

A woman with her hair styled in an updo, wearing a white Victorian-style dress with a high collar and puffed sleeves, and a bright red sash. She is standing in a room with large windows, looking out at a landscape of rolling hills and mountains. To her left is a round table with a white lace tablecloth and an open book. To her right is a yellow upholstered chair. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light.

TWICE A BRIDE

A Novel



MONA HODGSON

Author of Two Brides Too Many

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*Author of *The Bride Wore Blue**



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Twice a Bride

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Written for the Lover of my soul—Jesus!

*Hear my cry, O God;
Attend unto my prayer.
From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee,
when my heart is overwhelmed:
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.*

PSALM 61:1-2

ONE



1898

Fagged edges marked the sculpted granite at Willow's feet. Love was like that. Smooth in places. Sharp and dangerous in others.

'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Willow stared at the white rose in her hand. She agreed with Alfred Lord Tennyson's statement. But on this last day of August, churned clods of Colorado dirt formed a blanket over her father's grave. Was it the loss of her father so soon after their reunion, or was it fear threatening to rob her of air? Both were cunning adversaries.

She glanced at the shiny black carriage where her loved ones awaited her. Aunt Rosemary hadn't looked at her today, but Willow had seen the apprehension clouding Mother's eyes. Her brother, Tucker, had stared at her during the graveside service, worry rutting his brow. Even her sister-in-law watched her the way one would watch a pot on the brink of a boil.

If Willow dared to look in a mirror, she'd see the same question lurking in her own features. Could this insatiable sorrow pull her back into a tide she couldn't withstand any more than Sam could survive the undercurrent in the San Joaquin River?

She bent to the ground. "Father, I'm sorry for the anguish I've caused

you. I wanted to be strong.” She laid the rose on the grave. “I won’t be a Weeping Willow this time.” Squaring her shoulders, she brushed away the tears spilling onto her cheeks. At what point after Sam’s death had her mourning become abnormal? Would she recognize warning signs if it were to happen again?

“Willow?” Tucker’s voice wafted on the breeze, just above a whisper.

Drawing in a fortifying breath, she looked at her brother and stood. His eyes narrowed as though he expected her to crumple. Tucker had been the only one to visit her at the asylum after Father had her committed, and he’d visited her once a week despite never receiving notable response from her.

Tucker met her gaze. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She brushed a blade of grass from her mourning gown. “I needed some time.”

“I can’t help but worry about you.”

She offered him a slight grin. “I know.”

He slid his hands into his trouser pockets. “You shouldn’t be alone.”

Willow agreed. She’d expected by this time in her life to be a pastor’s wife and herding at least two or three little Peterson tykes.

“I’m not alone.” Was she trying to convince him or herself? “Mother and Aunt Rosemary are at the boardinghouse with me.”

He looked at the rose she’d placed on their father’s grave. “Saturday they’ll return to Colorado Springs.”

“But Miss Hattie is under the same roof, and she’s not going anywhere.” Willow added a lilt to her voice to see if she could cause his brow to soften. “And I have you.”

Perhaps it was a mistake to live this close to her brother. He had a wife, a church to shepherd, and the Raines Ice Company to oversee. Worrying about her was not a pleasant way for Tucker to live. But if she didn’t settle in Cripple Creek, where would she go? Nothing, and no one, awaited her in Stockton, California, where she’d grown up and married Sam.

Tucker's shoulders sagged. "It's not the same as having a spouse to... I'd feel better if you'd agree to move into the parsonage."

Willow pressed the squared toe of her dull black shoe into the grass. "We've already talked about this, and my answer is the same."

"You can't blame a brother for trying."

"I don't." She patted his bristled cheek. "I love you for it."

Tucker offered his arm. "We best get to the house. A supper awaits us."

A bereavement supper, to be exact, replete with long faces and self-conscious commiseration. She matched Tucker's pace, determined to remain above the shared sadness.

