

MAIL ORDER SWITCH

ELIZABETH AND CAROLINE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



ELIZABETH

"*Y*our hair is coming down."

Liz dipped her head low against the seat in front of her and tried to stuff the long golden strand of hair back up under the ragged cowboy hat. She briefly glanced at the dark-haired woman next to her and hoped no one else had noticed the slip. She looked back out the window at the sun-scorched prairie grass rushing by the train. How in the world was she going to pull this off?

"There is no way you are going to fool anyone dressed like that," the lady's soft voice answered her thoughts.

"What?" Liz snapped as she turned to her seatmate again, silently taking in the troubled brown eyes and the worry lines above her thin brows. The lady wasn't harsh, but she looked worried—worried about Liz? No, it couldn't be that.

"I don't know why you are dressed like a man, but there is no way you are going to pass it off. Even if your long silky hair didn't keep falling down your angel face, those pink, heart-shaped lips

and sooty lashes will give you away. Not to mention those curves. Those britches aren't hiding anything."

Liz dropped her face in her hands willing herself not to cry. The old hat that was too big anyway tipped forward letting the rebellious strand of hair fall loose at the back of her head once more. What was she going to do? She had nowhere to go. When this train got to Denver, she had to get off. That was all the money she'd had for a ticket. She had hoped, as a man, she would be able to get a job on a ranch. Granted, she didn't have experience, but she could learn, couldn't she?

"You want to talk about it?" The woman's voice was kind.

Liz turned back to her, weighing the question. Liz had been sitting next to the woman for two days, ever since Liz had boarded the train in Chicago. The woman had been by the window then but had let Liz sit there the next day.

"It's just not safe to travel alone..." Liz just wouldn't tell her the whole truth. She couldn't tell anyone that she might have killed a man, even if it was self-defense.

"I'm Caroline." The lady held out her hand and smiled, but the smile seemed forced.

"Elizab—" Oh no! She shouldn't have used her real name. What if there were people already looking for her?

"It's okay, honest. Whatever you are running from— I'm not going to tell anyone. You look like you need a friend, and I could surely use one right now." Her hand came to rest on Liz's arm and her large brown eyes softened. She was maybe in her mid-twenties, if Liz had to guess, not too much older than she was.

"Thank you." She brought her hand up to rub the aching pressure from her forehead. "I had to get away. The day I turned eighteen, my uncle, my guardian, tried to force himself on me."

"Oh no, that is dreadful. Where are you going to go? I mean, what will you do?"

"I don't know... I thought I could get work on a ranch—if I

could act like a man. My uncle wa...is my only family. My parents passed away nigh on a year ago."

"I'm sorry, but I think even if you cut your hair, you still wouldn't pass, even for a boy. You're just too pretty."

"Shh..."

"I'm sorry." Caroline bit her lower lip and tried again. "Have you ever thought about being a mail-order-bride?"

"What? What is that?"

"Exactly what it sounds like." She reached into her valise and pulled out a newspaper. "Here, read the one I've circled."

WIDOWER, looking for a woman to care for two small children.

Must know how to cook and clean. Marriage in name only. Apply in writing.

THE AD WAS LISTED under a column for mail-order-brides, and there were probably ten more. She could do that! Well, maybe not that one; she didn't know how to cook, or clean, or even care for children.

"That is what I'm doing. I'm on my way to Colfax to meet my man." The dark-haired woman pursed her lips and the previous look of discomfort returned, to present itself in the lines above her brow and the rigid way she held her shoulders.

"You must be so nervous! How do you know he isn't a monster? Or very old and ugly?" Liz shuddered again, reminded of the many times her father's brother had let his hands wander. Uncle Rupert's advances had become more and more disgusting as the time had gone on, the dirty rotten lecher.

"Well, you can't be sure, but we have written letters to one another. I keep telling myself that is enough. But..."

"But what?"

