

# The Outlaw's Bride

*(The Sons of Johnny Hastings)*

By

Renee Rose

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# Chapter One

1872, A Stagecoach Trail, Wyoming Territory

Sam stood three feet back, watching Curly and his two henchmen rob the stagecoach, a sick feeling in his stomach. He had been selected at gunpoint to be a member of the outlaw Curly Jones' gang two days earlier and this hold up would seal his fate as a wanted man. Not that there wasn't already a bounty on his head.

"I think that's everything," Jim said, holding up the pocket watches and purses he had absconded.

"Uh...boss? Your handkerchief has come down," Scotty said, pointing the muzzle of his six-shooter toward Curly's face.

The bit of cloth once covering his face now hung around his neck. "Dammit!" Curly snarled, his half-mad expression turning even wilder. "Light the carriage on fire!" He struck a match, holding it to the curtains of the stagecoach, while the trapped passengers screamed.

Sam surged forward and slapped it out. He was damned if he was going to let innocent people die. He could take at least two of the outlaws down before the third had a chance to kill him.

"That isn't necessary," he said.

"They saw my face!" Curly screeched.

"So what? You're wanted dead or alive anyway, one more robbery isn't going to make a difference."

Curly narrowed his eyes at him. "All right," he said, stepping forward and snatching Sam's handkerchief down. "If I'm going to be recognized, so are you. Folks, this here is Sam Pride, wanted in Colorado Territory for the murder of four cattle men."

The terrified passengers gasped.

Sam grit his teeth and strode forward to slap the flank of one of the coach's horses. "Go on! Get out of here," he yelled to the driver as the startled team lurched into motion.

He turned to see Curly taking a swig of whiskey from his flask, still glaring at him. Ignoring it, he walked back to where they had hidden their horses.

He had stumbled upon the outlaws in a cave in the hills of Colorado, where they both had taken refuge from a spring rain. Curly wanted to shoot him on the spot, but he'd argued he was a wanted man, too, and could not very well turn them in for the reward without getting himself hanged at the same time.

"Looks like you'll be joining us, then," Curly had said.

"I prefer riding alone."

Curly had leveled his six shooter at his forehead. "I *said*, it looks like you'll be joining us."

So he had joined them, biding his time, waiting for the moment he could slip away without getting shot in the back. In three days they would near Cheyenne, where the opportunity to part ways should present itself more easily.

Curly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Let's ride, boys."

The men swung into their saddles and started the horses in the opposite direction of the stage coach at a gallop. He looked over his shoulder and saw the stagecoach continuing to move safely away from them.

The sky had darkened, though. It looked like they were in for rain.

#

She could manage during the summer, but if she did not get some help, she would not make it through winter on her own. And that was assuming the bank did not show up to foreclose before then.

Mabelle stood on the wooden porch of her brother-in-law Frank's small ranch and surveyed the Wyoming plain. Despite the heartbreak of losing Frank and Susie and the hardship of trying to run the place all alone, she loved it out west. Loved how the open blue sky, the expanse of spacious land allowed her soul to soar. For the first time in her life, she felt like she belonged, which was ironic, considering she teetered on the brink of survival.

Basic food supplies were critically low, although the garden she had planted as soon as the earth thawed looked promising. But she had no way to get into town to purchase any goods because the natives had stolen the horses when they killed Frank. They would have taken the

grain and flour, too, but when they came in the house and saw her sister Susie dying of consumption, they dropped it, turned tail and ran.

Susie had only lasted six weeks longer. As soon as she had seen Frank with the arrow through his chest, her eyes had turned glassy and she lost all the will to fight. Mabelle guessed she had only stayed alive long enough to make sure her little sister knew how to run the ranch without them.

She walked to the barn, swinging the door open. "I'm right here, girl," she soothed Sally, the jersey cow, who shifted and snorted, anxious to give milk. "I know, you've been waiting for me, haven't you?"

Sally lifted and lowered her head, eyes bright with anticipation. She laid a hand on the cow's back to let her know where she stood and scooted her stool to the right position. Pulling on the cow's full teats, she expressed the warm milk into the pail, sensing the relief in the large animal with each steady tug.

If anyone had asked her two years ago if she would ever milk a cow, she would have snorted in his or her face. A girl from Richmond, Virginia, while not wealthy, she had been comfortably raised as the daughter of an architect. It had been Susie's husband who had the notion to move out west and homestead, and when he had written last year to tell them Susie had consumption, Mabelle had moved out to nurse her.

