

IT ISN'T A SHOTGUN WEDDING,
BUT THERE ARE PLENTY OF GUNS INVOLVED

ANNE GARBOCZI EVANS

PLUM PUDDING
Bride

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The Plum Pudding Bride

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Dedication

To my mother who taught me how to read, and my
father who taught me how to write.

1

There she was, the girl he'd loved for seven years. And she was sorting preserve cases at *his* store, as she'd done for the last four years. She stood not six paces from him, and yet so far away.

Peter's fingers squeezed the ring box in his jacket. This time, he was going to go through with it, no matter if she pointedly changed the subject, or hastily found excuses to be elsewhere, or pushed other eligible young women at him. Dadburn it, today he'd have his answer, a "yay" or a "nay" instead of living in this wretched bog of uncertainty.

The store had already closed. He just needed to grate the key in the locks while Patience tidied the shelves. The falling winter sun made long shadows on the floor between them. Now she had put down the strawberry preserves and taken an inventory list. She moved towards the mercantile section.

His heavy boots clomped on the hardwood floor, but his heart clomped louder. His fingers tightened around the red velvet box. It was a white-gold ring and a miner's cut diamond. Size six, as he'd discovered four years ago when he'd stolen her glove.

Patience's brown hair twisted back around her ears. She always complained it lay too flat and said her younger sister teased her about having a mottled complexion. But he'd never seen hair shine like hers, and her soft skin set off brown eyes that possessed a

luster no girl in Gilman could match. And her smile. Oh, her smile. She could turn Antarctica into the tropics by just curving her lips.

A head-high shelf of baking perishables hemmed them in on one side while bolts of fabric made up the other side of the narrow aisle.

"Patience Callahan, will you—" Peter slid the box out of his pocket and started to lower one knee to the ground.

Her gaze flicked to the ring box. "Why, Peter"—she stepped into him, blocking all attempts at kneeling—"I've been meaning to tell you my news."

Her long fingers were slender. Yet they could move lickety-split when sorting spools or organizing canned goods.

"I just received this." Patience tugged a newspaper clipping out of her pocket along with a small daguerreotype. "This is Arnie Dehaven. He's a Montana rancher. I've answered his mail-order-bride advertisement and I'm marrying him."

"What?" Peter's jaw gapped open as he stared at the black-and-white photo. It showed a hulk of a man who looked as if he hadn't shaved in a week. The man's brow sloped beneath a shabby coat.

"I'm marrying him." She smiled sweetly and from her other pocket produced a train ticket and a letter.

The opening line of the letter read: *To my loveliest Paytience.*

Peter scowled. "He misspelled your name."

"Because he was in such a hurry to write back. Only ten days after I sent my letter, I got his answer. I'm traveling out by train in two weeks. Arnie's twenty-five miles from town, so he'll drive in to get me. It takes a strong man to weather the Montana

wilderness.”

“Or a stupid one,” Peter muttered under his breath. Yes, he’d never ranched or braved sub-zero temperatures with only a steed and a wool blanket. But he’d worked hard with his pa at the railroad throughout his youth and then been smart enough to start up a successful store that had flourished in the last six years. What was so wrong with that?

She stuffed the picture and letter into her apron pocket. Only Patience Callahan could make the thick duck cloth of the store’s work aprons look dainty and overwhelmingly desirable.

“Why marry a stranger? There’s plenty of men here in Gilman.” Not that he’d want her marrying any of them. But with her wit and face she could capture any heart. “You wouldn’t see your family for years at a time.” Surely her pa hadn’t agreed to this?

“That is where we are different.” She said it as if she’d already made up her mind.

Who was he fooling? Of course, she’d made up her mind against him. Ever since her twenty-first birthday when she’d turned him down for the Fourth of July picnic for the third year running, he’d known it was a one-sided love. But women could change, right? He’d become more successful every year; all of the townsfolk respected him. He’d even ridden in the sheriff’s posse a few times and was now a fair shot with a pistol after some lessons.

