



Montana Bride (Bitter Creek)

By Joan Johnston

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A DESPERATE DECEPTION
THE PROMISE OF FOREVER

When Karl Norwood's mail-order bride meets an untimely demise on the way to the Montana Territory, Hetty Wentworth steps in to take her place. Hetty has no idea how she's going to pretend to be all the things she isn't—including the mother of two kids. She only knows her deception is necessary if she's going to save two orphans from the awful fate she suffered as a child.

Karl smells a rat when a much younger woman than he was expecting arrives with two children who look nothing like her. But his mail-order bride is so beautiful, he doesn't object—until he realizes that his charming new wife has been lying . . . about everything. Can a woman forced to keep secrets and a man hindered by distrust ever hope to find happily ever after in each other's arms?

Praise for *Montana Bride*

"[A] swiftly paced romance."—*Publishers Weekly*

"*Montana Bride* is a compelling read and definitely a noteworthy addition to a great series."—*Fresh Fiction*

"Joan Johnston knows how to spin a story that will get to the readers every time. [*Montana Bride*] is no different. . . . It was emotional, heartfelt and real. It was honest. . . . It was simply magic from a master storyteller."—*Night Owl Reviews*

"If you are a fan of historicals, a fan of beautiful descriptive writing, and a fan of steamy romance, you won't want to miss out on *Montana Bride*."—*Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews*

"Johnston has a keen eye for quirky circumstances that put her characters, and the reader, through a wringer. Laughing one moment and crying the next, you'll always have such a great time getting to the happy-ever-after."—*Romance Junkies Reviews*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Joan Johnston is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of many historical and contemporary romance novels. She received a master of arts degree in theater from the University of Illinois and graduated with honors from the University of Texas School of Law at Austin. She is currently a full-time writer living in Colorado.

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Chapter One

“Don’t you dare strike that child!” Henrietta Wentworth set her plate of hardtack and beans aside and rose from her seat on a fallen log beside the campfire.

“He’s my son. I’ll hit him if I want.” Mrs. Lucille Templeton had grabbed her seven-year-old son, Griffin, by the arm as he tried to escape after “accidentally” dropping a plate of beans into her lap.

“Look at my dress!” Mrs. Templeton wailed, staring down at a green-velvet-trimmed traveling dress that was clearly ruined. She tightened her grip until the boy grimaced and said, “This fiendish brat spilled that plate on purpose. He deserves the whipping he’s going to get.”

Hetty balled her fists and took three steps to put herself toe-to-toe with Mrs. Templeton. “You will beat that child over my dead body. Let him go.”

“Hah!” Mrs. Templeton snorted. Nevertheless, she loosened her grip, and Griffin jerked free and fled. He disappeared behind the Conestoga wagon in which they’d all been traveling from Cheyenne, in the Wyoming Territory, to Butte, in the Montana Territory, where Mrs. Templeton was destined to become a mail-order bride.

The hodgepodge Templeton family included the widow Templeton, her nine-year-old daughter, Grace, and

her seven-year-old son, Griffin. Hetty had trouble imagining how Mrs. Templeton had produced a daughter as kind as Grace, although she had no doubt how she'd spawned a hellion like Griffin.

Nevertheless, not one of the three Templetons looked like any of the others or seemed anywhere near their professed ages.

Mrs. Templeton, with her dyed blond hair, muddy brown eyes, and substantial figure, looked considerably older than twenty-eight.

Grace was plump, had flyaway red hair and green eyes, and was already sprouting small buds on her chest, which told Hetty she was more likely twelve or thirteen than the nine she professed to be.

Her brother, Griffin, was a skinny stripling with dark brown eyes and tangled black hair that made Hetty itch to take a brush to it. Hetty figured he'd last seen the age of seven three or four years ago.

No less odd was the short, slender, but very strong young Chinese man who was their guide, protector, and driver, Mr. Lin Bao, who said he'd come to America ten years ago to work on the transcontinental railroad. Hetty had learned that the Chinese put their family name first, so Mr. Lin's first name was Bao, which he'd told her rhymed with cow. Mr. Lin now worked for the man who would become Mrs. Templeton's husband, Mr. Karl Norwood.