At the wagon, Willow stepped onto the wrought-iron foot brace and seated herself beside her sister-in-law, Ida.

Concern laced Mother's green eye—the source of Willow's own eye color. "Are you all right, dear?"

Willow nodded, her lips pressed against another swirl of grief. She wasn't the only one burying a father or a husband today. "What about you, Mother? Are you all right?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose."

Tucker raised the reins. As the wagon jerked forward, Ida's tender hand rested on Willow's palm and squeezed her sister-in-law's hand. Tears stung Willow's eyes. She needed to find her own path, but she didn't let go.

Uncharacteristically quiet, Tucker guided the horses down Second Street toward the rustic home their parents bought when they left Stockton. How ironic that when Father's consumption got the best of him, nearly two years ago, he ended up in a sanitorium. An institution, of sorts. Mother had moved in with her sister in Colorado Springs to be close to him. Tucker lived in the cabin until he and Ida married and moved into the parsonage. Now Otis and Naomi Bernard and their four sons called the cabin home.

As they approached the creek-side property, Tucker slowed the horses. Mother let out a fragrant moan, and Tucker reached over and patted her arm.

Willow had seen the place once when she first came to Cripple Creek for her brother's wedding, but she'd never viewed it as her parents' home. Home was the clapboard two-story house in Stockton where she and Tucker had grown up. The house where she'd planned her wedding.

She wanted to believe everything happened for a reason—that God had a divine plan. Last year she'd found it easy to believe He'd left her here on earth and healed her so she could help her parents through her father's illness. But now? Father was gone. Mother planned to return to Colorado Springs with Aunt Rosemary. And her brother had a new life with a pregnant wife.

"Here we are," Tucker said. A few horses and wagons formed a line between the cabin and the barn. Otis, the biggest man Willow had ever seen, stepped off the porch. His oldest son stood at his side. Even at ten years old, Abraham was already a miniature of his father—dark skinned and broad shouldered.

His wife, Naomi, awaited them at the open door. A paisley-print apron added a bright spot to her black broadcloth dress. "Please accept our condolences, Missus Raines." The petite woman reached for Mother's hands. "Mr. Raines was good to us. You both were, and I'll never forget that." Sincerity shone in her dark eyes.

"Thank you." Mother glanced at Abraham. "We appreciate all you and your father did to keep the ice deliveries going when Mr. Will took sick."

Nodding, Abraham twisted a floppy hat in his hands. "Ma'am, Mr. Will did have a big bark, but he never bit me."

Tucker was the first to laugh, but Willow and Mother soon joined him.

Naomi didn't laugh. She glared first at Otis, then at her son. "Abraham, you will apologize for your disrespect."

Abraham's brow crinkled. The boy obviously didn't realize that what he'd said was, by some standards, inappropriate. He straightened nonetheless, his arms tucked into his sides in a contrite manner. "I apologize, Missus Raines. I didn't mean any disrespect. I liked Mr. Will. He always gave me a penny for candy or gave me a Tootsie Roll—my favorite."

Mother smiled. “He liked you too, Abraham.” She patted the child’s head, then looked at his mother. “Naomi, your son is right. My husband did sound off with quite a bark now and then.”

Willow remembered her father’s bark, and she already missed it.

Naomi opened her mouth to speak, but Mother beat her to it. “No harm done.”

“Thank you.” Naomi stepped away from the open door. “Lots of folks have come to pay their respects.”

They entered the cabin one after the other, Willow stepping into the front room last. Before she reached the food tables, a stout woman stepped in front of her.

“I’m Mrs. Henry.”

“Your husband drives one of the ice wagons.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Henry narrowed her hazel eyes, looking at Willow but not meeting her gaze. “According to everything I’ve read in Scripture, if your father is in heaven, he’s in a far better place.”