Mabelle finished milking and led the cow out to pasture, fed the chickens and went out to walk the fences. She had lost fifteen head of cattle already, and she'd be damned if she would lose any more.

By the time she headed back that afternoon, the sky had darkened to a purple-gray. It looked like a nasty storm was headed her way. She glanced back at the forty steer she still had and hoped they would not be spooked by the storm. She pulled down the brim of her brother-in-law's cowboy hat, which she had taken to wearing in place of the customary bonnet. With no one around to see her anyway, she found it more practical for keeping off the sun or rain without blocking her peripheral vision. She hunched her shoulders against the first drops that came at an angle, pelting her with a ferocity she did not believe she deserved. She picked up her skirts and ran to the house, not stopping until she had run up the wooden steps and stood under the protection of the porch roof.

Gazing at the blackened sky, a sense of foreboding sent tingles up her spine. Though she did not consider herself superstitious, she had learned to listen to such feelings, because they always boded evil. She shut the door, latching it for the first time since she had moved there.

What she intended to keep out, she did not know.

#

The first drops began and moments later the sky opened up on them, soaking their clothes, their hats providing little protection due to the angle of the pelting drops.

“Look—out there,” Jim said, pointing at what appeared to be a small cluster of buildings.

“We can't go there,” he protested, fearing more innocent lives would be endangered by the ruthless gang of bandits.

Curly gave Sam a withering look. “Oh yes, we can!” he said, spurring his horse and galloping in the direction of the ranch.

Hell!

Part of him wanted to just turn his horse and gallop away from them on the chance he could get out of firing range before they noticed. But it was not fair to whomever lived in that ranch house. They would need his protection against these heartless killers.

The ranch looked small and spartan, but well-kept. Curly led them straight to the barn, where they found the door standing partway open as it swung from broken hinges. It seemed at odds with the orderliness he observed elsewhere on the ranch.

They led the horses in, uninvited. Two horse stalls stood empty, with no sign of having been used recently. A jersey cow looked up from her stall, bleating at the newcomers.

They hobbled the horses and removed the saddles. Jim found a brush and began to curry his mount, crooning softly to the mare.

“Howdy ma'am,” Curly said when the broken barn door swung open and a young woman holding a shotgun appeared. She had thick, dark hair that fell in two braids across her shoulders. Long lashes framed her big doe-eyes and freckles sprinkled across her nose.

She did not answer, just looked them over, face stiff with fear. She took in the guns holstered at the hips of each man and tightened her grip on her shotgun. Sam prayed she would

not put her finger on the trigger, because Curly had a quick draw and no qualms with killing anyone who got in his way.

Sam forced a smile. "I hope you don't mind us barging in like this, ma'am. We were caught in the storm and your barn looked mighty inviting."

She lowered her weapon. "No...of course not."

"Well, you gonna ask us in?" Curly demanded.

She stiffened and looked back to him, as if for guidance.

He gave her a half shrug and attempted another smile. "We are wet. It sure would be nice to dry off."

She swallowed and stepped back from the doorway. "Right. Come on up, then," she said, looking reluctant.

"I hope your husband's not caught out in the rain?" he asked as they ran up the porch steps and followed her into the dwelling.

"No. I mean, yes. Well, he is out riding the fence, but I expect him back anytime."

"Anytime meaning today? Or more like this week?" Curly probed.

She shot a nervous glance at him and a muscle jumped along her jaw. "Could be today, could be tomorrow," she said in what was clearly a bluff.

Curly grinned. "Well you be sure to thank him for his hospitality," he drawled, pulling off his boots and removing his wet Stetson. Jim and Scotty followed suit, clomping in and leaving puddles on the floor as they pulled off their wet gear.

"I will," she said in a thin voice.

The house was simple, consisting of the large main room with the stove and table with four chairs, and a curtained doorway that must lead to the bedroom. Whoever built the ranch house had done a fine job. Though small, the workmanship showed care and no rain leaked from the roof or corners.

Curly walked right over to the pantry and began to rummage through her food stuffs. "What's for supper?"

Her hands balled into fists at her sides, color flooded her cheeks. She reached for the shotgun she had leaned against the door, and he met her hand, closing his fingers over hers on the barrel to prevent her from lifting it.

When her eyes shot to his, he gave a small shake of his head.



Her nostrils flared. “What do you men want?” she demanded.