"If I'd had my way, Miss High-and-Mighty," Mrs. Templeton muttered as she lifted her skirts to dump beans from its folds, "we would have left you to rot in that wagon where we found you."

Hetty had no doubt of that. She'd never met a lazier or more selfish person in her life than Lucille Templeton. It was appalling that she owed this woman her life.

Mrs. Templeton had forced Mr. Lin to stop near the apparently abandoned Conestoga wagon because she'd wanted to scavenge whatever remained inside, but someone had already looted the wagon. All she'd discovered was Hetty, dehydrated, weak from loss of blood, and with a wound that had become infected from the arrow deeply embedded in her shoulder.

If not for Mrs. Templeton's avarice, Hetty would be dead.

Although, honestly, it was Mr. Lin's doctoring that had kept her alive. He'd used mysterious medicines from the Orient to bring Hetty back to life over the past seven weeks as they'd traveled north. Mrs. Templeton claimed to be a nurse, but she didn't seem to know much about caring for anyone. Hetty shot a quick look at the young Chinaman, who was sitting quietly beside the fire smoking a long, curved white clay pipe.

"If it had been up to you, Lucy," a young female voice accused, "you would have left Hetty in that wagon to die."

Hetty hadn't seen Grace approaching from the opposite side of the campfire, but she'd seen the girl defend her brother from their mother's slaps often enough to know that where Griffin was, Grace was never far behind.

"I'll take care of this, Grace," Hetty said, knowing that Mrs. Templeton was still angry enough to lash out at her daughter.

Her warning came too late. Mrs. Templeton reached out her arm like a lizard's tongue, grabbed a handful of Grace's tumbled red curls, and yanked hard. "You're the one to blame for this. I never should have brought the two of you along."

Grace shot a fearful look in Hetty's direction.

Hetty couldn't imagine having a mother who wished she'd left her children behind. A mother who felt free to slap faces and yank hair. A mother who considered her children a nuisance. No wonder Grace looked so scared.

Hetty's heart went out to the girl. Hetty's own wonderful, loving parents had been lost three years ago in the Great Chicago Fire, when Mrs. O'Leary's cow had kicked over a lantern and burned down most of the city, including the Wentworth family mansion and her father's bank.

Overnight, Hetty had gone from being the pampered daughter of wealthy parents to being an orphan stuck in the Chicago Institute for Orphaned Children. Her uncle, Stephen Wentworth, had left Hetty and her three sisters and two brothers at the orphanage even after they'd begged him to rescue them from the cruelty of the headmistress, Miss Iris Birch.

Miss Birch, like Mrs. Templeton, seemed to find joy in brutality against those weaker than herself. Every infraction at the Institute had been punished with three—"You're lucky it's only three!" Miss Birch was fond of saying—vicious strokes of a birch rod.

Hetty forced her thoughts away from her five siblings, who were all lost . . . or dead . . . but certainly gone. She couldn't do anything to help them. But she could help Grace.

"What I said about Griffin goes for Grace, too," Hetty said. "Let her go."

Mrs. Templeton twisted Grace's hair until the girl whimpered and stood on tiptoes to avoid the pain. "This is my kid. I'll do with her as I like."

"Not while I'm here, you won't." Hetty obeyed a sudden impulse, and her balled fist struck Mrs. Templeton in the nose.

"Ow!" Mrs. Templeton released Grace and grabbed her bloodied nose. "You'll pay for that!"

Instead of running like Griffin had, Grace stood and watched with anxious eyes. "Please, Lucy," the girl pleaded. "I'm sorry. Griffin's sorry."

"Shut up, you ungrateful whelp!" Mrs. Templeton snarled.

That was another strange thing about the Templeton family. Hetty couldn't imagine calling her own mother by her first name, yet both children called their mother "Lucy." Nor could she imagine any mother calling her daughter an "ungrateful whelp."

Hetty should have known better than to think Mrs. Templeton wouldn't strike back. A moment later she felt nails claw their way across her face, narrowly missing her left eye. One of the scratches across her brow bled profusely, blurring Hetty's vision on that side, so she almost missed seeing Mrs. Templeton bend to pick up a heavy dead branch.

"Lucy, don't!" Grace cried. And then, to Hetty, "Look out!"

