



Patience

BRIDES OF THE WEST

LORI COPELAND

Over 400,000 *Brides of the West* novels sold

BRIDES OF THE WEST





LORI COPELAND



*Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

Patience

Copyright © 2004 by Lori Copeland. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of card copyright © by MartinaM/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of postmark envelope copyright © by Preto Perola/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of flowers on saddle copyright © by studio_diva.mail.ru/Depositphotos.com. All rights reserved.

Back cover photograph of brown paper copyright © by VadimVasenin/Depositphotos. All rights reserved.

Designed by Libby Dykstra and Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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

Patience is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

Previously published in 2004 under ISBN 978-0-8423-1938-6.

First repackage first published in 2007 under ISBN 978-1-4143-1539-3.

Second repackage published in 2021 under ISBN 978-1-4964-4198-0.

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Barbara Warren.

*Every author needs a helping hand,
and Barbara supplies me with knowledge,
encouragement,
and much-needed spiritual uplifting.
Thank you, friend.*



Patience Smith might have been surprised to know that her life had just changed dramatically. Sheriff Jay Longer didn't realize his had changed at the same instant.

Swinging a long leg over the saddle, the sheriff of Denver City, Colorado, climbed aboard his mare. His eye caught Dylan McCall hugging his wife on Main Street, right in broad daylight. And in front of the sheriff's office, too. He frowned. Was that any way to uphold the dignity of law enforcement?

A moment later Jay rode up to the waiting couple, sliding out of the saddle before the mare came to a stop.

Ruth McCall whirled to face him, her pretty face a mix of warring emotions. "We were in the shop. Mary was pinning the hem on Lenore Hawthorn's wedding dress—the bride's parents forbid her to try it on, so Patience was modeling it. A man burst into Mary's millinery and grabbed Patience. They went off in that direction!" She pointed west. "Go!"

“Honey, slow down,” her husband warned. “I don’t want you upset.”

Tears brimmed Ruth’s eyelids. “You have to *do* something, Sheriff!”

Jay frowned. Deliver him from newlyweds and estrogen-produced hysterics. All that sweet talk between the marshal and his bride should take place in the privacy of their home, not in the presence of people who might find it scratchy to watch. Of course, time was, when he still had Nelly, he might have been as lovestruck as Dylan, but he’d have had enough sense of propriety to keep it to himself.

Sure, he would.

If he had Nelly back, he’d get down on his knees right out there in the middle of the street and tell her all the things he wished he’d said when he had the chance.

Jay casually straightened the brim on his Stetson. “She was wearing Lenore Hawthorn’s wedding dress when she was abducted?”

Ruth nodded, tears rolling down her cheeks. “She was standing in for Lenore for the final gown fitting.”

Jay glanced at Dylan, then back to Ruth. “Well, there’s our answer. There’s been bad blood between the Hawthorns and the McLanes for years. Ben and Lenore’s wedding has set them off again—my guess is that the culprit has a connection with the groom’s family.”

With the Hawthorn/McLane wedding scheduled to take place tomorrow night, Jay figured that had to

be the circumstance. Old man McLane was a crusty old reprobate, and he'd sworn to stop the nuptials between his oldest son and Hawthorn's youngest daughter. Apparently he'd found a way to interfere.

Ruth lifted a shaky hand to her forehead. "Sakes alive. The kidnapper mistook Patience for Lenore?"

Jay nodded. "That'd be my guess. What about you, Marshal?"

Dylan agreed. "That's the way I have it figured."

Denver City bustled in the background. An hour from now it would be dark, and a posse would find it impossible to track the young woman. Jay would have to set out alone and follow the trail until it got cold—or until he found Patience Smith.

"But *why*?" Ruth argued. "Why would anyone snatch a bride? What do they want with Lenore—Patience?"

The sheriff and the marshal exchanged sobering looks before Jay finally admitted, "Well now, that's hard to say." Could be a million explanations, but only one thing mattered. What would the kidnapper do with the girl once he discovered his mistake?

"Let's not panic," Dylan said. "When Patience tells the man that he's got the wrong woman, he'll probably turn her loose."

Whirling, Ruth bolted back into Mary's millinery shop in tears, and Dylan approached the sheriff.

