

PAPER WIDOW

by

Ailene Frances

Copyright 2017 Ailene Frances

Printed in the United States of America

Worldwide Electronic & Digital Rights

Worldwide Rights of all Languages

ELECTRONIC VERSION

EARTH WISE BOOKS

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any form, including digital and electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written consent of the Publisher, except for brief quotes for use in reviews.

Notice** Portions of this story may prove too graphic, sexually explicit, or violent for sensitive readers. This novel is intended for adult readers.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

CONTENTS

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Thirty-Seven](#)

[Thirty-Eight](#)

[Thirty-Nine](#)

[Other Books](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Sneak Peek at Love Misunderstood](#)

ONE

The sun rose only an hour earlier, yet it already shone upon the pines with an intensity that denoted the promise of yet another scorching day. Squirrels and chipmunks scurried about to accomplish their tasks before they were forced to seek shelter from the harshness of the Indian Summer sun.

Elise bent down and carefully relieved her shoulders of the burdensome yoke balancing the water buckets she faithfully hauled from the nearby creek several times a day. Her work-worn hands rested on her slender hips as she twisted and bent in different directions to help ease the tightness in her body that was the result of yet another fitful sleep.

For what seemed like the millionth time, she lamented over blindly responding to the advertisement in the Matrimonial News for mail order brides in the west. She was so eager to escape the mundane existence of the Boston Brahmin society that, when the advertisement crossed her path, she rushed to respond with little thought or investigation about who would be waiting for her on the opposite end of the correspondence, what she would be walking into, or what she was leaving behind. She also never questioned just how a copy of the Matrimonial News made it into the Joselyn family parlor.

Now, finding herself alone, penniless, living in a shanty that would not even qualify for an outhouse at home, and ill-equipped for the months that lay ahead, she had plenty of time to ponder this fact, as well as her foolishness.

She understood her foolishness to some degree. She was young; just barely seventeen. Seventeen-year-old women of privilege were not worldly enough to truly understand the happenings beyond the social cocoon their parents kept them in.

She enjoyed a year of flirtation after her debutante ball before her father announced that she had an excellent offer for a match with Judd

Turnham. Judd was fifteen years her senior, barely reached her height when she wore flat-heeled slippers and had a paunchy middle that spoke of the life of privilege he led. Sure, he was part of the richest family in the Brahmin elite and was due to inherit it all when his ailing father passed, but the thought of his overly soft, stubby fingers touching her the way a man could touch a wife was more than she could tolerate. It was bad enough when he stole a kiss while escorting her through the gardens. She had to force back the bile that threatened to project up her esophagus. The memory of his acute halitosis and abundant nose hair would probably haunt her forever. So, what if the cowboys of the west were notorious for their lack of social etiquette. She would rather have a tough, virile, and socially inept cowboy than stinky, paunchy Judd any day.

The photograph and description the matchmaker, Eliza Farnham, showed her of Douglas Meacham and the description of the life that awaited was so appealing, she made her decision to marry him by proxy that very afternoon. It was done in secrecy, with only the witnesses provided by Eliza to validate its authenticity.

Douglas was a twenty-seven-year-old civil war veteran from Pennsylvania who went west to prospect for gold. He mined long enough to accrue a small financial safety net and acquire a respectable piece of land to ranch in northern Texas. He boasted a small herd of cattle, a solid barn that housed a hearty pig, a milking cow, some chickens, a robust garden, and the beginnings of a house that was strategically placed on the land to allow plenty of room to add on when the children arrived. It lacked only a wife to make it complete.

What started out as a dream adventure quickly turned into a nightmare. Since she never had the occasion to ride in the public car of a train before, Elise was not prepared for the grueling, filthy accommodations that were kept

hidden from those fortunate enough to warrant a private car. What little funds she managed to squirrel away during her whirlwind departure were stolen from her reticule while she napped. She had tucked some of her prize jewelry in her travel bag, which went missing somewhere in Oklahoma. By the time she was ready to disembark, she had only the clothes on her back and the jewelry on her person. She quickly sold the jewelry to pay for passage on the stagecoach that would take her to the Texas territory of Wichita Falls where Douglas was to meet her.