As Mrs. Templeton swung the unwieldy weapon Hetty bent backward but then lost her balance and fell into a clump of buffalo grass. Hetty made the mistake of trying to push herself upright with her injured shoulder and yelped in pain. Even after seven weeks, it wasn't healed enough to support her. She was stuck on the ground, a sitting duck the next time Mrs. Templeton swiped at her with that heavy branch.

Mrs. Templeton must have realized Hetty's predicament, because she uttered a shout of triumph. However, the ponderous weight of the branch, as it continued its sweeping arc, had dragged her sideways. Instead of letting go to regain her balance, she held on to the branch, and her momentum forced her several steps backward.

Hetty heard Mr. Lin yelling something behind her, but she was too busy trying to avoid being brained by the tree branch to pay attention. She heard Mrs. Templeton cry out and wondered if Grace had somehow intervened to save her.

Hetty looked up in time to see Mrs. Templeton's arms flailing as she tripped backward over a large stone. She finally let go of the branch, which flew several feet upward before it began falling, falling, disappearing from sight before ever hitting the ground.

As Hetty struggled to her feet, she realized at last what Mr. Lin had been shouting. "Be careful!" she cried. "The cliff!"

She got one last look at Mrs. Templeton's face in the firelight—a ghoulish mask of fury—before the woman fell backward out of sight.

Her shrill scream seemed to go on endlessly. Then it stopped.

Hetty dashed with Grace toward the edge of the hundred-foot rock cliff that had been visible in the daylight when they'd camped, but which had disappeared beyond the light of the campfire after dark. She felt sick with grief and regret. She'd only wanted to protect Grace and Griffin. Instead she'd made them orphans. She couldn't do anything right! Mr. Lin should have let her die.

"Watch out!" Hetty gasped as she put a hand across Grace's waist to keep the girl away from the edge. She could see nothing in the blackness below.

Grace kept repeating, "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no."

"What happened?" Griffin called out. "Did the witch hurt herself?"

Grace turned on her brother angrily as he appeared in the light of the campfire and said, "The witch is dead."

Hetty stared at the two children, dismayed at what they were saying about the woman who'd borne them. "What's wrong with you?" she asked Grace. "Your mother has just died a ghastly death."

"She wasn't our ma!" Griffin retorted.

"Griffin," Grace warned. "Don't say another word."

"There's no reason to lie anymore. Lucy's dead. We're DOOMED."

Hetty remembered her twin sister, Hannah, using that precise term, DOOMED, when their eldest sister, Miranda, had turned eighteen and could no longer remain at the orphanage. Miranda was the one who'd protected them from Miss Birch's terrible temper. Without her, they were DOOMED to suffer under the iron discipline of the horrible headmistress.

In the end, Miranda had stolen away, along with their two younger brothers, Nick and Harry, to become a mail-order bride in Texas. At least, Hetty hoped that was what had happened. The three sisters left behind—Hetty, her identical twin Hannah, and Josie—had never heard from Miranda again.

When Miranda had failed to contact them, they'd taken desperate measures to escape Miss Birch. Hannah had followed Miranda's lead and become the mail-order bride of an Irishman, Mr. McMurtry, and Hannah, Hetty, and Josie had journeyed west with him to the Wyoming Territory.

That trip had ended in a disaster that was all her fault. Because of her behavior, they'd been forced to leave the safety of the wagon train. Their lives had quickly unraveled. Mr. McMurtry had died of cholera, Hetty had been sorely wounded in an Indian attack, Josie had been taken captive by the savages, and Hannah had gone for help and never returned.

By the time Hetty had come to her senses, after weeks and weeks of being nursed back to health by Mr. Lin, they'd been closer to Butte than Cheyenne. She'd been forced to continue the journey to the Montana Territory. Once she got to Butte, Hetty planned to find some way to get back to Cheyenne, locate Hannah, if she was still alive, and begin a search for Josie.

Now she'd caused another disaster! What was wrong with her? Why did she always do exactly the wrong thing? How would she ever make amends for the wrong she'd done to these two poor orphaned children?

It suddenly dawned on her what Griffin had blurted. She wasn't our ma! Hetty's brow knit in confusion. So what were the two children doing with Mrs. Templeton?