If? Willow coughed as if she’d just swallowed something sour. She covered her mouth, more in an attempt to stifle her retort than as an act of propriety. Mrs. Henry had good intentions, didn’t she? Offering the woman the benefit of her doubt, Willow nodded, then glanced across the crowded room. Hattie Adams stood with Ida at the dessert table, and she suddenly had a hankering for something sweet—their company.

Her sister-in-law brushed a tear from her cheek. Tucker had found a good wife. Ida had a big heart and was mourning the loss of a man she barely knew. Hattie pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket.

Willow regarded the stout woman still planted in front of her. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Henry tugged the white collar on her black shirtwaist. “Just remember, it’s always darkest before the morning.”

And just before one woke up. Biting her lip, Willow started across the

room. Don't make eye contact. Don't smile. She didn't want to be stopped by any more misguided well-wishers. She was a woman on a mission.

Flight. Straight into the sanctuary of Ida's and Miss Hattie's company.

Ida looked Willow's way and extended an arm to her. Willow took Ida's hand and glanced at the dessert table. She'd recognize her landlady's three-layer carrot cake anywhere.

"I remembered." Miss Hattie's smile highlighted the laugh lines that framed her blue-gray eyes.

Hummingbirds and eagles were more closely related than Mrs. Henry and Miss Hattie.

Willow squeezed her sister-in-law's hand. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Ida sniffled. "I was thinking about the baby."

And the grandfather he or she would never meet. Willow nodded. The grandmother too. Ida's mother had died more than a dozen years ago. The Sinclair sisters had expected their father to arrive in Cripple Creek this past spring, but so far they'd seen no sign of him.

Ida dabbed her face with a handkerchief. "I was about to grab a piece of carrot cake and take it out to the bench. Join me?"

Willow caught sight of a pinched-face woman in a black shirtwaist with a white collar. "I suppose that depends on whether or not we're faster than Mrs. Henry and her trite expressions."



That evening, Willow pressed a butterfly seal to the envelope on her dressing table. She'd written a letter to her friend at the Stockton State Asylum. Maria Lopez had taken good care of her even when she was in a stupor and wasn't aware of the older woman's tender care. When Willow had awoken and become aware, Maria brought her homemade tamales every Sunday.

Willow had buried her father today and still missed Sam something awful.

But she was a blessed woman. God had put people like Maria and others at the asylum in her path. She still had a brother, her mother, and an aunt who loved her. And now she had Ida.

Miss Hattie's laughter winged its way to the second story. Mother and Aunt Rosemary were downstairs with her landlady.

Tucker was right about her being alone soon. Mother and Aunt Rosemary would board the train for Colorado Springs in three days. Tucker and Ida were busy with each other and their pursuits.

Willow had wasted two years of her life in the asylum. Two years she could've spent apprenticing with an established painter.

She returned her writing box to the bedside table. There had to be something she could do to support herself and her artistic ambitions. It'd be even better if she found purpose in it. Her landlady thrived on coming alongside others—especially young women experiencing a big change, as each of the Sinclair sisters had. Following Miss Hattie's example, Willow decided to search until she found purpose.

But right now, her quilt-covered bed looked more inviting than the blank canvas propped in the corner. Yawning, she left her bedchamber and strolled down the staircase to the parlor to say good night.

Aunt Rosemary sat on the sofa beside Miss Hattie, chattering between sips of tea. Her mother looked up from where she sat on a Queen Anne chair and motioned for Willow to join them.

"Come in, dear. I was hoping you'd join us before you retired." Mother nibbled a lemon bar and then glanced at the plate of nuts and red grapes. "I couldn't eat at the house. Not right after...with all those people."

Willow seated herself in a rocker on the other side of the table that held her mother's teacup. "I couldn't either." But sitting by the creek between the two willow trees Tucker had planted, she'd managed a generous slice of carrot cake just fine.

"I was beginning to think you'd gone to bed." Mother pulled the napkin

from her lap and wiped her mouth. “What were you doing up there for so long?”

“I wrote a letter to Maria, my favorite attendant at the asylum.”

