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Edited by Diane Eble

Designed by Melinda Schumacher

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Copeland, Lori.

Hope / Lori Copeland.

p. cm.— (Brides of the West)

ISBN 0-8423-0269-7 (softcover)

I. Title. II. Series : Copeland, Lori. Brides of the West 1872.

PS3553.06336H67 1999

813'.54—dc21

99-34162

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Printed in the United States of America

05 04 03 02 01 00 99

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Chapter One

**H**ope Kallahan pressed a plain cotton handkerchief to her upper lip and shifted wearily on the hard wooden seat, bracing herself against the wall of the coach.

Her bones ached.

She'd have given all she owned for a pillow to cushion her backside. Never had she sat for so long on such a hard wooden bench, not even in church. The pews in Papa's house of worship were softer than this device of torture.

"Are you feeling poorly, Miss Della?"

The young woman sitting opposite Hope peered anxiously into the sickly face of her elderly companion.

"I'll be fine, dear. Just having some mild discomfort. Don't worry your pretty head, Miss Anne. I'll be just fine."

Della DeMarco, the young woman's escort, fanned her flushed face. The poor woman had taken ill the moment

she boarded the coach, but she insisted on continuing the journey. Her charge, Miss Anne Ferry, daughter of Thomas White Ferry, U.S. senator from Michigan, was traveling to Louisville to visit friends.

Pressing back against the seat, Hope counted the tall trees lining the road. Miles of countryside rolled by, bringing her closer and closer to her new home.

And a new husband. To think that a man like John Jacobs wanted her as a mail-order bride—well, it was answered prayer. After Papa died, Hope and her sisters, Faith and June, were in desperate straits. They knew Aunt Thalia couldn't afford to feed another mouth, much less three. With no resources of their own, the girls felt they had no other choice but to find suitable mates. And since Cold Water had no likely prospects, they were forced to look elsewhere.

Faith had moved to Texas to marry Nicholas Shepherd, a fine upstanding rancher; June would soon travel to Seattle to marry Eli Messenger, an understudy to the powerful evangelist, Isaac Inman of the Isaac Inman Crusade.

Of course it was too soon for Hope to have heard from either Faith or June, but she hoped to very soon. She was anxious to see how each sister fared with her new husband.

Ordinarily, Hope would be frightened by such a long and perilous journey undertaken without the security of her sisters' companionship, but she was resigned in the knowledge that she was doing the right thing. She simply had to trust that God had ordained this marriage. Soon she would marry John, and they would live happily ever after.

Would she be a good wife, one John would be proud to claim? Papa had spoiled her shamelessly, but she was perfectly capable of being a dutiful wife. She reached up to pat her ebony hair into place.

If matrimony wasn't too demanding—and Medford had a decent hairdresser.

Anne Ferry edged forward in her seat. Large brown eyes saved the petite blonde from being plain. “I just don't know what to do. Miss Della shouldn't be traveling, but she insists.”

“Well—she's the best judge of that,” Hope murmured, but she uttered a silent prayer for the woman's impediment anyway. Papa always said that folks sometimes weren't the best judges of their own resources, meaning that they depended upon themselves far too much and not enough on the Lord.

Papa. She sighed, still feeling his loss. So much had changed since his death. One moment he had been preaching a fiery lesson, and the next, he was lying cold and unresponsive in the pulpit. Now she was leaving everything and everyone she knew to marry a man she didn't know.

She closed her eyes, her forced enthusiasm waning. From now on her life would be just plain dull. She'd be a tired old married woman with three or four young ones hanging on her skirts. She sighed.

She knew little about this man she was about to marry. They'd become briefly acquainted through letters exchanged over a few short weeks. John's picture depicted a rather plain face, dark hair neatly trimmed and parted on

one side, a handlebar mustache. She'd never cared for mustaches, but then perhaps she'd learn to like one. John looked a bit uncomfortable in the photo, as if his collar were too tight or his britches too snug in the get-a-long.

