



TWO BRIDES TOO MANY

A Novel

MONA
HODGSON

Praise for
Two Brides Too Many

“Mona Hodgson has been charming children with her delightful stories for years, and now she is giving adults the same pleasure in her debut novel, *Two Brides Too Many*. Spunky sisters, mail-order brides, a mining town full of men, but where are the right ones? I was captivated from the first page, wanting to read faster to see what would happen next and to read slower so the book would not be over. A great read.”

—LAURINE SNELLING, author of *The Red River* series
and *Daughters of Blessing*

“From the opening scene to the happily-ever-after ending, Mona Hodgson’s *Two Brides Too Many* puts a fresh spin on the tried-and-true mail-order-bride story. What happens when you combine two sisters, two elusive grooms, and the rugged mountain outpost of Cripple Creek, Colorado? Love, laughter, and one of the best historical novels of this year!”

—KATHLEEN Y’BARBO, author of *The Confidential Life of Eugenia Cooper* and *Anna Finch and the Hired Gun*

“*Two Brides Too Many* is one good book! Mona Hodgson sweeps the reader away with Sinclair sisters Nell and Kat and nestles them in the majesty of Colorado, where a cast of characters eagerly await, to create a home. Hodgson leaves a tasty trail of breadcrumbs ready to lead us into the next story. Two more sisters...I can’t wait!”

—ALLISON PITTMAN, author of *The Bridegrooms*

“Strong characters play out an intricately crafted story across a rich tapestry of setting. Not your usual mail-order-bride story, and I loved the twists and turns. A real page-turner.”

—LENA NELSON DOOLEY, award-winning author
of *Pirate’s Prize*, *Wild Prairie Roses*, and *Love Finds
You in Golden, New Mexico*

“A delightful first novel from veteran writer Mona Hodgson. Spunky brides, spirited sisters, and sweet romance add up to a tale the Old West won’t soon forget.”

—DIANN MILLS, author of *Breach of Trust*, *Sworn
to Protect*, and *A Woman Called Sage*

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For Cindy, Tammy, and Linda—my very own sisters.

*Behold, I will do a new thing;
now it shall spring forth;
shall ye not know it?
I will even make a way in the wilderness,
and rivers in the desert.*

ISAIAH 43:19

ONE



1895, Portland, Maine

I have you cornered.”

Kat looked up from the writing desk to the table, where Nell was grinning. Nell’s match with Ida had been particularly animated on this Sunday afternoon. Both were fiercely competitive, and Kat knew better than to challenge either one of them at checkers, or most any game.

Ida perched on a cushioned chair, face to face with Nell. The oldest of the four Sinclair sisters wasn’t accustomed to losing, and it showed in Ida’s furrowed brow. She stared at the board, but the pattern of the red and black disks didn’t change. When she finally made a move, Nell snatched the red game piece off the board, her blue eyes sparkling.

“That’s five out of seven, Ida.” Vivian, the youngest at sixteen, called the tournament from the sofa where she lounged with Sassy, her Siamese cat.

“You’ve been dethroned, sis.” Kat closed her journal. “We have a new Sinclair checkers champion.”

While Ida lifted an imaginary crown off her head, Nell stood and smoothed her skirt. Ida placed the invisible trophy atop Nell’s wheat-blond twist. “I present the new queen of checkers.” Ida bowed. All four sisters giggled.

Kat picked up her journal and walked to the window. Fabric ties held tartan curtains open, framing the idyllic outdoor scene. Crimson and golden leaves adorned the maples and oaks outside, and a couple of squirrels frolicked while a handful of leaves twisted and twirled above them like autumn acrobats.

Acrobats in fall colors

Twist and twirl...

Kat hurried back to the writing desk and recorded the words in her journal, her pencil flying over the page. Sunday was the most inspiring day of the week. The Sabbath’s time of rest and reflection always left her refreshed and full of new ideas.

Nell cleared her throat. “I don’t suppose you’re writing about my victory for the *Portland Press Herald*.”

“A recounting of your conquest, as great as it was, isn’t Kat’s cup of tea.” Vivian laughed. The name *Sassy* fit Vivian as well as it did her cat.

“Now if Nell were the writer in the family, we’d all be reading a most romantic love story,” Ida said, returning the checkerboard to the bookcase.

“I believe in love.” Nell shrugged. “Is that so bad?”

“Believing in love is not at all bad, poppet.” Father’s warm voice drew their attention to the doorway. He wore a herringbone suit, his

auburn mustache and beard neatly trimmed. He leaned against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest.

“We have a new checkers champion, Father.” Nell raised her hands to her head and formed a crown. “Me.”

“And such a humble winner.” A weak smile turned up one side of Father’s mouth, and an uneasiness began to niggle Kat’s stomach. Something wasn’t right.