"But I don't want to do this now." Caroline bit through her lower lip. It was no wonder; she had been worrying it with her teeth for quite a while. Liz watched as a spot of blood appeared, just before her tongue darted out to clear it away and then she sucked it in under her top lip.

"Well, what can you do then?"

"I have to go—he paid for my ticket. I can't let him down." She sat back with a heavy sigh.

"I wish I could help you."

"It will be all right. I hope so, anyway." Caroline put the newspaper back inside her bag and pulled out a couple envelopes.

As she started to read one of the letters, Liz turned to watch the scenery glide by her window again. Was it too late? Could she possibly find one of those mail-order things? Maybe at her next stop she could find a newspaper. She only had a day and her train ride would run out. She would be in Denver. What was the next stop?

"Do you want to read his letters?" Caroline's voice broke through her thoughts.

"Are you sure?" Liz sat back and took the letter held out to her when Caroline nodded.

DEAR CAROLINE,

Thank you for your response. It gives me peace that you are also a widow, and your age is good too. Since my wife, Hannah, died only three months ago, you will understand my feelings in wanting this to remain a marriage in name only.

I have two children; Molly is four and Jonah is eight months. I need someone who can care for them and take up the role of a wife around the ranch. If it were not for my children, I would not find this necessary. I hope you understand my position.

I am a hard-working man and very busy most of the time. I am honest and fair; my hands like to work for me. I think that most folks would give me a good reference. I don't think I am hard to look at,

although I'm hesitant to boast and say I'm a good-looking fellow. I am thirty-five years old. I know some people fear the unknown in this type of situation, however, since this is not going to be a love match, it should hardly matter.

If you can tell me about yourself, that would be helpful. Is there anything important that I should know before you arrive? Do you like children?

Thank you again for your willingness to give of yourself.

Wade Malone

"WELL, he sounds like a nice enough man," Liz said and looked to Caroline, trying to reassure her.

"Yes, but I'm not sure I'm ready for this. I mean I loved my Jacob... It will be hard to be married to another. I should be comforted by the fact Wade says it will be in name only, but somewhere deep inside, I want to have a husband who loves me, again." Her warm brown eyes were swimming in a pool of tears she brushed away just before they spilled over. "I was drawn to the children, because Jake and I, we never...had our own."

"Well, you can focus on them then." Liz smiled softly, trying to cheer her new friend. "They will love you immediately."

"I don't think I can do it. I don't know how I even got myself on this train. I never do anything spontaneous. I just want to go home. I should have listened to my mother."

"Maybe I can go with you and help!" Liz gave Caroline an exaggerated wink and laughed. Even if delivered in jest, she felt lighter than she had in a long time.

"Maybe you could go for me."

"Oh sure." Liz chuckled to herself as she watched a river come into view and ramble on alongside the train.

"No, really! You could pretend to be me and marry Wade. It would fix both of our problems." Caroline's voice rose in pitch. "He would never know the difference. I didn't send a likeness. All he

knows is my age and well, hmm..." Caroline reached for Liz's hat as the younger woman turned back toward her.

"No..." Liz swatted at Caroline's hands. "...and quiet down! Everyone on the train is going to hear you. You told him you have dark brown hair and brown eyes and you are, what, mid-twenties? I'd never pass."

"You have brown eyes, too! And I'm twenty-four; you can pass for that." She was chewing on her poor lower lip again.

"No, I can't pass for twenty-four. I barely look my own eighteen."

"But you thought you could pass for a man?"

"That was different. I don't have brown hair, either." Liz crossed her arms and sat back with a sigh. She sure wished that she could switch places with Caroline, but she knew it was impossible.

"Men think everyone's hair is brown, trust me. I was married before. Elizabeth, please! You are like an answer to my prayers. I can't go through with this, and you need a place to go. Just think about it."

Liz didn't respond, couldn't respond. She needed to think— she had to think of a way to let this truly deranged woman down gently.