She suddenly understood so many things that had seemed strange about Mrs. Templeton's behavior toward her supposed children. About Griffin's pranks, which often had Mrs. Templeton as their victim. About Grace's wariness around her pretend mother. About the disparities in ages and appearances of the entire fake family. But how had the three of them ended up together on this journey to Butte?

Hetty turned to Grace and Griffin, who were now standing beside each other. She crossed her arms over her chest because she could feel her body beginning to tremble, and it was all she could think of to do to keep herself from flying into a million pieces.

Mrs. Templeton was dead on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. Hetty was at least partly responsible for someone dying. Again.

She forced her mind away from memories of the calamity she'd caused on the journey west. There was nothing she could do to change the past. She closed her eyes to shut out the awful vision of two men fighting because of her, and the vivid blue eyes of the man she'd loved as he lay dying in her arms. When she opened them again, she said to the two children, "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"Mrs. Templeton worked upstairs at the saloon where we were living," Griffin said. "Before our mom died, she used to work there, too, and some of the ladies made sure we had a place to sleep and food to eat. But Grace was getting older, and they wanted her to—"

"Griffin, that's enough," Grace interrupted.

"Anyway," Griffin continued, "Mr. Norwood's advertisement for a mail-order bride said that he'd consider a widow with children, so Grace went to Lucy with this crazy idea that we could all get out of there if Lucy became this guy Norwood's mail-order bride."

"And Mrs. Templeton went along?" Hetty asked.

Grace grimaced. "As soon as I agreed to pay her, she did."

"You paid her to bring you along and she treated you that badly?" Hetty said.

“Why do you think I dumped those beans in her lap?” Griffin said.

“I wrote all the letters to Mr. Norwood,” Grace said. “But Lucy insisted that I tell him she was twenty-eight, so Griffin and I had to pretend to be younger, too. I’m thirteen. I’ll be fourteen in a couple of months.”

Hetty turned to Griffin and asked, “How old are you?”

“I’ll be ten in the spring.”

Hetty glanced at Mr. Lin, who was listening to this confession, and wondered what he was thinking. His dark eyes remained inscrutable.

“We’re DOOMED, all right,” Grace said.

Hetty watched tears pool in Grace’s eyes before they slid onto her freckled cheeks. Her heart went out to the two children.

Grace glanced at her brother and said, “I can always get work at a saloon in Butte.”

Griffin’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth flattened to a hard line. “Not that kind of work. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“What other choice do we have?” Grace said quietly.

It took Hetty a moment to realize what kind of work Grace was considering. At seventeen, Hetty was still naive enough, even after hearing the escapades of a girl at the orphanage who’d previously taken a lover, to be shocked. “There must be a better alternative,” she said.

“Not unless we go to some orphanage,” Griffin replied bitterly. “We ended up in one right after our ma died, but we ran away. We’ve been hiding out at the saloon ever since. I’m never going back. I’ll starve first.”

Hetty shuddered. Grace working in a brothel? Grace and Griffin at the mercy of some cruel headmistress like Miss Birch? “There has to be a way for the two of you to avoid either of those choices.”

“There is way,” Mr. Lin said.

Hetty, Grace, and Griffin all turned to find the Chinaman tapping out the contents of his long clay pipe.

“What do you suggest?” Hetty asked.

“I think you be mail-order bride,” Mr. Lin said. “Two kids be your kids. Mr. Norwood get bride, kids get home, you get husband help you look for missing sisters.” He smiled and said, “Work out happy for everybody. Okay?”

Hetty stared at Mr. Lin for a moment in astonishment, then glanced at the two children, who were staring back at her with hopeful eyes. Hetty wanted to help, truly she did. But she’d caused so much pain and suffering, she wasn’t worthy of being anyone’s bride. She’d had her chance at love, and she’d utterly destroyed it. She didn’t deserve another.

Besides, the deception would never work. She could never pass for twenty-eight. She knew nothing about being a mother or a nurse. And she was a virgin.

Then she thought of what Grace might be forced to do if she refused. And pictured mischievous Griffin in an orphanage, facing some heartless headmistress.

Hetty looked from one young, worried face to the other and said, "Okay. I'll do it. I'll become Mr. Norwood's mail-order bride."

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