

[PDF] Mail-Order Christmas Brides: Her Christmas Family\Christmas Stars For Dry Creek (Love Inspired Historical)

Janet Tronstad, Jillian Hart - pdf download free book



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Description:

About the Author Jillian Hart grew up on the original homestead where her family still lives, went to high school where *Twin Peaks* was filmed, earned an English degree, and has travelled

extensively. When Jillian's not writing her stories, she reads, stops for café mochas, and hikes through the pine forests near her home in Washington State.

Janet Tronstad grew up on her family's farm in central Montana and now lives in Pasadena, California where she is always at work on her next book. She has written over thirty books, many of them set in the fictitious town of Dry Creek, Montana where the men spend the winters gathered around the potbellied stove in the hardware store and the women make jelly in the fall.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. *Montana Territory, December 1884*

Tate Winters tipped the brim of his Stetson to cut the glare of the sun, watching as the westbound train squealed to a noisy stop along the depot's platform. The great metal beast spewed steam, smoke and uniformed men who ran to set brakes, open doors and toss out luggage. He braced his shoulders, preparing for the worst.

Who knew what sort of woman was going to step off that train? She could be homely, she could be desperate, she could be so bitter and sharp-tongued that no man who'd ever met her would have her. The way he saw it, he had to be ready for just about any type of horror a woman could bring a man.

"Pa, do you see her?" Gertie clutched his hand, her fingers so small and slight within his own. "Do you see my new ma?"

"Hard to say, since I don't know what she looks like." He didn't care how ugly the woman was. He'd promised to marry her and he would. His life might be in shambles and there wasn't a thing of his heart left, but he hadn't been able to say no to his daughter's wish. Gertie, eight years old, wanted a mother. After everything she had lost, everything his mistakes had cost her, he could not deny her the one thing she wanted most. Regardless of how disagreeable, quarrelsome or shrewish Miss Felicity Sawyer was, as long as she would devote herself to his little girl, he would put a ring on her finger.

"Ooh, look at the pretty lady." Gertie breathed the words in awe and jabbed one finger. "Is that her?"

Tate took in the cheerful woman in a bright yellow dress with a daisy—yes, a daisy—mounted on her bonnet. What kind of woman wore a hat like that in winter? Slender, graceful, lovely. No way would such a beauty need to resort to answering a marriage advertisement in the territorial newspaper. No way would that woman be desperate enough to marry a stranger.

"She's like a princess." Gertie looked captivated, blue eyes wide, button face hopeful. "Like some of the stories in my books, Pa."

"She isn't for us. Let's find the woman who is." He leaned heavily on his cane and took a careful step. The pain wasn't as bad these days but it was still enough to make him grit down on his molars when he transferred weight onto his left leg. He ignored the glance of disdain a few townswomen threw his way as they bustled by. He'd gotten used to that pain, too.

"But, Pa, the pretty lady is all alone." Gertie went up on tiptoe straining to see through the milling crowd. "No one's comin' to greet her."

"I told you. Leave it be. She's not who we're looking for." Relief shot through him when he spotted a squat, rotund looking woman with a pointy nose and an unhappy pinch to her rather homely face. "There she is. That's your Miss Sawyer."

"I don't think so." Curls bounced as she shook her head. "Felicity said in her letters she had blond hair just like me. That lady there has brown hair. She can't be my new ma."

He knew what it was like, that sinking feeling of realizing what you got in life was far short of what you wanted. He hated that his daughter might be disappointed, but hadn't he warned her? Hadn't he tried to keep her from getting her hopes set too high?

"The brown-haired lady looks mighty sensible to me." He limped forward, shoulders straight, trying not to look like the cripple that injustice had made him. "That's what a little girl needs in a mother. Someone practical, someone who knows what life is about. You go on up to meet her now."

"Pa, I told you. It's not her. Look."

Sure enough, some tall, rail-thin fellow strolled up to the stout woman and offered her his arm. With contented smiles, the pair whisked off, leaving him gaping in shock like a fish out of water. Fine, so that wasn't his bride. Miss Sawyer had to be around here somewhere. "Best check toward the other end of the train."

"Pa, the pretty lady is just standing by herself. No one has come for her." Excitement rang like music in his daughter's voice. She tugged his hand, holding on so hard. He could feel her hopes rising, soaring like prayers toward the sky. He grimaced, wondering what was best to say to keep her from getting hurt.

Up ahead the beautiful lady had her back to them, exchanging words with a baggage handler. A battered-looking trunk stood between them. Her melodious "thank you" lifted into the air as sweetly as church music.