"We've got a problem," the marshal said.

"Could be—then again, he might have realized his mistake instantly and let her go at the edge of town."

"Maybe—but if he didn't?"

Jay took off his Stetson and wiped his forehead. “Then you’re right—we have a real problem.”

Dylan stood by while Jay slid a Winchester Model 1873 into the hand-tooled rifle scabbard tied to his saddle. A cold wind buffeted the men’s sturdy frames. Tomorrow night 1873 would be ushered out with parties and noisy celebrations, but Jay wouldn’t be part of the festivities.

Dylan ran a hand across his face. “I still think I should be the one to go after her. Those girls and Ruth—they’re like family to each other.”

Longer busied himself checking cinches and stirrups. He knew the girls had come all the way from Missouri to be mail-order brides, an arrangement that hadn’t worked out. The orphaned young women were as close as sisters, so Dylan’s bride’s tears were understandable. “You’re newly married, and you’re the marshal. I’m single, the sheriff, and the crime was committed in my county.”

Not that Jay wanted to go after this particular orphan. He’d had more than one disagreeable run-in with Patience Smith, the last occurring a couple days ago. She’d burst into his office carrying a bird with a broken wing and asked if he knew anything about setting bones. He’d calmly pointed out he was town sheriff, not town vet. He’d eyed the critter that scattered droppings on the office floor.

She’d eyed him back sternly, then asked if he was coldhearted.

He had to admit that he was—had been for a long time. And he wasn’t in the bird-fixing business.

She'd left with the bird in hand, and the last he'd seen of her, she was crossing the street, head held high, determination evident in her squared shoulders and stiff back.

Dylan's voice broke into Jay's musings. "The kidnapping took place in my town."

Jay sighed, knowing how stubborn McCall could be. "Look, let's not argue. I'm going after her, and I'm going to bring her home. That's my job; it's what I get paid for."

Conceding, Dylan stepped back. "I'll look after the town while you're gone. That much I can do."

Nodding, Jay gathered the reins between his gloves and mounted. "Finding her—finding anyone—in these mountains isn't going to be a cakewalk." The sheriff settled his hat more firmly on his head. He'd be lucky if he survived the search this time of year. January wasn't for the fainthearted. But he had another reason for going, one he wasn't going to mention. The wire he'd received today crackled in his shirt pocket. He knew what it said by heart. His gambling debts had caught up with him. The people he owed were coming to collect, and he didn't have the money to pay. If he wasn't here, there wouldn't be much they could do, and if he could buy enough time, maybe he would recoup his losses. And then again, maybe he wouldn't.

Turning the horse, he rode out of town due west. Somewhere out there a young woman was in danger, and as sheriff, it was his responsibility to rescue her.

He could only hope that Patience Smith was as

tenacious with her kidnapper as she'd proven to be with him.



Patience decided that getting rid of trouble was like sacking fog. You grasped, fumbled, and blocked, but it kept coming. She shivered. The late-afternoon air was cold as granite, and she was wearing little more than lace and tulle.

She wanted off this horse, and even more, she needed to make sense of what had just happened. She glanced sideways at the man who held her on his horse and wondered about his intelligence. How could anyone mistake her for Lenore Hawthorn? Lenore had blonde hair, angular features, and blue eyes. Patience had brunette hair, a round face, and dark brown eyes.

The swarthy man's hold tightened. "Stop squirming, Lenore!"

"I'm not Lenore!"

"Yeah, yeah. That's what they all say." He set his spurs deeper into the mare.

"But I'm not Lenore!" Patience yelled.

"Shaddup!"

She swallowed back her mounting hysteria. The outlaw gripped her tighter around the middle and galloped around a curve. This mistake had something to do with the ongoing feud between the Hawthorns and the McLanes, she was sure. Hatred between the two families ran as deep as still water,

and she feared there was no telling what fate awaited her if this man thought she was Amos Hawthorn's daughter. The families' insane feud had been going on for decades.

She frowned when she thought of Mary, Lily, Harper, and Ruth. The girls had all looked thunderstruck when this man had burst into the sewing shop and seized her. If the situation wasn't so grave, she'd laugh; but right now all she could do was cling to the horse and pray she'd survive the frantic ride.