#

The man at her pantry whirled to face her, a wicked grin on his face. “Why, what do you mean? Ain’t it proper to offer a meal and a place to sleep to strangers passing through?”

“I don’t like the looks of you,” she said, fear coursing through her. She opened her fingers to tug them out from under the tall man’s grasp. She found him most chilling. The other three she had known were no good, but somehow she had half-trusted the tall, good-looking one. And his betrayal now made her angry.

The grin vanished from the wily-looking one and he crossed the room and leaned his bearded face into hers. “Is that so?”

She sensed warning from her companion, but she did not heed it. “You can sleep in the barn, but you aren’t staying here,” she said, planting her hands on her hips.

He drew his arm up to backhand her, but the man beside her caught it mid-swing. The other two men in the room drew their guns before she could even blink, pointing them at the tall man.

“Easy, boys,” he said in the same conciliatory tone he had used with her out in the barn. “I have no quarrel with Curly, but where I come from, you don’t hit a woman in the face.”

“Oh yeah?” the curly-haired man said, a sneer on his face. “Where do you hit a woman, then?”

The man hesitated a beat, then replied, “On her backside, where you can’t do any lasting damage.”

“That so? Why don’t you show us how it’s done, then, Pride.”

The tension already rippling through the room grew, not only from her, but from the man called Pride as well.

“All right,” he said, taking her elbow. “I’ll take care of the girl. But it will be in private.”

She yanked her arm back, but he held fast, tugging her toward the bedroom. The man called Curly trailed behind them, a mad leer on his face. She struggled against her captor, but he managed her easily, deftly trapping one of her arms against her chest as he picked her up by the waist and carried her the rest of the way.

“Easy,” he murmured in her ear, but did not release her.

Sitting on the bed, he tipped her across one of his knees, clamping his other leg over both of hers before she could kick herself off.

“Let me go!” she screeched, squirming against his hold as he flipped her skirt and petticoats up her back.

He rested his large palm on her pantalet-covered backside. “Get out,” he said, a commanding bite to his voice.

“You think you’re the boss here?” the man called Curly demanded.

“No. But I’m managing the woman and I want a little privacy.”

“I see,” the man drawled, his tone changing. “Maybe we’ll all have a turn with her.”

“*No.*” His voice was hard. “No one’s having a turn with her. I’m going to teach her to mind her manners, and she’s going to make us supper. End of story.”

She stopped all struggle, paying attention to the strain between the two men, holding her breath to hear who would win the contest of wills. She sensed rage from the man in the doorway—the sort of mad rage that did not care about consequences, but Pride had an indomitable command. The air crackled between them, neither moving or speaking. After what seemed an eternity, she heard the floor creak as if Curly had walked away. Although with nothing but a curtain separating the two rooms, privacy was relative.

Before she could resume her struggle to free herself, her captor’s hand cracked down on her bottom.

“Ow!” she exclaimed, though it had not hurt so very much. It was more the indignity of it that enraged her. *I’m going to teach her to mind her manners.* Where did he get off?

“The louder you yell, the better,” the man said in a low conspiratorial voice, bringing his hand down again.

By the third smack, she realized the spanking was only for show and he wanted her to make it sound like it really hurt. He probably thought she would be grateful for saving her from the crazy one, but she did not find his chosen solution amusing in the least. The humiliating position stung her pride and she did not intend to take a spanking—symbolic or real—without a fight.

“Let go of me!” she hollered, bucking her hips around in an attempt to free herself from his firm grasp.

He spanked harder.

She reached back, trying to smack his face with her hand. He caught both her wrists and bent them behind her back, immobilizing them in his large grip as he continued the steady slaps. She twisted her head, squirming her upper body around until she drew close enough to his body, where she managed to sink her teeth into his side.

“Ow!” He jumped and grasped her braid to jerk her head away. She did not think she had drawn blood, but she knew the bite must have hurt.

“Now you really *are* getting a spanking,” he muttered, yanking the slit in her pantalets open to bare her bottom to his view.

“No!” she shrieked, squirming with all her might as his hand cracked down on her bare flesh, ten times harder than it had before. “No! Ouch!”

He spanked fast and mean, on and on and though she continued to fight him, she lost any hope of escaping his steel grasp.

“You bastard!” she screamed.

“That’s right, I am a bastard,” he said, never pausing in his continuous flurry of spans. “I’m the bastard who is giving you a spanking, little hellcat.”

