

The Juniper Bride

(The Sons of Johnny Hastings)

By

Maddie Taylor

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One.....	5
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	22
Chapter Four	38
Chapter Five	57
Chapter Six	64
Chapter Seven.....	75
Chapter Eight.....	79
Chapter Nine.....	87
Chapter Ten	94
Chapter Eleven	104
Chapter Twelve	117
Epilogue.....	125
Maddie Taylor	135
Blushing Books Newsletter	136
Blushing Books	137

Chapter One

Boston

July 1872

The warm brush of his lips on her cheek and the final squeeze of his hand lasted no more than a second. Then he was gone. With troubled eyes, Emmalee Gray watched the back of her fiancé's tan linen coat as he wended his way through the crowd. Clint was so very tall that she could easily see his dark head a good ways down the teeming platform even after the view of his coat was displaced by the meandering travelers and well-wishers. Not willing to break contact just yet, she stared after him, worriedly, as the other passengers rushed to board the waiting train, jostling her in their haste. After a particularly jarring bump from a rather portly man who apologized profusely for his clumsiness, she lost sight of him. Scanning the hundreds of people gathered, she wrung her hands nervously. Could she do this?

Her eyes searched up and down, bobbing from one masculine head to another until finally, she spotted him as he climbed the metal stairs several cars down. Clint didn't turn for a final glance. He simply flashed his ticket to the uniformed man standing by and disappeared inside the railcar. That he hadn't turned that one last time, for a final glimpse or a quick wave, bothered her. Doubts that had plagued her for days swept through her once more. Of late, he'd seemed distracted and distant, which was so unlike him. Then suddenly, this mysterious trip had come up. He'd been vague about it, claiming it was just business, and then he'd changed the subject. If she pushed him on it, he got annoyed. Something about all this didn't sit right with her.

In the days leading up to his departure, Emmalee had begun to worry that this trip held potential life-changing risks. She didn't know why, call it women's intuition, but it was just a bad feeling. Traveling west was dangerous, even by rail. Stories of train robberies, marauding gangs of outlaws and Indian troubles trickled back east and filled the newspapers daily. What if something happened and Clint didn't return? Where would that leave her? The idea of being without him in Boston was simply too much to bear.

The shrill blast of the train whistle screeching twice in quick succession made her jump as it chased away her dismal ruminations. It was followed by a blast of hissing steam that made Emmalee jump. It was time to make up her mind. The train would depart in minutes. She had to make a decision now. Stay or go? Either decision posed a risk. One path led to potential danger; the other risked heartache.

“All aboard!” The familiar cry resonated over the crowd.

It was now or never.

Turning, she rushed to the depot window. In a voice breathless with excitement, Emmalee plunked down her fifty-dollar second-class fare, stating boldly, “One ticket to Denver, please.”

The rhythmic swaying lulled her into an unseeing daze as she stared out the window at the passing landscape. After two days of travel, they had long ago left the large populated cities behind and entered the Ohio Valley with its flat uninteresting forests and mile upon mile of endless wilderness. An occasional farm or small town were mere blips in the vast, ceaseless monotony.

A sudden jolt jerked her to the side, knocking her overstuffed carpetbag to the floor with a resounding thud. The porter who was passing stopped to offer assistance picking up her ticket that had slipped from the outer pocket.

“Best put this in a safer place, miss. You’ll need this when changing trains, else you’ll have to pay again.”

“Change trains? I didn’t realize after New York there was another change.”

“Let me take a look for you.” He studied the information for a moment and nodded.

“Three more changes, miss.”

Startled, she looked up in alarm. “Three! I had no idea.”

“Yes, there are changes in Chicago, Omaha, and Cheyenne before you make it to Denver. The last leg is unreliable at best. Folks often end up taking the stage into Denver.”

“Oh dear! I never thought... a stage coach you say?”

“It’s a new rail line, you see, and often gets into snags. In some cases, the live horses are still more reliable than the iron ones.” He chuckled at his rail industry joke.

