, and then this one old man—”

“Hold it.” Will pointed toward the white stenciled letters on his front window. “Under *Men’s Emporium, Purveyor of All Things Gentlemanly*, I’ve listed gunsmithing—nothing else.”

“Oh, c’mon, Mr. Stanton. We all know you’re gonna be a doctor someday, even if you don’t put it up there.”

“I’m not practicing. Get Dr. Forsythe.”

“But the lady needs stitches.” He stuck his hands on his hips. “On her *face*.”

Will gritted his teeth but untied his oil-smudged apron. The county doctor adamantly declared that the best surgeons—whether the surgery was major or minor—were fast surgeons. Coupled with the man’s sorry bedside manners, his speed would ensure the woman’s face would be stitched up in seconds to spare her pain, but the work would be shoddily done and certain to look terrible.

How could he allow a horrible scar to disfigure a woman if he could possibly suture her wound so people wouldn’t stare at her for the rest of her life? He’d learned at his mother’s knee to sew and sew well. “Does she truly need stitches?”

“Yes, sir.” The boy backed out the door. “Mrs. Hampden insisted I get you while Dr. Forsythe cares for the man with chest pains.”

“Anyone else hurt?” Leaving Oliver standing in the doorway, Will strode to the back to grab his medical kit—a small wooden box his father had fashioned with a carving of Jesus’ nail-pierced hands on top.

“No.” The boy placed his hands at his sides, as if he were gripping holstered six-shooters. “I heard Mr. Hampden say the gang tossed the expressman out the window, though. Posse went out to see if he’s still alive before they chase after the gang. Pa says they

likely won't pick up a trail, since they jumped off at the Solomon River. Probably rode through the water a ways."

Will flipped his sign to Closed and hustled after Oliver, who wove through the onslaught of pedestrians from the train.

"William!" Mrs. Hampden flagged him down from across the street.

Will turned and waited for a wagon to pass. He dodged a donkey cart and almost stepped in the unmentionable pile an animal had left behind on the dusty road. "I was just heading to the depot."

As soon as both his feet hit the sidewalk, Kathleen pivoted toward her store. "I had Carl bring her to the mercantile. She doesn't need half the town watching you stitch her up."

He strode after her, barely nodding at the people passing by. For a short, pregnant woman, Kathleen could sure eat up the ground.

When they entered the mercantile's back room, instead of climbing the stairs to the family's apartment, Kathleen led him into the office, where a lady wearing a wrinkled black dress sat on a crate pressing a wad of blood-soaked fabric against her face. The poor thing looked exhausted.

Carl stood by the door jiggling his fussy little girl, his eyes wide with frustration. "I sent Junior upstairs for a nap, but Gretchen won't lay down without you."

Kathleen took the one-year-old from his arms and rested a reassuring hand on the injured woman's shoulder. "Eliza, this is William Stanton. He delivered Gretchen. No finer doctor in the county—even if he is rather young."

Will frowned, not sure whether he scowled more because she called him a doctor or because she made him sound like a child, though Kathleen was indeed closer to his parents' age. He sat on a crate next to his patient. The deep red color plumping her cheek made his fists curl. How he'd like to make the perpetrator's face match hers.

Will forced himself to smile though, knowing his demeanor would affect his patient. “I wasn’t really given a choice in attending Mrs. Hampden. She has a knack for giving birth so quickly that whoever happens to pass by gets the honor of attending the delivery.”

“You’re highly competent, no matter what you say.” Kathleen shook her finger at him, then took a pouting Gretchen out the door.

Carl turned to follow.

“I’ll need your help, Mr. Hampden.” Since he’d run out of cocaine powder, Will grabbed the laudanum from his medical box.

“Um . . .” Carl shifted his weight, taking a long look at the door. “I don’t do well at the sight of blood. . . .”

“You can close your eyes.”

“Or screaming.” He looked a bit pale already.

Will blinked innocently. “I don’t intend to scream.”

Eliza, who looked much calmer than he’d expected, glanced at Carl, a smile tugging at her lips. “Me neither.”

“Great, two jokers.” Carl took a reluctant step closer.