Mother popped two grapes into her mouth. Willow gnawed her bottom lip. Her stay there—the very fact that she needed to be tucked away—was still a hush-hush topic.

“Would you like something to eat, dear?” Miss Hattie pointed to the tray of sliced ham and cheese, and lemon bars.

“No, thank you.” She’d be ready for a big breakfast, but right now she wanted her pillow. “I came down to say good night.”

“You do look tired, dear.” Aunt Rosemary added a slice of ham to her plate and licked her lips.

Mother set her plate on the table and picked up her cup and saucer. “Before you go back upstairs, I have something to tell you.”

Willow squirmed in the rocker. Mother’s statement usually preceded a serious announcement or declaration.

“I had a chance to speak to Ida when she came back from the creek.”

“About your grandchild?”

“About you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Ida said she couldn’t offer you full-time work, but she’d welcome your help in the icebox showroom.”

“You didn’t.” It came out louder than Willow would’ve preferred.

Mother’s teacup rattled in its cradle. “Indeed, I did. And you should be grateful. Rosemary and I will be leaving soon, and as lovely as this boarding-house is, you can’t just sit around. It wouldn’t be good for you. You need something productive to do.”

She did need something productive to do. But selling iceboxes?

Two



Trenton Van Der Veer stood at the worktable just outside his darkroom and leveraged a pry bar at one corner of a crate. A delivery wagon had hauled the two crates from the morning train—his first big order since he'd opened the studio two months ago. He applied pressure to the iron bar until the nails gave way with a shriek, then carefully lifted a paper-wrapped flask from the wooden box. He set it on the table and smoothed out the sheet of parchment paper. Repeating the process with bottles of fixer and flasks of developer, he stacked the paper he could use to protect his finished prints. After he'd emptied the first crate, he set the bottles in neat rows on one of the new shelves he'd built in the darkroom. He lined up the chemicals according to their role in the developing process—developers on the left, washes and fixers on the right.

Trenton pulled two new glass plates from the crate and examined them. Obviously, the train offered a smoother track than the rural road he'd maneuvered in Timothy O'Sullivan's photographic van, a glorified and enclosed buckwagon. No matter how well he'd wrapped the plates, at least one would crack on most trips. He tucked the new plates into one of the shallow wooden boxes on the shelf below the counter. The metal slides went into the next box over, and he placed five cans of negative emulsion into the third box.

This new shipment alone was twice the bulk of supplies that would have fit in the wagon. But working as an apprentice traveling photographer was his past. He was thirty-seven years old, and he'd grown tired of living out of a

van. It was time he settled down; time that his clients came to him. That was why he'd opened the Photography Studio, although Colorado hadn't been where he'd expected to hang his shingle. He'd spent some time in New York during his traveling years and had been set to return there with an ambitious wife to photograph the cream of society—magazine editors, newspaper moguls, and the latest songbirds of the opera.

Trenton's eyelid twitched, and he reached up to still it. He'd expected to return to New York with a wife, but then—

The bell on the outer door jangled. He had company.

Opening his mouth to speak, Trenton contested the persistent cramp in his tongue. "B-be...r-right there." After adding the last sheet of parchment paper to the stack, he stepped into the office and closed the door to the dark-room behind him. Mollie Kathleen Gortner stood at the counter in a navy blue suit. An angled hat eclipsed the mine owner's narrow face.

"G-good day, m-ma'am."

"And to you, Mr. Van Der Veer." She stared at the leather apron he'd donned to unpack the boxes. "You telephoned. My print is ready?"

He'd telephoned Monday and had expected her to come by yesterday. As he opened his mouth to speak, he felt the muscles on the right side of his face contract. "Y-yes. Right here." He lifted the portrait from a stack of prints beneath the counter and laid it in front of the businesswoman. She'd brought in a mine-claim certificate and a feathered fountain pen for her sitting.

She examined the sepia image. "Nicely done, Mr. Van Der Veer."