She couldn't possibly pull off such an act. She was too young, she didn't look the same, she wasn't a widow, and she couldn't cook or clean. The poor man needed a wife who would be able to help him. Not her, she couldn't help with anything—and she was a murd—

An announcement interrupted her thoughts. "Next stop, Hastings. We will be stopped for an hour. If you leave the train station, please return to the train promptly as the train will not wait for you. I repeat: next stop, Hastings."

Liz peered out the window, looking for some sign of the city mentioned. She saw rolling hills with tall brown grasses and towering pines, rocky hills, and ledges, but no town in sight.

"I am not going on." Caroline's voice cut through her thoughts. "I'm buying a ticket and going home."

Liz turned around fast to meet her new friend's eyes. "Are you sure you want to do that? Maybe you should give yourself some more time."

"No, I shouldn't have come. I've wasted so much time." Caroline looked weary; her shoulders had lost their stiff height. She'd stopped biting her lip. She even looked at peace with her decision.

They had just met, but Liz was going to miss her. She had somehow felt safer having the woman next to her for the past two days, and now she felt as though they were friends. If only she could talk Caroline into going to the rancher and just taking her along. Maybe she could pretend to be her sister...they could come up with a tale that she had to bring her at the last minute.

"I will leave my ticket and letters with you, in case you change your mind and want to go on to marry Wade."

"No, Caroline. Won't you change your mind? If you want to go, I'll go with you."

"No, I'm going home, but I will give you a dress and all the correspondence. You can marry Wade and tell him the truth later. It's perfect. You need a place to go."

"We have arrived at Hastings," the conductor shouted. "If this is your destination, please pick up your luggage. If you are travelling farther, please return to the train on time. Again, this is Hastings; our next stop is Fort Morgan, Colorado, in four hours, and Denver in the morning."

"Please, don't leave yet."

"Come with me. We'll talk, and you can change into one of my dresses." Caroline reached for Liz's hand, grabbed her valise, and with a sway of her skirts between the seats, she dragged Liz toward the door.

It was a very different 'Caroline' who boarded the train headed to Colfax forty-five minutes later. Liz was as nervous as a lady of the night in a church, when the conductor passed by her seat before

the train started moving again. She didn't know why she was so jumpy, but she worried that everyone who looked at her would know she was trying to be somebody she wasn't. She hadn't been that anxious dressed as a man.

She laid her head against the glass. The grass was thinner here, and it seemed to slowly disappear as the train barreled on. The hills were getting steeper, the ledges rockier. Was it a sign of the troubles that lay ahead for her?

Colfax was almost two more whole days on the train farther than Denver. At least Caroline had meals paid for in the dining car. Liz had been munching on apples and stale bread. In Chicago, she put the things she wanted from shops on her family's accounts, so she had little need for coin. And she'd not had time or opportunity to get more money before she'd run. She'd been too afraid. So, after buying her ticket and some food, she had very little left of the bit she'd taken from Rupert's study. She saved the rest for when she arrived in Denver.

Now, if she could work this out, at least she wouldn't have to worry about food or where she would go. She reached in her bag to read the other two letters from Wade. She should try to figure out as much as she could about the man to whom she was signing her life over.

DEAR CAROLINE,

I appreciate your openness about your husband; again, that makes you the perfect candidate in my eyes. We have a lot in common, it seems. I hope that you won't miss your mother too much; we don't have many women folk nearby, nor many other neighbors for that matter. Town is half-a-day's ride from our ranch. It is a rather lonely existence. I hope that you will be fine with that.

I am not worried about you knowing how to care for the children; to be honest, little Molly can almost take care of herself and the baby. I know that is not right. What I mean is, she is a smart little girl and acts like she

is Jonah's mother. She will help you figure everything out. I know that they need a mama and I will be thankful to have this business settled.

Is there anything else you think you need to know about me? If not, then I will send money for your train fare after I hear from you again.

Thank you,

Wade Malone

WELL, it was good that he didn't have neighbors because then it would be harder for anyone to track her down if they came looking. And it was a positive note that it didn't require much skill to care for the children. Now, if only she could figure out how to overcome the rest of the shortcomings.