Will winked at Eliza before unscrewing the bottle’s cap and measuring a small dosage. “Unfortunately, all I can do is help you get very relaxed and not notice the pain so much. You’ll still feel every stitch.”

Carl groaned, and Eliza’s face scrunched. Was the needle he’d pulled from his kit making her anxious or was it Carl’s unmanly apprehension?

She sucked air through her teeth, then quickly relaxed her face. The blotch on her handkerchief grew bright red around the edges.

Will handed her the medication, and she gingerly placed the cap against her lips.

“You’re not going to want to sip that—drink it right down.”

She threw back the whole measure, and forced it down with a hard blink.

He left to wash up in the Hampdens' upstairs apartment, giving the medicine time to work.

Carl was pacing the tiny office when he returned, yet the lady seemed relaxed.

Will sat beside her and reached for her makeshift bandage, his hand cupping hers. "Let me take a look."

She removed her hand and stared straight into his eyes. Her irises were a rich brown, like the cloves she'd used to sweeten her breath.

He forced himself to break from her gaze and focus on her gash. She'd most likely need eight stitches. He pressed the cloth back against her skin to staunch the blood. The heat of her cheek through the handkerchief was uncommonly distracting.

Mr. Hampden swayed and put a hand on the wall to keep himself upright.

"Carl, get behind her so you can't see, and I need you to clamp your arm across her forehead and against your side to hold her still."

She shook her head slightly, the loose tendrils of hair tickling his knuckles.

He should anchor her hair behind her ear, but that would be too intimate a gesture for a doctor. Not that he was one. Maybe that's why he almost desperately wanted to do that very thing for some reason.

"I won't move." Her eyes were steady and as dark as the hair trailing across his hand.

He blinked and refocused. She didn't realize how many stitches he was going to have to put in. "Dr. Forsythe might close this up quick enough you could stay still without help, but you wouldn't be happy with your scar. Stitches hurt no matter how much Mrs. Hampden talked up my abilities."

"I've had stitches before," the lady mumbled. "I'll be fine."

Maybe she would. At least she appeared more resilient than Carl. The man was turning whiter with each passing second, and he wasn't even looking at Eliza.

Maybe he should wait for Kathleen to return, but was she strong enough to hold this woman still?

“When do you plan on starting?” The lady’s eyebrows arched as she tried to peer down at his hand cupping her cheek. She actually looked amused. A woman who could laugh in this situation was a strong woman indeed.

“I’m giving the medicine time to work.” He glanced down at her hand but saw no wedding ring, then rolled his eyes. The robbers would have stolen it. “What’s your last name, Eliza?”

“Cantrell.” Her eyelids sagged, then flew open. If she was feeling sleepy, the medicine had done its job.

“It’s time.”

His friend anchored her head under his arm, his muscles flexing tight, his Adam’s apple running up and down his throat.

“Just look at the ceiling and think of lots and lots of sales, Mr. Hampden. Happy thoughts.” Will smiled at Miss Cantrell and scooted closer. “You should close your eyes.”

She tried to shake her head, but Carl thwarted her. Good.

“If I can’t watch, I’ll flinch.”

“All right.” Grabbing a little piece of leather with his free hand, he offered it to her. “Bite down on this. It’ll help steady you.”

When she nodded, he lowered the handkerchief and began his first stitch. Impressively, she only tensed and forcefully exhaled.

Will prayed for a steady hand with each poke of his needle. If she stayed motionless and silent, Carl would remain upright and her scar would be minimal.

After seven stitches, he knotted the silk. “I’m finished.” He smiled into her droopy eyes.

Carl let go of her head and sighed. “That wasn’t so bad, but I need to go, um, outside for a moment.” He moved toward the door on wobbly knees.

Will couldn’t suppress a chuckle at the man’s melodrama, not that Carl was paying attention to him. “You impressed me, Miss

Cantrell.” Will wiped his hands and pulled out some bandaging. “I should have taken your word for how you’d fare.”

She gave him a weak smile before her head drooped and her shoulders sagged.

He frowned. He hadn’t given her enough medicine to cause her to sleep sitting up. “Are you all right?”