“I don’t desire safety. I want adventures. Marrying a stranger, moving to a far-off land, well, state—it’s the stuff of my dreams. I’d suffocate living in the same town I grew up in, going to my mother’s monthly tea, sitting in the same church pew...”

Suffocate marrying him, more like. But he was

interesting, he really was. He read Shakespeare at night sometimes, between cataloguing the store receipts and drawing up order summaries, and he rode up to the mountain lakes at least once a season to see the sunrise. He could switch church pews too, even though he had sat on the exact same knothole since he was seventeen, if it would make her happy. If only she'd give him a chance.

"...have Mrs. Clinton needlepoint the exact same gown she makes for all the babies of Gilman," Patience finished with disdain.

Babies, what inspired that thought? Surely she wasn't planning on having babies with the unshaven lummoX in the picture? Wait, she was. His legs went heavy, and for the briefest of seconds he lost the ability to move. He couldn't let this happen. He couldn't.

What did she know about this Arnie? He was probably an ignorant clod who'd failed in civilized parts, so built some soddy in the wilderness where he chewed tobacco and beat wives to death. Did he read? Did he write? Obviously not. He couldn't even spell his future bride's name.

"Don't look so downcast, Peter." Patience smiled at him, that lovely smile that made his world spin. "I found the perfect girl for you."

"What?" Peter frowned.

She acted as if she knew he'd meant to propose.

"My little sister, Kitty, has taken a bit of a fancy to you. She's a lovely girl. Young, beautiful, maybe not highly intelligent, but she's got common sense and would make you a stunning bride."

Young? Yes, seventeen, a mere child. And he didn't care for the rosy-cheeked, blonde-haired, milk-colored-skin look. Kitty'd laugh at anything. *Anything*,

even Reverend Gray's puns.

"I've another two weeks before I leave, and I'd be delighted to chaperone if you court Kitty."

Court Kitty! As if he'd even consider the idea when Patience was in his world. Beautiful, knowledgeable, wonderful Patience.

"What do you say?" She'd taken out the daguerreotype of Arnie again and pressed it to her heart.

He wanted to be sick right there on his thrice-scrubbed general-store hardwood.

As she tilted the picture to look at it, she smiled prettily, lending color to her perfectly molded cheeks. Even the curve of her elbow, just visible through brown calico, could melt his heart into a puddle. And he wasn't letting any Arnie Dehaven press his hand to that perfectly molded elbow.

"All right, I'll ask Kitty out." He had a plan, and he'd court Kitty Callahan or worse, if that's what it took, before he'd see the sweetest, most intelligent, loveliest woman in the world married to some Montana swindler. And he'd known Kitty since she was in short skirts. Foolish fancying or no, he'd wager he could talk her into helping him.

~*~

After waving a greeting in the yard to Pa Callahan and being offered buckwheat pancakes by Ma Callahan, Peter found his way back to the sitting room. Patience was working at his store. He knew that because he'd scheduled her to work.

With a rustle of starched skirts, Kitty entered the room. She looked a little older and her gold hair was

caught up in a bun rather than pigtails. But courting her was still a ridiculous prospect.

"Mr. Foote, please tell me you aren't here because of my sister's meddling. The idea that I could ever suit a man like you—"

"Please take a seat." Peter gestured to the settee and sat on a wood chest. "I am here because of your sister's meddling. But I'm here to meddle in your sister's meddling."

"Oh?" Kitty bounced onto the settee's arm.

"As you know, Patience is the sweetest, loveliest, kindest, most astute—"

Kitty coughed.

Perhaps he was laying on the adjectives a bit strong. Peter shifted back to lean on the peach wallpaper. "Anyway, I've loved her since I was ten, so I can't just let her marry this Montana stranger. I thought maybe if we agreed to this silly courtship and had Patience chaperone—I don't know. Maybe she'll see something in me she hasn't before?" As he laid out the plan, it sounded too good to be true.