"I'm g-glad you approve." He'd like the image better if Mrs. Gortner hadn't looked so serious. Perhaps women in Kansas weren't alone in taking themselves too seriously. He shrugged. If only shrugging were enough to rid him of the memories.

Mrs. Gortner pulled a fan from her reticule and flipped it open. "Has Mrs. Hattie Adams spoken with you yet?"

No more than a handful of women had visited his shop. Mostly business-

men. Miss Mollie O'Bryan and Mrs. Gortner being the exceptions. "No. Sh-should I ex...pect her?"

"Mrs. Adams is a widow and the owner of Miss Hattie's Boardinghouse over on Golden Avenue. She's been in town for at least a dozen years and is a good woman to know." Mrs. Gortner fanned herself. A strand of red-brown hair streaked across her forehead. "As the co-chairwoman of the Women for the Betterment of Cripple Creek, I mentioned you and your photographic services at our meeting last Friday. Several of the women seemed taken with the idea of scheduling a sitting, Hattie Adams in particular."

"Thank you." The two words jerked out as one.

"You're welcome." Not seeming at all put off by his stammering, she returned her fan to her reticule and pulled out the balance she owed.

After writing out a receipt, he slid the print into a crisp manila envelope, hoping the mine owner had the kind of influence that would bring him business.

She held the photograph as if it were a fragile baby. "Do you know what else would help to make your business boom, Mr. Van Der Veer?"

An articulate spokesman wouldn't hurt.

"Painted portraits are all the talk now, you know. You need to hire someone who can paint portraits from your photographs. The time saved from a portrait sitting would be a wonderful selling point."

He rubbed his jaw. He'd read all about photographic portraiture in Peterson's National Magazine but hadn't given it any thought.

"Mark my words, Mr. Van Der Veer. You hire someone who can paint mantel portraits from your prints, and your quiet little business will boom."

"I'll g-give it some thought, Mrs. Gortner, and let you know wh-what I decide."

Trenton opened the door for her, then looked at the clock above the door. He had a sitting in thirty minutes. Inside the studio, he set up his tripod six feet from the Greek column he used as a stationary elbow rest.

The more he thought about Mrs. Gortner's suggestion—almost a demand, really—the more he liked the idea of partnering with someone who could paint portraits from his photographs. It'd be all the better if the artist could also colorize existing prints. That, too, was a popular service in the bigger cities. Two months in business may be too short a time to be considering expansion, but if he could find the right man for the job, they'd both benefit.

While waiting for his two o'clock appointment, he made a mental list of the artists he'd met. Jorgensen and McGregor in New York, and several in Chicago and Kansas City. It was doubtful he could lure any of them to Cripple Creek. From his darkroom, he pulled out the plates for this sitting, then returned to the studio and inserted the first plate into the back of the wooden box on the tripod.

It'd be better to solicit help from someone local, anyway. Someone with connections in the district could help stir interest in the Photography Studio. His friend Jesse had been in Cripple Creek for several years and was certainly doing his part to help spread the word, but as much as Trenton appreciated his friend's enthusiasm, a blacksmith and livery owner's sphere of influence in the arts was admittedly limited.

He'd write out an advertisement for the Cripple Creek Times and deliver it to the newspaper this afternoon. He might even pen a letter to Susanna while he was at it.

When the studio met his satisfaction for the next client, Trenton pulled a sheet of scrap paper and a fountain pen from the top drawer of his desk. He needed just a short advertisement, direct enough that he wouldn't waste his time with anyone who wasn't qualified for the job.

Painter Wanted: A skilled portrait painter to work with photographer.
Send letter of application and a sample of your painting to The
Photography Studio at North First Street.

He returned the pen to its cradle in the desk and greeted Mr. and Mrs. Updike as they arrived for their sitting.



The rope of bells on the door jangled, and Susanna looked up from the tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries.