Maybe she’d counted his stitches and realized the extent of the damage. She wasn’t the prettiest woman in the world. She had a fairly long face and big eyes, but every woman wanted to be beautiful, and stitches and the resulting scar wouldn’t help. Though, if she was tough enough to endure sutures without a peep, she’d rise above a fading scar. “In a few years, I don’t think you’ll see any evidence of what happened today. Unless you look really close.”

He held out the bandage, trying to figure out the best way to wrap her head. “You’ll need to cover your wound until it no longer oozes. Then you should let it air dry.”

“I’ll be fine.” She handed him her unadorned bonnet and reached for the gauzy roll. “At least my face anyway.”

“Are you hurt elsewhere?”

She sighed as she lifted the strip to her face. “My pocketbook.”

Will put her hat on the edge of the desk. “Where’re you headed? Folks in my church could donate money to get you home.”

The bandage’s end kept slipping from where she tried to anchor it against her neck with her chin. Will reached out to hold the piece against her skin, velvety like butter. His fingers itched to run along her jawline.

Watch it, Stanton. You don’t manhandle patients just because they feel soft.

After she got the first round of gauze started, he let his hand slide down, his double-crossing fingers lingering seconds longer than necessary.

She stopped unrolling the bandage and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Was she trying to figure out why his hand

loitered so long where it shouldn't have? He met her gaze and tried to breathe normally.

She watched him for a second before continuing with her head wrapping. Without the aid of a mirror, she smoothed the cloth as she unrolled the bandage.

He should help her, but he was afraid his fingers might decide to take a trip down her long neck.

"No need to send me anywhere. I'm Salt Flatts' newest resident."

"Oh." Will scurried to think of any Cantrells in the area, but none came to mind. His tongue suddenly felt dry. "Are you alone?" She had to be, since no one was with her, but why had she come? There weren't many available jobs in Salt Flatts for single ladies. "Do you need a place to stay? Maybe a member of my church could house you until you can send for money to stay at one of the boardinghouses."

She tied a neat little bow under her chin and indicated she wanted her hat. "If you're wondering when I will pay you, don't worry—"

"Oh no, ma'am." Will handed her the bonnet. "I don't charge people."

She cocked her head and scrunched her brows, as if witnessing nuts falling out of his ears. "You aren't charging me because of the robbery?"

"No. I don't charge for my services because I'm not ready to hang out my shingle as a doctor."

She puckered her mouth as if he'd said something that didn't make sense. "People seem convinced you're better than the county physician, so why wouldn't you ask for payment?"

Why did he feel as if she'd pulled out an augur, readying to drill a hole in his skull to check for brains? "I just don't."

She shrugged. "You're selling yourself short. If Mrs. Hampden insisted I see you because you do such great work, then you're worthy of being paid." She flung up empty palms. "Not that I have any money at the moment."

“As I said, don’t worry about it.”

“But I’ll pay soon.” She took a sidelong glance toward the door and leaned forward to whisper. “You’re looking at a woman who’s going to be running the most prosperous mercantile in town. Just wait and see.”

His eyebrows froze near his hairline. “A mercantile?” Salt Flatts had one too many stores already, if his financial woes were an indication.

“Have you heard of F. W. Woolworth of Pennsylvania?” Her serious face had transfigured in the same way his little sisters’ did when they talked about kittens. “I’m going to—”

The door creaked open, and Kathleen came in, arms void of children. “Are you done already, Will?” She smiled upon seeing Miss Cantrell’s bandaged face. “I didn’t hear anything while I was putting Gretchen down—not even my husband’s unconscious body hitting the floor.”

Kathleen giggled and squeezed Will’s shoulder before taking a seat next to Miss Cantrell. “Do you need Carl to get your things? I should’ve asked who was waiting for—”

“No need.” Miss Cantrell clamped both her hands around Kathleen’s. “I’ve got plans.”

Will turned to pack up his box, pushing his emaciated savings purse farther back into the corner.

Great. Another mercantile owner. If Miss Cantrell was about to compete with the Hampdens, the Lowerys, and him and Axel for Salt Flatts’ sales revenue, he’d never make enough to afford medical school.