She spent the entire time on the dusty, rut-filled road to Wichita Falls fretting about the poor impression she would make to her new husband because of the unfortunate circumstances that occurred during her travels. She read about husbands having their marriages annulled due to false representation and wondered if the same would happen to her once Douglas took a look at her bedraggled person. There was nothing she could do about it. Her future was in the hands of fate. She just hoped fate would be a little kinder than it had been so far.

That was not to be.

She squatted to reposition the yoke on her shoulders and slowly stood up, being careful not to spill the life-sustaining liquid in the interim. Her thighs proved much stronger since she arrived three months earlier, making her movements look smooth and easy.

As she crossed what constituted as a small courtyard for the humble ranch, she spotted a horse and rider off in the distance. She did not need to strain to see who it might be. She knew it was Nellie Wilson performing her weekly check.

Elise did not know where she would be, had it not been for Nellie's kindness. They stumbled upon each other by chance at the station. Elise was

searching the streets for her husband, Douglas, and Nellie was scoping the travelers for her niece, Anna.

Elise met Anna on the train during her trip west. They were about the same age and from similar family backgrounds, but that was where it ended. Anna's father died the year before. Her mother was sending her to live with her mother's sister, Nellie, while she sought a replacement for her late husband. Not only did Anna think finding a husband would be a daunting task amongst the few who survived the war between the states, but she found the concept of being shoved out of the way for her mother to have a better advantage in snaring a man revolting. She considered her mother far too old for such shenanigans. Since they were financially well off, she could not comprehend her mother's neediness.

Reluctant to leave the luxuries and advanced society of the east, Anna monitored her surroundings carefully as the train continued west. By the time they reached Kansas, she saw enough to make her decide to take matters into her own hands. She bid Elise goodbye, wished her well, and asked her to tell her Aunt Nellie that she was sorry, but she would not be joining her after all before she purchased a ticket to return east.

Nellie reciprocated Elise's disappointing news with some devastating news of her own. Douglas was found dead on the road to town just that morning. Some said he fell from his horse and hit his head on a boulder while others say he was the victim of a robbery. Nellie thought it might be both.

So far, Elise was married on paper only. Now, the paper bride was a paper widow.

"Hello!" shouted Nellie as she reined her mare up next to the hitching post near the front porch.

"I made apple pie," Elise said as she poured the contents of her buckets into a large barrel. "It's still warm."

“What time did ya get up to fuss like that?” Nellie asked with a shake of the head.

“I need better bedding,” Elise complained as she held the small of her back and motioned for Nellie to follow her inside.

“That Eliza Farnham should be shot for her deceit,” Nellie huffed as she scuffed the dirt from the soles of her boots on the edge of the roughhewn porch before following Elise into the tiny cabin.

“I’d settle for reimbursement of my money, so I could buy passage back home,” Elise sighed. “I have been looking and looking for any money or gold Douglas might have hidden away with no luck.”

“Are ya sure he had any?” Nellie asked as she helped herself to a slice of pie. “Ya were lied to about the state of this place. He could have lied about being a miner too.

“There’s water in the basin to wash your hands with,” Elise said in a flat tone.

“You’re such a dandy girl, ain’t ya?” Nellie chuckled as she made her way to the basin and immersed both weathered and gnarled hands into the shallow bowl. Her head twisted and turned as if she was looking for something. “I thought there was a spring out back.”

“He never got around to piping it into the house,” Elise said wistfully. Nellie’s brows knit together as she said, “That would sure make life easier.”

“I make two trips a day to the creek,” Elise volunteered. “Sometimes three.”

“Good heavens, gal,” Nellie gasped. “Whatever do ya do with all that water?”

“Make tea, for one thing,” Elise said as she reached for the can she kept her tea leaves in and opened the lid. “I found this on the back of the top shelf,”

she said as she pointed to a wooden shelf placed high enough on the wall over the stove to necessitate a stool to reach the things placed on it. "Douglas had a decent supply of tea and coffee. This one smells like home."

"I ain't never developed a taste for tea," Nellie said as she wrinkled her nose and then popped a finger full of pie in her mouth. "It won't keep your belly full in the winter months," Nellie scolded. "What do ya plan on doing when the snow comes?"