Sitting up, Hope opened her compact and peered at her image in the mirror. Everyone said she was beautiful, but Papa said that was the Lord's doing, not hers. She studied her violet-colored eyes and dark hair gleaming like black coal in the sunlight. Indeed, she had been given high cheekbones and a rosy, full mouth. Lots of people were pretty . . . but maybe she was extraordinarily blessed. . . . She snapped the compact closed. Papa had warned her about being vain.

"Ohhhh, who would have ever thought this would happen?" Anne glanced at her chaperone. "Miss Della was in blooming health when we left."

"One can't always anticipate these things." Hope was more concerned about the slightly green tinge that had come on Anne's companion than about her persistent cough. The old woman was dozing, her head bouncing against the rolled upholstery.

"Have I told you that I'm visiting old friends from the Ladies' Seminary?" Anne asked. "We share such wonderful times together in Bible study and discussion." She leaned closer. "There are very few, you know, who can discuss the Scriptures intelligently. Most are inclined to frivolous things, parties and such. Even Father. Why, there's this one man on our staff who is positively decadent. He dresses well, but his hair is much too long and he has this, well, this

'look' to him." She shivered. "He's taken a shine to me, but I fear he hasn't much interest in Scripture." She glanced at Miss Della, whose dry snores resonated off the coach walls.

"I've wanted to visit friends for some time now, and now Miss Della has taken ill." She fanned her face with a small fan she kept in the turquoise bag in her lap. She glanced back, her pretty blonde curls bobbing with each jolt. "But it's been a joy to travel with you. I do hope that your Mr. Jacobs isn't too far from Louisville, so that we might see each other often while I'm in Kentucky. I want you to meet all my acquaintances, perhaps even join our Bible studies."

"That would be nice, but Mr. Jacobs said Medford is some fifty miles from Louisville." Hope shifted, trying to get more comfortable. The miles seemed endless now. She'd been traveling for over a week, and she was anxious now to reach her destination.

Though she had little in common with Anne, she had been excited to have someone her age on the long journey. Papa had been a preacher, and she'd heard whole chapters of Scripture every day of her life, but she wasn't as dedicated to Bible study as Anne.

And her memory was just awful. She couldn't remember a thing she read.

June was more to Papa's liking when it came to spiritual matters—and Faith, too. They recalled every single thing they read. It seemed a natural thing for her sisters to accurately quote Scripture, but though she tried, she got hopelessly confused.

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall . . . they shall . . . find peace? No, they would be called something, but she wasn't sure what.

She studied serious young Anne Ferry. She bet Anne would know—she'd quoted the Bible since boarding the stage, and it all sounded perfectly flawless to Hope.

The coach slowed noticeably, and Hope straightened to look out the window.

“We're coming to a way station.”

“Thank goodness,” Anne breathed. “I am so weary of all this lurching—and the dust. Perhaps a stop will make Miss Della feel better.”

Hope doubted it, but then, as bad as Miss Della was looking, most anything was likely to help. She automatically braced herself as the stage drew to a swaying halt. Miss Della jarred awake, looking around dazedly. Her small round face was flushed with heat. Hope feared she was feverish.

The driver's face appeared briefly in the coach window before he swung open the door. “We'll be stopping to change teams and eat a bite, ladies.”

Hope settled her hat more firmly on her head. “Thank you, Mr. Barnes.” She clambered out of the coach, then turned to assist Anne with Miss Della.

“Oh, my,” Miss Della whispered, her considerable bulk sagging against the two young women. “I don't feel well at all.”

Hope gently steadied her. “Perhaps you can lie down until we're ready to leave.”

“Thank you—yes, that would be nice. Oh, my. My head is reeling!”

With Anne on one side and Hope on the other, they supported the elderly woman’s bulk inside the way station. The log building had a low ceiling and only one window. The interior was dim and unappealing, but the tempting aroma of stew and corn bread caught Hope’s attention. Breakfast had been some time ago.

Anne waited with Miss Della while Hope asked the stationmaster if there was a place for the woman to rest. The tall, thin man pointed to a narrow cot that didn’t appear to be all that clean. But beggars couldn’t be choosers.