Pure fire heated her bottom and she began to panic, as it seemed he had no intention of ever stopping. But she would be damned if she would apologize or beg.

Clamping her jaws together, she tensed her shoulders and stopped struggling, hunkering down to endure the remainder of the spanking. He seemed to take it as a surrender, because he stopped abruptly, yanking her to her feet with him. He stood chest to chin with her, his powerful hands gripping her shoulders.

“I hate you!” she hissed, cursing herself for sounding like a petulant child.

He gave her a little shake and leaned down to speak to her in a low, angry tone. “You can hate me all you want, but those men are dangerous. They will shoot you at the drop of a hat. I am doing my best to protect you!”

She thrust her chin forward. “Well, I do not approve of your methods!”

He relaxed his grip, a trace of humor flashing across his face. “No, I don’t imagine you do,” he said, one corner of his lips turning up.

She huffed and stormed past him, although her dramatic exit lost its punch when she entered the room of vipers, who had all just heard her getting her bottom spanked like a naughty

child. Her face burned almost as much as her backside as she stormed to the pantry and began to rummage around.

The truth was, she did not have anything to serve them for supper. She had been subsisting mostly on eggs and dairy, trying to conserve the flour and cornmeal. The jars of food Susie had canned last summer had long since been eaten, and she did not know how to kill and butcher one of the animals, so she had put off attempting it on her own.

She had two eggs, some milk and butter and the flour. Sensing the presence of Pride behind her, she muttered, "I could see if there are any more eggs out in the coop and make flapjacks."

"I'll go," he offered, striding to the doorway where he had left his boots neatly lined up on the mat next to hers.

She had wanted to go—to escape the scene in the house, but he probably did not trust her to return without a weapon or go for help.

"I had better show you," she said, realizing she did not want to be stuck alone with the outlaws, either.

She slipped on her own boots and put her brother-in-law's Stetson hat on her head, dashing out into the rain to the coop.

"I am sorry about all this," he said when they were inside, taking her aback.

She knew to enter the coop quietly, and Buddy, the crazy rooster was used to her, but at the sound of the deep voice, the cock flew up protectively, charging them with wings flapping and sharp claws flying.

She gave a little scream, as she had always been afraid of the stupid cock, and the tall stranger thrust her behind him and snatched up the rooster by his neck, snapping it in one quick motion.

She stared, her jaw hanging open.

"Looks like we are having chicken for breakfast tomorrow."

"You killed him!" she said indignantly, her hands on her hips.

"Yes, ma'am, I did. And I did you a favor. That cock was too aggressive."

Since she didn't know the first thing about roosters, she merely stomped over to the hens and began to search their nests. She found two more eggs. Turning to leave the coop she stopped in her tracks.

Pride leaned against the door, swinging the rooster by its feet, blocking her exit.

“My name is Sam, Sam Pride.”

She met his eyes, then looked away. She truly did not want to make friends with this man but it would take effort to resist his charisma. He had a way about him that turned her knees weak—charming, confident and take-charge. Not to mention handsome, with sapphire blue eyes contrasting with brown hair, and a dimple in his chin.

“Mabelle Lawson,” she gritted.

“Mabelle, listen. I am sorry about that spanking, and I regret barging in on you like this. I can’t control those men, but I promise I will do my best to keep you from getting hurt.”

She rolled the eggs around each other in her palm. “Thank you,” she said grudgingly.

Still, he did not move to unblock the doorway.

“You have a lot of pluck. I don’t know what you’re doing here all by yourself, but I admire you for it.”

“My husband’s coming back—”

He stopped her with a little shake of his head. “You and I both know no one is coming.”

A shiver ran up her spine. How did he know that? The momentary trust growing between them ebbed away. Just because he said he meant to protect her, did not mean he would. She had no reason to believe he was any different from the men inside.

#

Something about the feisty little spitfire made him want to defend her to the death. Her cheeks had flushed pink, and her lips were parted as if she meant to say something, but had forgotten. They were berry colored, and full. He wanted to drag his own mouth over hers and taste them. And he had a feeling a woman like her would be a wildcat in bed.

She tossed a braid over her shoulder and considered him. “Are you going to move or are we going to stand here like this all day?”

He grinned. “Am I going to have to spank you again, or can you mind your temper in there and not get yourself killed?”

She looked sullen. “I’ll mind it,” she grumbled.