Great heavenly day! Railway travel was one thing, but a stage coach trip was something else entirely. She'd read stories of the Indian troubles, which were frightening at best. The gun slinging outlaw robberies on the stage coach lines often left injured or deceased victims. Numerous women had been kidnapped, some held for ransom or raped and killed, others taken and never heard from again. All of these heinous acts were inconceivable and chilled her blood.

Another dilemma was that she couldn't hide from Clint on a stage. If she hung back and took a later stage, she'd lose track of him. Having no idea where to go once in Denver, she'd be lost altogether. There was no way around it; she'd have to reveal herself in Cheyenne, or possibly sooner in Omaha or Chicago. She'd have to because that was the whole purpose, to be with him and support him through this. Wasn't it? In this case, it was better later than sooner, because surely that far along in the trip he wouldn't send her back alone. Her stomach churned with dread at the inevitable confrontation. Facing outlaws almost seemed less scary—almost.

She felt the porter's concerned gaze on her face and tried to tamp down her alarm.

"Maybe you could wire a message to your intended to meet you in Cheyenne, if you're that concerned, miss."

"That's an excellent idea, sir."

"There's a telegraph office in Council Bluffs where we stop. We'll be boarding new passengers there, and you'll have time to send your telegram. I'll give you its direction when we arrive tomorrow afternoon."

He studied her ticket for a moment before his eyes switched back. "Highly uncommon for a young woman of quality to travel alone, 'specially as far as Denver."

"Um, my uh—husband will be meeting me at the next stop."

His skeptical eyes ran over her, landing on the bag at her side. Emmalee's eyes followed, and she flushed five shades of red when she saw that some of her unmentionables were peeking out of the open bag.

"I thought it was your fiancé you were meeting?"

Oops, she'd slipped up. "You must have misheard."

"You runnin' away, miss?"

"No! What makes you ask that?"

"No wedding ring and you're mighty jumpy. That's an odd bit of luggage for such a long trip, and you ain't been out of this car since you boarded. Among the willows, are ya?"

Puzzled, she glanced up at him a moment before stating coolly, “Apparently not because I have no idea what that means.”

“Among the willows, you know, running from the law.” He said this in a hushed tone behind his cupped hand, meant for her ears only. “Quality lady like yerself couldn’t have done much wrong. Maybe it’s best to fess up and take yer medicine.”

“Hmph! I am not running from the law,” she hissed harshly, glaring up at him. “You are mighty inquisitive for a train porter. Do you interrogate all of your passengers this way?”

“No, miss, only the ones who remind me of my own daughter. You’re about her age. She used to smell like trouble, too.”

She grunted in outrage. “I must ask that you move along, sir. I am causing no trouble sitting here with a paid ticket, minding my own affairs.” With that, she turned her head toward the window.

“I think Mr. Shakespeare was right when he said yer protestin’ too much. I’ll keep an eye out for you, miss, professed trouble or no.”

She waited until she heard him shuffle past before looking after the kind, older man, a rail man who quoted Shakespeare, poorly and plain wrong, but he got credit for trying. Shaking her head as she watched him move about the car, chatting with one passenger after another, she smiled. Despite his nosiness, she liked him and appreciated his efforts to look after her, to a certain extent.

He was correct about one thing. It was true that unless a woman was in widow’s weeds or a fancy woman—conspicuous by her less-than-conservative dress—a young, unmarried woman was seldom seen traveling alone by train. Her contrived story to avoid undue attention was transparent, evidently, and with the way she’d just botched it up, well... there was no need for further speculation. He knew she wasn’t what she claimed to be, but he didn’t know the whole of it. Wouldn’t he be surprised if he learned her fiancé was traveling in first class several cars up? Her fiancé, she imagined, would be quite a bit more than surprised; he would be livid. Time would be the judge of that, of course.

“Miss?”

Jerking awake, she looked up at the man by her side.

“It’s supper time. May I escort you safely to the dining car?”

It was the older gentleman she had conversed with earlier. Mr. Harrison, if she recalled correctly. At least fifty, he was a businessman from New York who was travelling to Omaha to see his first grandchild.