When Della was gently settled on the small bed, Anne and Hope sat down at a long wooden table. A haggard-looking woman wearing a dirty apron set bowls of steaming hot stew and squares of corn bread before them.

Hope cast glances at the cot, concerned for Della’s comfort. “She seems very ill.”

“Yes—if only she could see a physician. . . . Sir!” Anne called.

The stationmaster paused in the middle of refilling the drivers’ coffee cups.

“Is it possible that a physician might look after my chaperone? I fear she’s running a fever.”

“Sorry, lady. Ain’t no doctor around here.”

“How far is the nearest one?”

“Twenty miles—maybe more.”

Anne met Hope’s eyes anxiously. Picking up her spoon, Hope began to eat.

It seemed like only moments had passed when the two drivers pushed back from the table and announced they would be leaving shortly.

Della thrashed about on the cot, moaning.

“She isn’t able to go on,” Anne said. “We’ll have to return home.”

“Might be for the best,” one of the drivers observed. “I got to stay on schedule.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Hope said quietly. “You just see to Miss Della. I suggest that you send for a doctor immediately.”

Anne looked uncertain about her new role—that of caregiver rather than receiver. “Yes—I’ll have to forego my trip—but there will be others. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to Della. The moment she’s able, we’ll return home and have our family doctor assume her care.”

“Got to get back on the road.” Mr. Barnes picked up his hat and left.

“I’m coming.” Hope rose and embraced Anne, then touched Miss Della’s unresponsive hand. With a final glance over her shoulder, she returned to the stage.

*Dear Lord, please restore Miss Della to health. And please watch over Anne and keep her from harm.*

The coach lurched forward, and Hope’s gaze fell on Anne’s turquoise bag lying on the seat. Picking it up, she moved to call out the window for Mr. Barnes to stop the stage but then realized that she could arrange for the purse to be returned. The driver had made it clear that he intended to stay on time. Hope opened the turquoise tote.

Inside were a few of Anne's calling cards, some spare hairpins, a gold locket engraved with Anne's initials, and a small mirror, also engraved. Valuable treasures, but nothing Anne couldn't do without for a few weeks.

The day seemed endless without the senator's daughter's conversation to break the monotony. Hope's clothing was covered in dust, and she'd have given nearly everything she owned to be able to take her hair down and brush it out. A headache pounded between her eyes.

In spite of the discomfort, she finally dozed, dreaming of Kentucky, a hot bath, and a bed that didn't rock.



Dan Sullivan wearily urged his horse down the steep incline. Up ahead, the Davidson gang wound their way through the narrow pass. Four months. He never planned on this assignment taking four long months. Was Franklin nuts, sending him on this wild-goose chase? The Davidson gang was a threat, all right—to anyone who came near them. How they'd managed to lift twenty thousand dollars in army payroll he'd never know. They moved at a whim, choosing a target by chance, never with apparent forethought. Yet their luck was uncanny. Or else someone was feeding them information. But if this was the case, Dan had been unable to identify the source.

Joining up with the gang had been easy. Frank had done an admirable job spreading the word about the legendary Grunt Lawson. Grunt was accepted into the gang and given the job as lookout.

But Dan was tired.

Tired of cold food and sleeping on hard ground. Tired of washing in cold streams and tired of watching his back.

Weary of living with imbeciles.

This case had no apparent end in sight. The gang had hit several payrolls, but Dan considered it blind luck. If something didn't happen soon, he was going back to Washington and tell Frank he was through. Spring was here, and he didn't have a potato in the ground. The thought irked him. His plans were made, and he didn't like interruptions.

Big Joe drew his bay to a halt at a wide place in the trail. "This is it."

Boris and Frog reined up short. Boris's mare jolted the rump of Big Joe's stallion. Big Joe turned to give the outlaw a dirty look.

Boris blankly returned the look. "This is what?"

"This is where the stage'll be comin' through. We wait here until we see the dust on that second rise over there. Back yore horse up, Boris! Yore crowdin' me."

Boris grudgingly complied.

Dan studied the road below. It was the third stage the gang had attempted to rob in as many weeks. Somehow, their luck had soured lately. Yesterday Boris broke a stirrup. He rode it to the ground, and the stage flew past before he got the horse stopped and his foot untangled.