"The garden is yielding a goodly number of crops," Elise said as she continued to prepare the tea. "I have also collected a fair number of apples and nuts. Do you want me to brew some coffee?"

"Do ya have a root cellar?" Nellie asked as she held up her hand and shook her head to indicate 'no' to Elise's offer to make coffee for her.

"There is a large hole dug in the ground that is covered with wooden planks," Elise said. "I think that might be what Douglas used for a root cellar because I found some old potatoes, onions, and squash in there."

"Any amount of snowfall on those planks and those skinny arms of yours won't be able to lift them off to get to your food," Nellie mused. "What about heat? Have ya been able to handle the axe and cut yourself some wood for the winter?"

"The supply Douglas chopped is running low. I need to find the means to leave here before I die," Elise said as she poured hot water from the kettle, she kept hot on the stove into the tin pot she used to brew tea in.

"Maybe ya should winter with me and Jake," Nellie offered.

"What about the daily care of the animals?" Elise asked.

"I thought ya was going to sell them off and use the money as part of your passage home," Nellie said.

"There is only a pig, a milking cow, and a few chickens. I rode out to see the herd yesterday," Elise said. "It looks like it is shrinking."

“Probably thieves,” Nellie offered. “The word’s out that you’re alone. If ya don’t sell those beasts soon, there’ll be nothing to round up come time.”

Elise pushed a stray lock of her thick, auburn hair behind her ear and said, “If I ever get back home, I will never complain about being bored again.”

TWO

Nate adjusted the collar of his full-length woolen coat as he stepped out of the three-story, faded red brick Philadelphia building into the crisp fall afternoon air. There was a distinctive skip in his step as he placed his bowler hat atop his smooth raven hair. He was just given his first big assignment as an employee of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. Up until then, his assignments had been small and seemingly insignificant. He wanted to have an opportunity to prove himself to the agency. This new assignment was that opportunity. He was to be partnered with Joseph Kennedy and Oliver Sullivan, which suited him just fine.

Joseph and Oliver served with him under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Biddle at the battle of Gettysburg. Experiences like that brought people together. That practically guaranteed them to be an efficient working team. At least, that's what Alan Pinkerton thought.

"Kimble, wait up!" Joseph called as he followed Nate down the stone steps.

"Can you believe the luck of it? I just can't seem to shake your sorry ass," Nate laughed.

"We make the complete package, my good man," Joseph said with a grin.

"Where's Sullivan?" Nate asked as he looked in the direction they just came from.

"He's got a woman to appease," Joseph said. "Damned nuisance if you ask me. You can't do this job with a woman hanging on your arm."

"Not well, I don't think," Nate said with a thoughtful scowl.

"You aren't gonna go get yourself all tied up with one, are you?" Joseph asked in earnest.

Nate scowled as he grumbled, "Lilith pretty much fixed that."

"She sure was a sneaky one," Joseph agreed.

"Damned right," Nate nodded.

"I hear he is a heavy drinker," Joseph said in a hushed tone.

"She wanted his fortune and family name," Nate shrugged.

"Yeah, the name," Joseph smirked.

"She deserves what she got," Nate said with a tone that hinted of bitterness.

"I still can't believe she wrote to you for so long after she married that shit head," Joseph said.

"He saved me," Nate pondered aloud. "I should thank him."

"Yeah," Joseph agreed. "I feel a little sorry for him. All I did was witness the deceit and I'm cured of ever wanting a woman."

"At least not for a long time," Nate said.

"Never," Joseph reiterated.

They walked back to their hotel in silence while their minds worked on making lists of what needed to be done before they boarded the train headed for Oklahoma the following afternoon.

Since the short notice was an inconvenience for Nate and Joseph, they could only imagine the impact it had on Oliver Sullivan. Nate shuddered at the thought of how Oliver's longtime girlfriend and intended fiancé, Alice Smyth, would respond to the news. She made it perfectly clear to Oliver that she expected a proposal, followed by a wedding, before the New Year. This assignment was surely going to twist her pantaloons. He would not put it past the spoiled socialite not to confront old man Pinkerton himself on the matter.

Nate thought Oliver's situation a good example of another reason for him to be grateful he was single and free.

“This assignment will change our careers. Let’s get a drink to celebrate,” Joseph suggested.