Liz folded the letter neatly, slid it back inside the envelope, and got the last one out. She didn't start reading it right away; this time she took a minute to think about him. His handwriting was neat, his spellings accurate. Although he couldn't be accused of being unnecessarily wordy, he had written three letters to Caroline to help make this mail-order marriage successful. And although he made it sound more like a business proposition, he must have been very much in love with his first wife. That had to say something about the man. And he was willing to remarry simply for his children to have a mama. He had to be a good man. She should feel better about the situation, but it made her feel worse for trying to dupe him. She sighed as she focused on the smudged print in the last letter. Unfortunately, it was hardly informative.

DEAR CAROLINE,

Here is the money for your ticket. Please wire me when you leave, so that I can plan to be there for you when you arrive. As I said before, the ranch is a half-day's ride from town. Have a safe trip. We anxiously await your arrival.

Wade

. . .

LIZ PUT the letters away with a quiet resolve; she could do this. It was easier to pretend to be Caroline the widow than to be a man, right? She would just have to let this poor fellow down by telling him at some point—probably pretty soon after her arrival—that she was very proficient at burning water. Or that she had made her mother cry most every day that she had spent in the kitchen with her and Mrs. Humphrey as they tried to teach Liz the art of cooking.

Liz understood much of what it took to run a large household, from managing the housekeeping staff to menu and party planning. She could sew and embroider; her needlework was most impressive. And music—she could entertain their party guests delightfully with her gift of singing and the pianoforte. But actually cooking—she'd failed miserably, to the point where she'd been banned from the kitchen. And now, in the few words he'd chosen to include in the advertisement, those were what he included as most important. How was she to let him down? Sooner rather than later, just get it out of the way. And if she was already married to him, what could he possibly do to her?

She resolved to be the world's best mama, and maybe she could find some other ways to make up for her shortcomings. She could learn to cook or clean, if she could find someone to teach her, and she wasn't afraid of hard work.

But it was all too soon that the conductor was calling out the stop for Colfax. Hadn't he just called out the stop for Denver, the one where she was supposed to get off? Oh, why had she let Caroline talk her into this? She peered out the train window, looking for Wade. She didn't know what he looked like, but she should be able to tell if there was a single man standing by the station with an "I'm waiting for my new wife" expression on his face.

"Last call for Colfax. We're not staying in the station. If you are

getting off in Colfax, you must exit. Ma'am, aren't you getting off here?" The tall man in a dark blue uniform came over to her.

"Oh, yes, I do apologize. All this time and I must have dozed off." Liz reached for the satchel Caroline had given her and slowly squeezed through the aisle to the door. As she stepped down to the boarding dock, she didn't look around. She assumed Wade would find her, and she couldn't have handled making eye contact just then anyway. She had to get herself together.

Liz made her way to the bench in front of the station and sat down to wait. Her hair was a mess, strands blowing free in the breeze. Caroline had helped her plait it in Hastings, when she'd changed into one of her dresses, but some of it had come loose.

"Excuse me, Caroline? Caroline Lowe?"

Elizabeth looked up to meet the confused blue-eyed gaze of a dark-haired cowboy. "Um." She cleared her throat. "Yes. Mr. Malone? I'm sorry; I must look a wretch."

"No, it's just—I pictured you differently. I, uh, looked for your trunk, but I couldn't find it."

"I lost it on the stagecoach during the first stretch, well, not me, the stagehands did. They're supposed to send it on if they find it." Amazing how lying just came natural to her.

"Oh, well, I thought you might want to freshen up and have some lunch before we go to the preacher. Then we will start for the ranch. It's a long ride."

"I have another dress in my bag, thankfully."

"Well then, we'll be on our way." He took her arm and led her down the wooden sidewalk.

Liz was afraid he would feel her heart banging against her chest. She could feel it in her ears and in her neck.

"You look fourteen, not twenty-four." He glanced sideways at her as he walked beside her.