The week before, Frog had burst out of the bushes and had ridden straight into the oncoming coach. He was thrown fifty feet into the air and was lucky he hadn't broken his neck. His horse ran off, and they still hadn't found

her. Frog had to steal a horse to replace the missing one; he also nursed some pretty ugly bruises for days, vowing that from now on Boris was leading the charges. A heated disagreement erupted, with a lot of name-calling Dan didn't appreciate.

"I'll wait here." Reining up, Dan settled back into his saddle to wait. With any luck, they'd botch this one, too.

"Nah, you ride with us. Don't need no lookout for this one. Ain't nobody around these parts for miles." Big Joe's left eye wandered wildly. "The drivers usually whip up the horses when they come through this pass, so be ready."

Dan shifted in his saddle. "What if the stage isn't carrying a strongbox?"

"Don't matter. This one's carryin' somethin' better." Boris leaned over and spat. A grasshopper leapt clear of the sudden onslaught.

Better? That was a strange statement. What did this stage carry that the men wanted more than army payroll?

The four men waited in silence. A dry wind whipped their hats, and the horses grew restless.

Dan shifted again. "Maybe it's not coming."

"It'll come," Big Joe said. "Somethin' must be keeping it."

"Yeah, somethin's keeping it," Boris echoed.

"Shut up, Boris."

"Can talk if I want to."

"Shut up."

"Can't make me."

Dan shifted again. "Both of you dry up."

Frog hunched over his saddle horn, staring at the horizon. Dan decided Frog didn't speak much because it wasted too much effort. Frog was lazy. Lazy, and he smelled like a skunk. The only time Dan had seen him take a bath was when his horse fell in a river and Frog was sucked under. Dan had begun to pray for river crossings.

He studied the motley group. Big Joe was questionably the brain of the outfit. Joe had difficulty deciding which side of his bedroll to put next to the ground. Frog was like his namesake, easily distracted, his attention hopping from one thing to another so quickly that it was impossible to follow his reasoning—if he had any. If this was the dangerous gang that was so adept at robbing the army-payroll coaches, their success had to be more fluke than finesse. These three had a hard time planning breakfast.

Big Joe suddenly sat up straighter. "There she comes!"

The others snapped to attention. Boris craned his neck, trying to get a better look.

"Where?"

"There."

"Where?"

"There!"

"Wh—" Boris winced as Big Joe whacked him across the back with his hat. Dust flew.

"Oh yeah. I see it."

Flanking the stallion, Joe started down the narrow trail. The others followed, Dan bringing up the rear. This had better be resolved soon.

Dan had had just about enough of this job.



Hope was dozing, her body automatically swaying with the motion of the coach. The sound of pounding hooves pulled her into wakefulness. One driver shouted and the reins slapped as the team whipped the coach down the road.

Scooting to the window, she peered out, wide-eyed.

A sharp crack rent the air. Clamping her eyes tightly shut, she swallowed the terror rising in the back of her throat. The crack sounded again and again. Gunshots! Someone was firing at the coach!

Horses pounded alongside the window. Hope's fingers dug into the crimson upholstery, gripping the fabric. She craned, unable to see who was chasing the stage. Then four men rode alongside the coach, hats pulled low. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Robbery. The stage was being robbed!

“Stop the coach!”

The harsh yell was accompanied by another gunshot. Hope's lips moved in silent prayer. *Don't let this be a holdup. Let me get to Medford safely. Protect the drivers. Oh dear—if only I could accurately remember the Lord's Prayer . . . the part about walking the fields of death . . .*

The coach came to a shuddering halt, dust fogging the open windows. Hope sat still as a church mouse, terrified to move. She heard the sound of someone cocking a rifle, and her heart threatened to stop beating. Dear Lord, what if she were killed before she reached John Jacobs? Would anyone find her? Faith? June? Aunt Thalia?

*Our Father, who art in heaven, how now be thy name. Thy*

*kingdom come, thy . . . thy . . . something or other be something or other . . .*

“Stay where you are!” a hoarse voice called out.