He'd given up on God, but if he still thought the Lord listened, then he would have asked for help for his Gertie. The crowd surrounding them was thinning, save for a few farewell wishers waving to loved ones who had just boarded the train. Doors closed, men called out, the engine idled harder until the entire train shook like a wild animal about to bolt.

No other woman was left on the platform. Miss Sawyer was a no-show. She had changed her mind without sending word and abandoned Gertie. The girl was going to be shattered.

"C'mon." No tender notes sounded in his voice. He had no tenderness left to give. Couldn't remember the last time he did. He wished he had some, even the smallest trace, so he could offer it as comfort to his daughter. "She didn't show."

"No. Felicity wouldn't leave me."

"Let's head home." He knew about being stubborn, about wanting something so badly you couldn't let go of it even when all chance was gone. "No tears now. You got your hopes up too high."

"I know, Pa." Her chin sank down and she gave a little sniff. Her hand tucked in his went slack. Her shoes dragged along the platform.

Blast that Sawyer woman. His cane thumped loudly on the platform. Anger licked through him. He should have figured this would happen. Women didn't keep promises, and if they did it was only because it was to their benefit. His girl didn't deserve this, she'd had too many disappointments in her short life.

"Gertie?" A woman's voice called out, a sweet melodic sound. "Is that you?"

"Felicity?" The child spun around so fast, he lost his balance. Her hand slipped out of his, leaving him lurching against his cane as she took off at a dead run toward the smiling blonde. "I knew you would come. I *knew* it."

"I would never break a promise to you, my very own little girl." To his horror the stunning woman opened her arms wide to wrap his daughter in a motherly hug, the silk daisy on her hat bobbing.

That woman was Miss Sawyer? She was going to be his new wife? His knees buckled. Air whooshed out of his lungs. His heart forgot to beat, of course there were some who said he didn't have a heart. He blinked, but the woman was still there, bending down to chatter excitedly with Gertie.

He swallowed hard, nearly choking. What cruel joke was this? He shook his head, not wanting to believe what was right before his eyes. He squinted, looking at the woman, really looking at her. She was gorgeous—slender and petite, her locks of gold done up just so, her face as finely carved as a china doll's.

Big blueberry eyes, a rosebud mouth and the daintiest chin he'd ever seen made him blow out a breath and stumble forward.

This simply couldn't be right. His cane's grip felt numb in his hand. All of him felt numb. Every step he took brought him closer to her. Easier to see the details now, the sunny smile, the pearls at her collar, the life sparkling out of her. She wasn't what he'd bargained for, not even close to what he wanted. She was not going to fit into his life. She was not going to work into his plans. She was going to have to turn around, climb aboard that train and go anywhere, somewhere else, even back where she came from. She wasn't going to stay with him.

"Felicity, you've gotta meet Pa." Gertie dragged the woman by one hand in his direction. "He's a real good pa, especially now that we're back together again."

Too late to head the other way. Hiking off into the mountains and staying put sounded like a good option. Too late to figure out a way to get her back on the train. The great iron beast roared, the whistle blew and the contraption took off, shaking the platform like a blizzard hitting. At least the train's departure postponed the moment when he had to exchange pleasantries with the woman.

He kept his eyes glued to the boards at his feet, letting her get a good long look at him. Let her see the cane. Let her see the failure he wore like a shabby coat, notice he wasn't wearing a wealthy man's duds. He was a simple working man, these days not doing much better than living paycheck to paycheck. Reckoned she was wishing herself back on that train about now, realizing that his best days were behind him. He'd been forced to settle for a mailorder wife because no one who knew him would have him.

"Tate?" Warmth softened her dulcet alto, tempting him to look up and meet her gaze, but he had to resist. He squared his shoulders, drew himself up straight and clamped his jaw tight. Prepared, her disappointment in him would hurt less.

"It's awkward, isn't it?" She rustled closer, fine shoes tapping on the plank platform, her hand tucked tightly around Gertie's. "What do you say to a stranger you are about to marry? I've pondered it the entire trip and I just could never think of the exact right thing."

"Me, neither." The words came out gruffly. He shifted his cane as if he didn't know what to say next.

"I figured you for the shy sort, since you let Gertie answer my first letter." She stopped before him, petticoats swishing. A cold wind gusted hard, blowing a piece of rattling paper across the platform

like a leaf in the wind, and she shivered. "My youngest sister was shy, too, so I understand completely. I will try not to be too exuberant. It's a fault of mine."

"I see." He didn...

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