“No, thank you, sir. All the swaying and sudden jarring are playing havoc with my appetite. Is that usual?”

“Not to worry, miss,” he’d reassured her with a fatherly grin and gone on to explain that jolts were caused by small places where, for whatever reason, the wooden tracks or connecting rails didn’t exactly match up. “When the wheels hit the misaligned rails, it causes the jarring and shuddering. You’ll get used to it.” He raised his hand, pointing to his head as if he’d just had a brilliant idea. “I know how to fix you up—tea and biscuits. I’ll bring them straight back.”

The nice man scurried away on his errand. She was hopeful he’d be more successful getting food out of the dining car than she’d been. Avoiding the common areas since the trip began, especially the communal dining car, she’d initially asked for a sandwich to take back to her seat, but when she learned that was forbidden, she visited at off hours, wolfing down her meal with her eyes glued to the door. If Clint found her too soon, there would be hell to pay, but she’d known that from the outset.

Clinton Ryan was not a man to be disobeyed. Although ordinarily kind and generous with her, he didn’t give orders to hear himself speak. At least, that is what he’d told her so often. She could practically hear his deep voice in her ear. Usually he was scolding her for some misdeed when he said this, or when relating a tale about some underling at the shipyard who had bungled something by not following the rules. She couldn’t begin to count the number of rules her presence on the train was violating.

This was by far the worst of her transgressions since they had started courting. Other times, she’d been flippant or had violated some degree of social etiquette that could risk her good reputation. Nothing too serious anyway, that was until a week ago. She wiggled on the hard bench seat as the direction of her thoughts brought her back to an uncomfortable remembrance.

Clint had come to supper, as was his habit every Friday evening. Afterward, they’d gone into the parlor for a quiet chat -- also not unusual. What happened next had stunned Emmalee, who even now could feel the sting on her cheeks as the vivid memory replayed.

“How long will you be away?” she’d asked in a low, disappointed voice.

“I can’t be sure what will happen when I get to Denver, but it’s six days by train.

Allowing an extra day for my business, I expect I’ll be gone at least two weeks, maybe more.”

“What kind of business is it? There’s no port in Denver.”

“Its personal business that I’d rather not go into right now, Em. We’ll just leave it at that.”

Emmalee hadn’t liked that. Shouldn’t a wife know about personal business? Sure, she wasn’t a wife yet, but the deed was as good as done. The invitations for their wedding would go out at month’s end. She also didn’t like that Clint was unusually quiet tonight. Was it the trip or something else bothering him? He was usually very forthcoming, telling her about work, friends, business or politics, whatever happened to be on his mind. This was quite different and it scared her somewhat.

“Why don’t I come with you and keep you company?”

“No, this is not a pleasure trip,” Clint said firmly, “as such I’ll be travelling quick and light. Besides, it’s another two months until the wedding. That would be most unseemly.”

“I can travel quick and light. We can tell people I’m your sister.”

“According to your father, the last time you went to New York for four days you took three trunks. That is not light, Emmalee.”

“But that was New York City, honey. A lady has to be in high fashion in New York. Denver, I’m sure, will be different.”

“Which is precisely why you won’t be going to Denver. It is still a rough town and no place for a genteel woman. I don’t want you exposed to the vulgar, criminal element that is pervasive in these western towns.”

“Boston doesn’t have vulgar criminal elements? Why, the Devil’s Edition begins just a few short blocks south of here!”

Clint stared at her wide-eyed before shaking his head in consternation. “I don’t even want to know how you learned such a slang term for that seedy side of town. It makes my hair curl. However, we aren’t talking about Boston. We are talking about you, a city-bred girl, naïve and sheltered, unused to harsh, tedious travel into unknown conditions. I won’t have it. The answer is no, and this discussion is closed.”

She should have heeded the warning tone in his voice, if not his words, but she didn't. All Emmalee heard was 'no' and a ridiculous list of unlimited reasons. Foolishly, she pressed on. "You're going by train, not dogsled or pack mule." She crossed her arms and gave him a disbelieving look.

"I said no, Em, and every minute of this discussion is a waste of time and breath. You will be remaining safe and sound here in Boston. Do not push me further."