"I hear that all the time. I knew I should have sent a likeness." She tried to laugh, but it sounded fake even to her own ears, which were beginning to feel decidedly warm. At least he could have said

she looked eighteen. "Well, you said you weren't much to look at!" she blurted, and then heat crept up her cheeks as she realized what she had just implied.

That was just what he didn't want, some simpering female falling in love with him. She could not think of him like that just because he was so well put together. Perhaps she should tell him the truth about her cooking and such sooner. It would be easier not to like him when he was mad at her.

"Is that what I said?" He let go of her arm to open the door of the Pioneer Hotel and took his hat off. She ignored the question and stepped inside.

"Well, hello. Miss Caroline, I presume?" A short and round elderly gentleman with ruddy cheeks stood at the desk and beckoned her to come forward. "I have a room ready for you to freshen yourself."

"This is Mr. Mendenhall, Caroline." Wade took her arm again and led her up the staircase behind the stocky gentleman.

"I'm sure you are fatigued and will need more than this after your trip. But Wade says you will be leaving right after the ceremony. In a town the size of Colfax, this is exciting. I mean, it's the first time anything like this has ever happened here. Well, here you are anyway, fresh water in the pitcher and linens, too, and if you need anything else, just ring the bell and I will send a maid right up."

Mr. Mendenhall backed away with a nod and left Wade at her door. "How long do you think you'll need? Will a half hour be long enough?" He was still holding his hat in his left hand as his right hand reached up to push his sandy, shoulder-length hair back out of his face.

There was never going to be enough time. How was she supposed to go down there with him, stand before a preacher somewhere, and lie? Would she have to put her hand on a Bible? Would God strike her dead?

"Do you need to lie down for an hour or something? If you need

to, we can push it. I know it has been a long trip. I just hate being away from the ranch any longer than necessary."

And then he was nice to her, too. How could she lie to this man? "No, I, uh, I will be fine; I slept on the train. Just give me that half hour." She backed into the room and closed the door. She needed to hurry and marry the man before she blew it and he found out the truth. Then it would be too late.

Liz was grateful that Caroline had given her some clothing, but she hadn't been able to provide her a corset or shoes. The boots she had on under her dress were the cowboy boots she had worn with her man clothes. Thankfully, they didn't show under the skirt of her dress. Caroline was also a little bit bigger than Liz, so her dress fit just a tad loose and long. When she pulled the mauve dress from her bag, however, she decided not to change after all. The dress was just too wrinkled from being rolled up and stuffed in the satchel.

So, after she washed her face and hands and said a quick prayer, she headed downstairs to find Wade. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner she could relax. She couldn't focus on the lunch placed before her in the hotel dining room, nor the conversation Wade was trying to make. It seemed she barely remembered how she came to be in the little church building with the preacher only a few minutes later.

"Oh," Liz gasped and tried to cover the paper when Wade looked over at her. "I, uh, just started to sign my maiden name." She giggled nervously. She had begun to write Elizabeth instead of Caroline and didn't know what to do.

"That is what you are supposed to do," the preacher supplied.

"Oh, good." She hesitated for a moment and then finished. Maybe he wouldn't look at it. He had already signed his name. "You may kiss your bride, Wade." The preacher winked at him.

Liz stopped breathing. Would he do it? She looked at Wade as he dipped close and his lips came down to press against hers in a brief nothingness peck.

He reached for the paper. "Let's go."

"Wait, I still have to sign it." The preacher chuckled.

Liz was going to die on the spot. She was never going to make it through this day. Would he notice it? She should never have come here.

"Just a minute, this is a mistake. Oh no. What is today's date? I put the wrong date. You are going to have to initial this change, Wade, because today is the nineteenth of June, not the eighteenth... Yes, eighteen-ninety-six. Can you believe it? I never thought I would live to see the turn of the century. Seventy-six years old." The wiry old man shook his head. "Oh yes, I still have to sign that. Is there a problem, Wade?"