While Father joined all four of the girls at the table, Tilda shuffled into the room and set a tea tray down on the mahogany table. She’d served the Sinclair family for ten years, and Kat would never forget how lovingly Tilda had cared for Mother until Mother’s death eight years ago. Tilda poured hot apple cider into the china cups and straightened up slowly.

Kat lifted her cup and took in a deep breath, inhaling the fragrant steam, then took a lemon bar from the platter and passed the tray to Ida.

“Her rule will be short-lived.” Ida squared her shoulders. “I’ll have my title and crown back next Sunday.”

“My girls are headstrong, even while being fair flowers.” Father lifted his cup with finely kept hands. “That’s what helped me survive losing your mother.” After a drink of cider, he returned his cup to the table. “I have news, girls, and I’m counting on that independent spirit of yours.”

While Kat considered what kind of news would have Father counting on their independence, she swallowed the last bite of lemon cookie.

“What kind of news, Father?” Nell asked the question before Kat could get it out.

“My job here is being terminated in May of the coming year.”

“That’s awful.” Vivian’s empty cup clinked against the saucer. “They can’t do that!”

Nell frowned at Vivian’s pessimism—a battle Nell and Vivian engaged in often. “You’ll find something soon, Father,” she said. “I’m just sure of it.”

“Nell’s right.” Kat couldn’t believe she’d said that. Her father had worked for Wyatt Locomotive for as long as she could remember, and there weren’t many other prospects here in Portland. “May is still eight months away. You’ll probably find something even better by then.” She hoped her voice sounded more optimistic than she felt.

Vivian scooted back her chair and folded her arms in a huff. “It makes no difference how much time they’ve given you. You’ve given them much more.”

“Well, they haven’t let me go entirely,” he said, letting out a sigh. “They’ve offered me a job overseeing their locomotive engineers in Paris.”

Nell gasped and Vivian shrieked. Sassy jumped off Vivian’s lap and scurried for cover. Kat sat still, stunned.

Father was taking a job in France.

While most writers might find a place like Paris exotic and alluring, Kat didn’t. She liked living in Maine. Portland had been their home all her life. This was where Mother lived and died.

Ida pinched the bridge of her nose, signaling one of her headaches was coming on. “I can’t leave Portland, Father. I’m only halfway through my secretarial course here.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve thought about that.” The clock began to chime, and Father waited for the fourth and final chime to sound before he continued speaking. “This house belongs to the company,” he

said, pressing his hand against the arm of his chair. "They are only providing me with a one-room apartment in Paris."

The niggle in Kat's stomach fast became a churning. She couldn't believe that Father was leaving them behind. At nearly nineteen, she should be ready for this, but with their mother gone, he was all they had left.

"You're leaving us here?" Nell asked, her voice shallow.

"I don't get to go to Paris?" Vivian whispered.

Father rose from his chair and strolled to the fireplace. Pulling Mother's picture off the mantel, he stared at it, as if drawing strength from her. "I have to do this," he said. "I don't see any other way."

Her father looked so forlorn that Kat almost stood up to give him a hug. She didn't like it, but she knew the decision to take the job had to be as difficult for him as it was for them. "We'll be fine, Father."

"I know you will, Kat. I have faith in each one of you. Your mother did a fine job of raising you to be exceptional young women." Father returned the photograph to the mantel. "I need to know that you four will be well cared for until I return, so I've arranged for Vivian and Ida to stay with your aunt Alma here in Portland until they finish their schooling. Then they'll join you and Nell in Colorado."

"Colorado?" Nell's voice quivered.

"Yes. I think Colorado will be the best place for you," he said, his eyes sad. "Towns are growing fast there, and the mountains are grand, and I've had many occasions for business there." Father returned to his cup and took a long drink. "There are good, solid men there, and as much as it hurts me to see you go, Colorado is a land of opportunity. That's what I want for my girls."

Questions piled upon questions, leaving Kat feeling a bit queasy.

What was Father talking about? Opportunities for what? And what did men in Colorado have to do with her and Nell? Kat glanced at Ida for answers, but her big sister looked just as dumbfounded as she felt.

“After the war, many men from the East moved out west, where they’re making good wages in the mines, railroads, and businesses. Some are even striking it rich. Vivian isn’t of the age for a husband yet. The rest of you are, and I’m afraid it’s time to start looking.” He shook his head. “Ida will finish her studies first, but I want the two of you to wire advertisements to the *Cripple Creek Prospector* in Cripple Creek, Colorado.”

“Advertisements?” The one word was all Kat could choke out.

“Yes, poppet. Advertisements for husbands.”

Kat pulled her napkin to her face and tried to hide her dismay. Traveling west to look for husbands was one thing. But advertising in a newspaper for one was another matter entirely. It just wasn’t something that well-bred ladies did.

But one look at her father’s pained face made her realize that everything had changed.

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