It was obvious he didn't want her tagging along. Maybe his personal business was more personal than he wanted her to know. Doggedly, she persisted. "Imagine all the long monotonous days riding in a boring Pullman car with a bunch of strangers and not a soul to talk to. I can make the trip less tedious for you, Clint."

He had finally lost his patience. "This argument is tedious, Emmalee, and I intend to end it now."

Without hesitation, he'd turned her over his knee, and to her horror, spanked her bottom right there in the front parlor. It hadn't hurt; she'd been wearing layers of skirts, petticoats and a bustle at the time. Even then, she had smirked at how much it had frustrated him as she listened to his grumbling about cages and women's frippery. Served him right.

The ignominy of the situation was what had truly bothered Emmalee. Taking place right after dinner, her father and stepmother were at home, not to mention their housekeeper who had yet to leave for the day. They had to have heard every smack, not to mention her squealing response. The position alone—face down across his hard thighs, his large hand riding low on her back keeping her in place—was degrading enough, but his scolding tongue had been worse.

He had lectured as he walloped her bottom.

"I made my decision, Emmalee, and told you no less than four times to leave off, but you didn't listen or heed my warnings. I will not tolerate sass or incessant nagging from my wife, nor will you ride roughshod over me like a shrew. None of this behavior will change my mind once it's set. You will need to learn this straight off."

Sighing, she recalled how she had flushed in humiliation and then to her further chagrin, begun to cry. What followed was another reason for her current predicament, because at that moment, her stepmother had walked in delivering another blow to her pride. Paulette (Papa's third wife), rather than excusing herself as one would expect, had stood by watching her stepdaughter's comeuppance with a satisfied smirk on her face. Her punishment had wound down a

moment before her father walked into the parlor. As Clint was helping her to stand, he strode in demanding to know about all the ruckus. This was the last straw, the final blow to her pride, a death blow. Unlike an honored knight on the field of battle where the final stroke ended their suffering with grace and dignity, Emmalee hadn't been given that consideration. Instead, she had to face the witnesses as well as her accuser with a mussed dress and tears pouring down her face when all she really wanted to do was run up to her room, slam the door with all her might, and flop down onto her bed for a good cry

Clint had produced his linen handkerchief for Emmalee with a murmured, "Settle down, now," then had calmly explained the situation to her father, his even temper already returned. Papa hadn't batted an eye, other than to say it was good they had an understanding and that the wedding notices had already been printed in the Herald. He'd then escorted a still-smirking Paulette from the room.

Left alone, Emmalee had turned her back on Clint, mopping her face with his borrowed linen. Her breathing was shaky with emotion, both mortification and anger. She stiffened when his large hands cupped her shoulders. They tightened when she tried to shrug them off.

"Turn around and look at me, Em."

"I'd rather not."

"It was not a suggestion, sweetheart." Easily, he turned her stiff body to face him. Unable to meet his eyes, she closed her eyes tightly. His hand at her chin tilted it upward, but she held firm.

"Look at me."

She shook her head.

"Is another trip over my knee necessary to get you to obey me?"

Her eyes flew open and she gasped in shock. His stern face filled her vision. "You are a brute, Clinton Ryan. I will never forgive you for this humiliation. What a relief to find this out before we speak marriage vows."

One side of his mouth kicked up in a half-grin at that. "Are you thinking to cry off?"

"Indeed."

"Think again, Emmalee, because that won't be happening." Both hands were cupping her face now, and his thumbs were wiping away the tears that remained. "I wouldn't allow it if you tried."

“You sound so certain. That is quite arrogant of you, sir.”

“It’s not arrogance if it’s a statement of fact.”

“You are that sure of yourself?”

“No, I am that sure of you, sweetheart, because you love me. Those words have passed these sweet lips often.” He had a gentle smile on his face, which cooled the burning hurt around her heart. “And, since you are a woman of honor, I know you won’t breach your promise to me. Will you, Emmalee?”

She hesitated, still incensed. Although she loved the big tyrant in spite of his high-handed ways, it wasn’t something she wanted to admit at the moment, even to herself.