He stepped aside and swung the door open, allowing her to slip past him. She gathered her calico skirts up in one hand to run across the mud pools to the porch, the fabric pulled taut across her backside, reminding him of the sight of that delectable anatomy bared to his view. Of course, he did not want her to endanger herself, but he would not mind if she sassed him a bit more in private. Bringing her to heel would be a privilege, rather than a chore.

He walked to the water pump and filled the bucket there, carrying it and the unfortunate rooster back to the ranch house.

He tossed the rooster on the table where the men sat and handed Scotty a tin cup. “Slit its throat and let the blood run into this,” he instructed.

Scotty gave him a dubious look, but as a follower by nature, he did as instructed.

He started to order Mabelle to heat the water in a pot for him, but then thought twice and did it himself, not wanting to tempt her into an altercation in front of the boys. As they stood side by side at the stove, her sleeve brushed his. She snapped her head to look at him, a mixture of surprise and something else on her face.

His skin tingled with pleasure at the nearness of her, so close he could smell the rain in her hair. He started to reach for a braid, wanting to feel it between his fingers, but she stepped back, looking away.

He knew only a fool would torture himself with thoughts about Mabelle Lawson at a time like this. He was a dead man, with a five hundred dollar bounty on his head, running with a band of outlaws who would get him killed in less than a week. He had no business sniffing at Mabelle’s door.

“All right boys,” Mabelle said, flipping the last flap jack onto a plate and slinging it in the middle of the table. “Plates are up there,” she said, pointing at the shelf behind them.

The men attacked the food, hungry after eating nothing but squirrel for the past two days.

She had set fresh butter on the table and they slathered it on, the milk fat melting into rivers of golden goodness as they shoveled the fluffy cakes into their mouths. Sam ate half his stack before he realized Mabelle had none. She stood off to the side, her arms folded across her chest, looking uncomfortable. There were only four chairs for the table, and even if she had a chair, no flap jacks remained on the serving plate.

He stood up, his gentlemanly instincts returning. “Mabelle, please,” he said, swallowing the food in his mouth and indicating the chair and his half-eaten meal.

“No,” she said with a little shake of her head, but she eyed the pancakes hungrily.

“I’ll eat ‘em,” Scotty offered, reaching for them.

He yanked them out of the outlaw’s reach. “Not *you*,” he said, giving Scotty a withering look. He put an arm around Mabelle’s waist and guided her to his chair, pulling it out and plunking her down. “Eat.”

She glared up at him, but when she saw his grin, the tension in her face eased. “I would say ‘thank you’, but there is no cause to thank you for my own food,” she muttered.

“You’re welcome,” he chirped with exaggerated cheeriness.

“I woulda said ‘thank you’,” Scotty grumbled.

A dimple appeared on Mabelle’s cheek, the suppressed mirth transforming her face. The sight of it made him hungry to tease out a real smile, to see her beautiful countenance free of strain and sorrow.

The water on the stove began to boil and he dropped the rooster into the pot.

Mabelle looked at him dubiously. “Weren’t you supposed to pluck it first?”

He laughed. “Is that why you have nothing but pancakes to offer us? You don’t know how to prepare a chicken?”

She flushed and stood up, picking up the empty plates without answering him.

“The flapjacks were good,” Curly observed, “but next time make more.”

She rolled her eyes as she walked to the washtub and dropped the dishes in, then stood beside him, peering into the pot. Her arms crossed her chest, but he sensed a softening in her, as if she wanted to learn, but just could not admit herself lacking.

“You boil it first, then dunk it in a pot of cold water. Makes it easier to pluck. This full-grown cock will be a little tough, so I’m thinking once the feathers are removed, we should boil it overnight to soften it up. It will make a tasty breakfast.”

She lifted her long-lashed eyes to his face, studying him.

“How long have you been alone here?” he asked softly, so the other men wouldn’t hear

She drew back, her lips tightening.

When she opened her mouth, he cut her off. “Come on, Mabelle, the truth this time.”

Sorrow flitted across her face and he instantly regretted pushing her.

“Never mind,” he said.

Picking up the bucket, he headed back out in the rain to fill it for the cold water dunking. Darkness had fallen, the stars blackened by the clouds. The rain had settled to a steady drizzle, the wind no longer forcing it to fly at an angle.

Mabelle needed him. Not just to protect her from the Curly Jones gang, but she needed a man to run her little ranch. He pretended for a moment he could stay, filling those shoes for her. But the thought of running a ranch brought back the pain of his own bitter loss and he gave his head a shake to clear it.