Patience had known him for half a decade or more. Why would a few weeks make a difference?

Kitty crossed her ankles. "You know my sister isn't perfect, Mr. Foote?"

"What?" Peter blinked.

"You've got some dream in your head as if she's an angel and you're presumptuous to even think she'd look on a mere mortal. To be honest, I think she's laboring under the same delusion."

"What are you saying?"

"She's twenty-five, which is practically a spinster. I know you are entranced by the mere lock of her hair blowing in the wind, but objectively speaking, she's

not incredibly pretty. She's real book smart, but she swears she'll never teach school because all those teeming young'uns drive her loony. Don't know how that bodes for childrearing. She took care of a kitten once, loved the wrinkled little thing. Until it died because she'd just got her hands on a copy of some ennui-inspiring French novel, Victor Hugo somebody, and she forgot to feed it. Oh, and she's a terrible cook. Can barely make edible gruel."

"I ate her apple pie. It was tasty." He didn't know how to coherently defend the starved kitten or the spinster part. Though he still thought even if she lived to be eighty, she'd have dozens of suitors vying for her hand. Her mere presence filled a room with warmth like the sparks of an oak fire.

"If you like the soggy, half-baked taste. She actually can cook decent if she puts her mind to it, but she's always got her nose in *The Three Musketeers* or some other unendingly long work of literature. Which is where she gets these impossible notions about husbands. If you want her, you'll have to become more Spanish buccaneer-like."

Peter crossed his arms. They were strong from years of moving crates and loading merchandise. "What do you want me to do?" He swept out his shop every day and wore a work apron when he cleaned up iced-cream spills. Scarcely Spanish-buccaneer material.

"Be confident. That's what she likes about this impossible Arnie Dimwit and her unpronounceable French heroes. Arnie bought her a train ticket before they'd even exchanged a second letter."

"I'm not confident." Not particularly, or he would have gotten his proposal out six years ago. As things stood, he still hadn't properly proposed, even though

he was fairly certain Patience knew what he'd intended. "Wait, you think he's impossible too?"

"Of course. He's a stranger with oversized biceps who can't spell. He might be a wifebeater, for all we know." Kitty tossed a lock of hair back over her ear.

"Exactly what I was thinking." Peter half stood. "Now if you could just help me tell Patience this—"

"No." Kitty brought her creamy white fist down on the wood chest with a resounding bang. "There will be *no* cajoling, *no* begging, and absolutely *no* mentioning your superior steadiness. Patience does what she wants. What you have to do is make her *want* you."

"But isn't steadiness in a man a good thing? I mean, especially for a woman. A woman's vulnerable with being the weaker vessel, and childbearing, and mothering. Surely a woman needs a steady man, who will—"

"You know this. I know this. Patience, unfortunately, does not." Kitty cut him off again. She *was* starting to remind him of her older sister.

A sigh escaped Peter's lips. Trust Patience to discover the virtue of steadiness when she was freezing in a soddy, expecting her third child while her husband drank at the saloon.

"So, first things first. We need to arrange a desperate situation where you can rescue her. That's what happens in all her novels. I think I'll hire a drunk from the saloon to drive my pa's wagon careening down the east road while we're walking, and then you can jump in front of the wagon and drag Patience to safety. She'll find it very romantic." Kitty smiled, a much more cheerful smile than the brush with death she described should inspire.

“What if I’m not quick enough?” A speeding wagon could kill Patience.

“Don’t be such a wet blanket. No wonder Patience finds you dull. Oh, and do you know how to flirt?” Kitty poised one hand on her left hip and jutted her shoulder a little out, showcasing what bosom the seventeen-year-old had.

“Sure.” He’d flirted before. Four years ago, he’d once told a girl—well, Patience—that her eyes were the color of plum pudding. Considering it was her favorite dessert, he’d expected her to be more pleased by that compliment.

“Good, because I’ll flirt outrageously with you on our outing. Jealousy’s always a good stimulant.”