“Have you stopped loving me because of a little spanking, Em? Be honest.”

Unable to lie to him, she shook her head slightly. She’d told him of her feelings shortly after he’d started courting her, foolishly giving him the upper hand. Mentally, she scoffed. She was deluding herself if she thought that at any point since their meeting he hadn’t had the upper hand. She wore her heart on her sleeve for him and everyone else to see.

The truth was she wanted to marry him, more than anything. Handsome and strong, he was usually charming and witty. He was most often kind and generous toward her, although it couldn’t be proven by the spanking he had just administered. She supposed with all of his good traits, she’d have to get used to the negative aspects of his character, especially his tendency to be high-handed and overly protective.

His sense of command came naturally, she supposed. The eldest of three brothers, he had also been an officer in the Union Army during the war and now that it was over, had long since taken up the reins in his family’s shipping business. He was well-respected in the Boston community and was being courted by influential men for a run at political office. He was used to being in charge and having his orders followed without question, the latter something in which Emmalee did not excel.

“What’s gotten into you tonight, Em? You aren’t usually so quarrelsome.”

“I don’t want you to go off and leave me, Clint. Please.”

“Sweetheart, what about me has led you to believe I will tolerate this behavior? Or that it will change my mind? I have made a decision about your safety and that should be enough for you. Do you understand?”

She nodded, another tear escaping.

“Let’s not spend our last evening together in a squabble.”

“Our last evening? You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“My train pulls out of the station at two o’clock. Will you come see me off?”

“I shouldn’t. You were quite heartless just now.”

“No, heartless would be having no regard for your safety and well-being. Heartless would also mean being spineless and caving in to your demands. You don’t want a husband like that, do you, Emmalee?”

“It might be easier on my backside if you were just a hint of those things.”

“Emmalee.” Her name, spoken in that stern tone, could scold and influence all at the same time.

“Fine. Of course, I don’t want a weak-willed, pathetic excuse for a husband, but do you have to spank me?”

“I’ll handle things as I see fit. You know that about me.”

“I didn’t quite know this...”

“You’ll get used to it. Behave, and it will be an infrequent occurrence.”

“It was humiliating, Clint. Paulette won’t ever let me forget this.”

“In the future, I will seek a bit more privacy. I had no idea she’d barge through a closed door.”

“She has no sense of boundaries.”

“Mm... So, are we settled, then?”

“I suppose.”

“Sweetheart?”

“Fine, I am settled.”

“That’s my girl.” With his head bent, he brushed her lips with his. At first, it was a soft touch of his lips, tender and sweet, leaving her slightly breathless; then when her lips parted for air, his tongue swept inside.

“You taste like strawberries and cream,” he murmured as his tongue retreated.

“Delicious.”

Out of breath from his attention, her husky voice responded shakily. “It was the shortcake we had for dessert.”

“No,” he corrected, nibbling at her lips as he spoke, “you taste this way always—sweet like a confection, pure like the richest cream, and as addictive as ripe summer berries.”

Aroused by his romantic words and the allure of his touch, she had whimpered helplessly, captured by his spell of seduction.

The car rattled and jerked, snapping her out of the sweetest of daydreams. Glancing around, she reoriented to her surroundings. She looked up just as nice Mr. Harrison came through the door carrying a silver salver of tea and biscuits. Suddenly, he staggered as another shimmying shudder shook the passenger car. The next moment, another shudder sent tea sloshing over him, as he slammed up against the back of a bench and the cup crashed to the floor, shattering. A violent jolt sent him flying backwards just as Emmalee was thrown forward. Her slight frame went hurtling frontward over two benches as the screeching sound of metal rang sharply in her ears. Passenger’s shouts of fear and cries of pain were like whispers beneath the shrieking squeals of twisted metal and the crunch of splintering wood.

Suddenly airborne yet again, her world turned on end. Tossed around like a ragdoll, her back connected with the ceiling. Disoriented and fearing her life was nearly over, she cried out for the man she loved.

“Clint!”

Then there was blackness.