Helen bounced into the confectionary with a newspaper tucked under her arm. Her pointy nose sniffed the air. "Oh, I do love the smell of warm chocolate." She glanced at the strawberries, only a slightly brighter red than her braid, then jabbed a boney finger toward the door behind the counter.

"My father went to the bank," Susanna said in answer to Helen's silent question. "But you still can't have one."

"We'll see about that." Helen studied her the way one would a butterfly specimen. "Have you been sour all day, or did you save it all for me?"

Sighing, Susanna returned the last strawberry to the tray and wiped her hands on her apron. "You do this every day, week after week. Then tell me how you feel about sticky, gooey candy and the people who rot their teeth eating it."

Helen's tongue darted out. "You didn't seem to mind it so much when Trenton fed you the chocolate-coated strawberries."

Susanna's stomach knotted. "You have a lot of nerve mentioning him."

Helen planted a hand on her hip. "It wasn't my fault that downhearted man left you."

"You were there!"

"And so were you." Helen waved the newspaper. "I thought this might help you feel better. But thanks to your foul temper, I can see I'd be wasting my time."

Susanna slid the candy tray into the oak icebox against the back wall. "How is a Podunkville rag going to help?" If it couldn't take her out of this place, it wouldn't make her feel even one iota better.

Helen raised the rolled paper, holding it like a summer fan just below her sparkling green eyes. "It's not the Scandia Journal, dearie."

"So you dropped coin for the Topeka Capitol-Journal." Susanna rearranged the tray so the icebox door would close. "A clear waste of your money. My father brings the Topeka Journal home from the smoking club."

"Once again you've underestimated me." Helen pressed the newspaper to her chest. "Do you consider Denver Podunk?"

"Well, it's not New York. Or even San Francisco. But it is out West, away from Kansas." Susanna tossed her apron into a basket under the counter. "How did you get hold of a Denver newspaper?"

"The Denver Post, no less." Helen held the newspaper out to her as if it were a meaty bone. When Susanna reached for it, Helen took a giant step backward.

Susanna crossed her arms.

Helen cackled. "Can't blame a girl for trying to have a little fun around here."

"Why should I care about the Denver Post?"

"My brother Harold lives in Denver, and he's been trying to talk my father into moving us all out there. He sent the paper, thinking all the talk about mines and mills would entice him."

Susanna took the newspaper from her and spread it out on the counter.

"Page five, right side."

She flipped pages. "I'm in no mood for chasing rabbits, Helen." Page five. "Can't you just tell me what you found so fascin—"

The headline in the upper right-hand corner of the page froze the word in her throat. "Photographer of the rich and famous drawn to wealthy Colorado."

"Trenton?"

"Keep reading." A smug smile dimpled Helen's freckled cheeks.

Sure enough, the article was about Trenton Van Der Veer. Her Trenton Van Der Veer. "He moved to Colorado...set up a studio in Cripple Creek."

Her finger trailed the margin as she read. "Says here Cripple Creek is on the southwest slope of Pikes Peak. 'The bulk of Colorado's millionaires call it home.'" Her pulse quickened. "He is still photographing the wealthy."

And where there was wealth, there were opera houses and theater companies that needed singers. Given a chance, she could revive Trenton's plans to marry her, take her to live in New York, and introduce her to the top tier there.

Helen tapped her perky chin. "Feeling better, are we?"

"Much better." Susanna took quick steps to the icebox and pulled out the tray of strawberries. "That information, my dear friend, has earned you not one but two chocolate treats."

Helen picked out the biggest strawberries on the tray.

"I've heard good things about Denver," Susanna said. "It's called the land of opportunity, you know." That was especially true if it moved her closer to Cripple Creek.

Nodding, Helen licked a smudge of chocolate off her bottom lip. "You're starting to sound like my brother."

The information about Trenton was worth the whole shop's worth of chocolates. Susanna held the tray of dipped strawberries out to Helen. "Any chance your father is considering the move?"