Seated on the wooden chest, he scratched the back of his neck and eyed the animated girl. He wasn’t half sure this was a good idea. But what else was he to do—sit back and let the Montana lummoX steal his girl?

“Oh, and can you get up a minute? You’re sitting on her hope chest and I promised I’d tat some lace for the wedding unmentionables she just finished.”

He jumped up as fast as if the chest lid had turned to red-hot iron. This plan had better work.

2

Arm in arm with Kitty, Peter strolled down the abandoned bit of road outside town that she'd selected. The December day had an unseasonable warmth.

A few paces behind, Patience followed along, head bent over her latest literary acquisition.

He craned his neck wistfully.

With a whack, Kitty brought her fan down on his arm. "Confidence, remember?" She twisted around herself. "Gotten any letters from Arnie Dimwit recently, sister?"

At that, Patience did look up. "It's Dehaven, Kitty. Dehaven."

"Oh, my mistake." Kitty fluttered her eyelashes prettily, like a young woman does when she wants attention.

Peter wished Patience would want his attention. Would she flutter her eyelashes like that at Arnie? Not if he could help it. *Confidence. Confidence.* Peter crossed his arms. Clearing his throat, he sped up the pace a little. "So, Kitty, tell me how your studies are progressing." That sounded confident, right?

She clasped his arm, bringing her pretty blonde head right up to his shoulder and sort of smushing her cheek on the cloth of his jacket arm. "I finished school two years ago, Mr. Foote. All grown up now. Ready to marry." She drew out a meaningful sigh, tipping her chin up to him as she stared dizzily into his eyes.

Peter fought the urge to disentangle his arm and run. This was a disaster. They wouldn't fool the town drunk with their fake courting, let alone the keenest mind in Gilman, Patience Callahan.

The pounding of hooves came from behind. A horse and wagon rounded the bend at an alarming rate.

With a little hop on tiptoes, Kitty pressed her mouth to his ear. "It's time."

A few feet behind, Patience ambled along, nose still stuck in the yellowed pages of her novel.

The wagon was coming fast, too fast. If he got them all run over by a runaway wagon by agreeing to a little girl's plan, Patience would have been better off with Arnie.

"Get off the road, Kitty, quick." Bounding backwards, Peter grabbed Patience's arm.

~*~

At Peter's touch, Patience blinked and looked up from the pages of *The Three Musketeers*.

Outnumbered ten to one, d'Artagnan had just raised his sword. What did Peter want now? She had a vague recollection of him walking arm-in-arm with Kitty while making insipid conversation. She hoped Kitty did fall for him. He'd make the flighty girl a steady, doting husband, if not a particularly exciting one.

"Get off the road." Peter's arm went around her waist as he dragged her to the dead weeds by the side of the road.

He was stronger than she'd expected. His arm felt solid against her waist and the smell of wood shavings,

likely from the packing material for canned goods, clung to him. But Arnie was twice as big, a real mountain of a man at six-foot three, with a brave personality to match. She was almost sure of that.

A careening wagon sped towards them, skidding over deep ruts in the uneven dirt.

Standing on the bouncing buckboard, a highly non-recommended pose at that rate of speed, the man driving the wagon pulled back on the reins. Mud splattered up as he came to a skidding halt in front of them. The man jumped to the ground and pulled out a gun. Staggering, as if one leg was injured, he pointed the gun at them.

Peter directed an accusing glance at Kitty.

Her sister couldn't have possibly known they'd encounter a thief when they took this lonely road.

Patience's fingers clutched her reticule. As much as she was loathe to part with the twenty cents it contained at the moment, being held up by a desperate highway robber was a rather romantic adventure. She'd tell this story to her babies as they clustered peacefully around her feet in Arnie's rustic home.

"Hands in the air," the unshaven man said. His voice was gruff and the smell of liquor clung to his tattered clothes.

"How about I just toss you my reticule?" Patience reached down to unclip the quilted thing.

The man swung forward and shoved her in the chest.