“You ain’t gettin’ the box!” Mr. Barnes yelled.

Another harsh laugh. “You totin’ cash money? Throw it down!”

“Stay back, Joe! Yore horse is gonna—”

A gun exploded and a horse whinnied. Hope carefully edged back to the window. One of the bandits was now lying spread-eagle on the ground, rubbing his noggin.

“Git back!” the grating voice yelled to the drivers who’d gone for their guns.

The drivers stepped back, still shielding the strongbox.

The second rider eyed the outlaw sprawled on the ground. “Git up, Joe. This ain’t no time to be foolin’ around.”

The man sat up, nursing his head between his knees.

“Fool horse. Pert near knocked the thunder outta me.”

A third man rode in, his gun leveled on the drivers. His voice was steady, unyielding. “Throw down the box, and no one gets hurt.”

Hope shivered at the sound of the strong, confident tone. It was nothing like the others. She timidly poked her head out the window, her heart skipping erratically. The outlaw with the calm voice wore a mask across his face, but the disguise couldn’t hide his dark good looks.

The heavy metal box bit into the dirt beside the coach.

“Whooeee! Look at that!” The big man on the ground

shook his head to clear it, then got to his feet. “We got us another U.S. Army money box!”

The second outlaw climbed off his horse and approached the cache. “Yes sirreeee. That’s sure nuff what it is, all right—got us another army payroll! Money and the woman too! This must be our day!”

“Lemma have it.”

“No way. Frog’s gonna carry it. You cain’t even stay on yore horse.”

Frog urged his animal forward, and the outlaw slid the cash box across his lap.

“Now, let’s see what we got inside here.” The big man, undaunted by humiliation, walked over to the coach and yanked the door open. Hope stared into the face of one of the strangest-looking men she’d ever seen. Thick body, bowed legs, square face. It appeared as if someone had fashioned a seven-foot man, then pushed him down into a six-foot-three body with a wandering eye.

“Well, howdee do! Here’s what we’re lookin’ for!” Big Joe’s mouth split into a tobacco-stained grin. “It’s Thomas Ferry’s daughter! And ain’t she pretty.”

Dan’s eyes switched to the frightened girl. “Senator Thomas Ferry’s daughter?” He urged his horse closer to the coach. “What are you doing?”

Joe looked back at him. “This here is the daughter of the big politician from Michigan. Read in th’ paper that she was on her way to visit friends in Louisville—”

“You cain’t read!” Boris accused.

“Oh, all right! I had someone read it to me! What’s the

difference?” Joe’s good eye rested on the prize. “Bet her daddy will pay a fine ransom to get his little girl back. A fine ransom.”

The young woman drew back, slapping the outlaw’s hand when he reached for her.

“Now don’t be spunky, little gal. Come on out here and let us have a look-see at what’s gonna make us rich.”

Boris grinned. “Yeah, rich—even if we cain’t spend any of the money.”

“Not yet, we cain’t. But in a few months, when we got all we want, we’ll lie back and let the stink die down; then we’ll hightail it to Mexico and live like kings.”

Big Joe reached inside the coach, but the woman scooted to the far end of the bench. “Why, Boris, she don’t want to come out,” Big Joe complained. He grinned. “Guess I’ll jest hafta go in and git her.”

One boot was on the metal step when the occupant apparently decided it would be better to exit the stage herself than have him inside with her.

“I’m coming out!”

“She’s coming out,” Joe repeated loudly.

“Could be she don’t want anywhere near you!” Boris laughed.

Dan backed his horse away from the coach as a bronze-booted foot searched for the stage step.

Dressed in a brown traveling dress with a straw hat perched atop her ebony hair, the young woman slowly exited the stage. For a moment, Dan couldn’t take his eyes off her. He’d seen his share of good-looking women in his

day, but this one was a rare jewel. Safe on the ground, she brushed at her skirt, glancing from one gang member to another, her gaze finally fastening on him.

Dan drew a resigned breath, looking away.

There was only one problem: This woman wasn't Anne Ferry.