The scoundrel was dirty and his rancid breath repulsed her. Where was he taking her? How soon would he accept the fact that she wasn't the intended bride? And then what? Would he dispose of her before she could convince him that he'd made a terrible mistake?

Relief suddenly flooded her. *Dylan*. Ruth's husband—or maybe the town sheriff, Jay Longer—would come after her. The bigheaded sheriff and she mixed like oil and water, but right now she wasn't particular about her rescuer. Considering their simmering animosity toward one another, she wondered if he'd even bother to come after her—but Dylan would make him. His job would make him. With his piercing blue eyes and hair as red as a Colorado sunset, Sheriff Longer was a hard man to understand. But whether he liked her or not, the tough-minded sheriff would not let this brigand get away with kidnapping a woman from his territory.

She clung to that belief as the horse's shod hoofs pounded the frozen ground. Wind stung her face

and cold seeped through her bones. She had no protection from the wintry elements—no coat, only the lace sleeves of Lenore’s wedding dress to protect her from the icy wind.

Suddenly, as if the hand of God swooped down and smote the enemy, the horse stumbled and pitched forward, throwing Patience and her captor over the animal’s head. Patience went airborne. Seconds later she slammed into the frozen ground.

Lying motionless, she struggled to catch her breath, and then, dazed, she sat up in a feeble attempt to regain her bearings. She was alive! The horse lay prostrate on top of the kidnapper. She wished she felt compassion, an urge to offer assistance to the poor, unfortunate villain, but relief flooded her. She was free! The man must surely be dead, or very close to death; she didn’t have the strength to even budge the horse to look.

Rolling slowly to her feet, Patience groaned. She tentatively tested her weight on one foot and then the other, and discovered that she could walk. Which she did, as fast as her injury would allow, grasping the hem of the fragile gown, trying to protect the sheer material from the rough trail.

Limping over the frozen ground, she sucked in deep drafts, the cold air stinging her lungs. Where was she? She had no idea; she wasn’t familiar with the region. From the time the five mail-order brides had come to Denver City, she hadn’t ventured far from the outskirts of town. Her eyes searched the barren, snow-swept land, and she shuffled faster. She’d

heard talk of prospectors in the area, how fiercely the men vied with each other for gold. Hysteria now threatened to overtake her as she realized she would freeze to death if she didn't find shelter soon. Her teeth chattered and her breath came in ragged gulps. *Walk, Patience. Walk like your life depends on it.*

Heartsick, Patience realized that in these circumstances, it actually did.



A blast of winter wind buffeted the sheriff, and he huddled deeper into the sheepskin-lined coat. The girl had only a thin, silk wedding gown to protect her from the cold. If he didn't find her soon . . .

Jay rode slowly, leaning from the saddle to search for tracks, but the frozen ground made tracking difficult. He didn't stand the chance of a snowball in a skillet of finding her, but he set his jaw in determination.

And then he spotted the dead horse. Dismounting and hanging on to the reins, he approached the carcass. His mare was skittish, and he had no desire to be stranded out here on foot. This was unfriendly country. If a man didn't freeze to death, he stood a good chance of running into a belligerent miner defending his claim.

Jay examined the animal, noticing a boot half-hidden beneath the horse's body. When he had satisfied himself that Patience wasn't there, he mounted again. He had no shovel; he couldn't bury

the miscreant. Animals would take care of what he couldn't. He nudged his horse and rode off slowly. Supposing the woman was still a captive, for it was possible the dead horse and victim had nothing to do with Patience Smith.

Then again, there was nothing to suggest that he *wasn't* the kidnapper, and when the horse stumbled she'd gotten away. If that were the case, where would she have gone? Running the questions through his mind, Jay came up with the same answer to both: most likely to one of the mining camps dotting these mountains or an isolated shaft, which would make finding her even more difficult.

He had been in these parts long enough to know that he couldn't go riding into camp dressed like a lawman. That would tip off the kidnappers that he was on their trail if she was still being held somewhere. He studied the rugged landscape, weighing his options. As far as he could see, there was only one choice open to him. Miners were a rugged lot, suspicious of strangers, so he'd ride into the closest town and get himself a shovel and a gold pan. Going undercover wasn't his style, but he was going to hit those camps disguised as a miner.