The blow sent her reeling back, boots slipping out from under her. She landed, backside in the mud, only to look up into a pistol muzzle. She gulped.

"I don't take kindly to orders being disobeyed." Leveling the gun at her, the man cocked the trigger.

Her life, all twenty-five years of it, flashed before her eyes. She should have cooked the grits more often in the morning and not made Kitty do it. She should have spent more time in her Bible rather than reading *Les Miserables* for the seventh time. She should have been kinder to Peter. He meant well, after all. She brought her arm up in a vain attempt to shield her head from the coming bullet.

From somewhere to the left, she heard Peter's voice, the last voice she'd hear before the angels singing and glory.

"Was this really necessary, Kitty?" Then Peter ran towards the man.

The robber swung his gun over to Peter.

Ducking, Peter charged forward, head down, and grabbed the man around the waist. He twisted the man's wrist with his other hand.

The man swung forward with a fist. The blow landed on Peter's jaw and he grunted something that sounded like "Kitty."

If he was thinking about her when he was this near death, maybe he did have feelings for the girl.

Using both hands, Peter threw the man backwards.

The man stumbled into the mud but recovered his gun arm.

Peter stood there fearlessly, as if the man couldn't end his life with just the click of a trigger. "Hand over the weapon." Peter's voice was as matter-of-fact as if he was sorting preserves.

She'd never taken him as the type to be calm in the midst of danger.

"Never." Raising himself on one arm, the man aimed the gun.

Peter kicked the man's hand and the gun went flying back onto the road. The impact made it discharge, sending a bullet up into the trees.

Peter stared at the quivering leaves where the bullet had passed, and then he leapt for the gun. Grabbing up the weapon, he pulled back the hammer and aimed it at the ground. He squeezed the trigger. Dirt spat up from a bullet, but his wrist held the gun steady despite the recoil.

Patience's eyes opened a little wider. She'd never seen him discharge a gun before. The gun smoke puffed up to his chest and powder residue covered his hands. She'd never noticed how strong his hands were.

Jerking to his feet, injured leg notwithstanding, the criminal ran forward.

Raising the gun, Peter brought the pistol butt down hard over the man's head. The robber fell unconscious.

"Kitty." Peter's voice was tight. "This gun is loaded."

His first thought was for her sister, not her? Patience got up, brushing the mud from her destroyed skirt. Peter *always* thought of her first. Even that time at the barn raising when she was competing in the cornhusking bee and he'd slipped her five of his ears so she could win the heifer she wanted, he'd thought of her first.

"That's not the man I hired." Kitty's face was pale as death.

Hired?

"Oh." Peter took a deep breath and swallowed so hard Patience could hear it. "Well." Peter paused.

He glanced over to the wagon the man had been driving. One of the horses had spooked in the gunfire,

but the other stood steady, dragging the wagon around in a circle. There was a length of rope in the back. "I guess we'll get this man to Sheriff Westwood."

Peter bound the man and, with a few heaves, managed to roll him up into the wagon.

A noise came from behind.

Patience turned towards it.

Far back on the road, another wagon careened down the road, raising dust.

A scowl crossed Peter's face. "We're going home." Grabbing the arms of both young women, he handed them up to the buckboard.

~*~

Patience winced as she put weight on her left foot. It had bruised in her tumble on the road. But it wasn't bad. There was just enough pain to be a thrilling reminder of the excitement of that hour. She placed the raspberry jam behind the boysenberry.

Peter was sweeping the store with vigorous brushstrokes. The dust sailed knee-high as straw broom bristles thwacked against the wood. He almost made the activity look heroic. And the way he braved gunfire today...it had been spectacular. A manly black-and purple bruise stretched from the right side of his jaw to his ear.

Standing the last peppermint stick in its place, Patience sidled closer. She smiled at Peter. "You saved my life today."

"It was unintentional." His teeth gritted shut. Setting down the broom, he pulled out his ring of keys and marched to the back of the store.

For the first time in a long time, she followed him.