“I have some things to take care of before I leave. A year is a long time,” Nate said. “How about we meet up for dinner and then we can celebrate?”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Joseph said with clear disappointment. “I have some things to take care of too.”

Nate studied his friend before asking, “Did you get fitted for your suit?”

“When did you do that?” Joseph asked with raised brows.

“Yesterday,” Nate replied.

“Hell, you didn’t get assigned until today,” Joseph complained.

“I keep my ears to the ground,” Nate said with a grin. “Tell Mr. Simon to put I the suit on my bill.”

“I can pay for it myself,” Joseph said as he squared his shoulders.

“I expect to be paid back out of your first paycheck,” Nate said with a firmness he did not mean.

He really did not expect to see any money from Joseph, and he was fine with that. Just a few months earlier, Nate became the most financially fortunate one of the three friends, with Oliver second in line.

Nate was raised in what would be deemed as quality surroundings in the eyes of Philadelphia society. Although he ran in the circle of socialites, he was not considered to be in the hub of that circle, which was one of the things that goaded Lilith. When he received a visit from the Miller Legal Firm informing him of an inheritance from an uncle on his mother’s side, all that changed; or would have, had Nate wanted to make the truth of his inheritance public.

Margaret Kimble’s brother, Richard Kincaid, was a wealthy, widowed rancher with no children. Since Nate was the closest relation, the fortune Richard amassed -which included an impressive amount of money along with an equally impressive cattle ranch on the Oklahoma/Texas border- was left to him.

Oliver -whose family of equally privileged background operated an apothecary because they wanted to; not because they had to- ran in the same circle of Philadelphia society with Nate. His fortune would have been comparable to the settlement left Nate by his father prior to Nate's inheritance from his uncle.

After learning of his friend's good fortune, Oliver was quick to point out that, had Lilith only fulfilled her promise of waiting for him to return from war, she could have lived wherever and however she desired. This observation stirred panic in Nate over the potential of being taken in by another deceitful female seeking his fortune under the guise of loving him. Right then and there he swore his friends to secrecy. Since he had limited confidence in his sister and mother's ability to abstain from gossiping out of pride and desire to elevate their status amongst the socially elite, he withheld his true worth from them as well. Except for Mr. Miller of the Miller Legal Firm, Joseph and Oliver were the only ones who knew the true value of his inheritance. He intended to keep it that way until the time came when he felt confident divulging it. Lilith's lies and deceit had truly left their scars.

The reports provided to Nate about his uncle's ranch led him to believe that it was in good hands with the current overseer. This was reassuring since, from the way things looked, it would be a while before he would be able to inspect the place. Still, believing the adage, 'When the cat's away, the mice will play,' Nate decided to have his lawyer plant a ranch hand in the mix who would provide regular reports on the happenings of the ranch.

He and Joseph parted company outside of the tailor shop. Nate reiterated the fact that he expected to be billed for Joseph's suit. After a little more grumbling, Joseph agreed and walked inside.

Nate smiled with satisfaction at the thought of being able to help his war buddy. They knew each other growing up and were on friendly terms

whenever their paths crossed, but they were part of social classes that kept them separated for the most part. It was not until they fought side by side that a true bond formed.

The war took its toll on everyone, but none more than the disadvantaged. Joseph's father was killed during the second year of fighting. Less than a year later, his mother died of consumption; leaving Joseph's fourteen-year-old sister and ten-year-old brother to do the best they could to keep their little farm operating enough to support them until Joseph returned from fighting and bring some semblance of normality back into their lives. Caring for his siblings when he was barely able to care for himself was a burden Nate's twenty-year-old friend said little about. He did not need to. Nate had eyes to see and ears to hear. He knew fully the struggles Joseph went through without so much as a complaint.

Nate reached the office of the Miller Legal Firm and stopped outside long enough to pull his mind into focus on the matter at hand. He wanted to have his affairs in order as best he could before he embarked on an assignment that would demand his full attention. He also had a family depending on him. Although his mother was still alive and well, she also became a widow during the war and his sister lost her fiancé. This left two needy women looking to him for comfort and support: both emotionally and monetarily. He wanted to arrange for a trust fund to be created for their care, as well as draw up a Last Will and Testament in the event he did not make it back from this assignment alive.