



White Rose
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Second Chances

Cindy K. Green

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by

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Contact Information:

titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com

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Ellie Westin wrung her fingers as the trail hands straggled back into White Bluff that dusty September afternoon. Any minute Joe would be among them. Her heart rate sped upward before she could stop it. Then her face warmed into what must be a blush of anticipation. She had to stop doing such things and gain control of herself.

Blowing out a quick breath, she dabbed her moist brow and sauntered back into the boarding house. She couldn't care less if Joe Cameron returned home or not. He'd had his chance, and she was through with him. God had plans for her life, and she hoped they didn't include living at Miss Rosa's as a maid, cook and washer-woman until she dropped dead of old age. She wanted more than just cleaning up after the dudes and cowpokes who visited as they passed through to bigger and better places. She dreamed of being a wife and a mamma.

She'd given Joe two years of her life to work up the courage to ask her to marry him, and he never had. He never even hinted at it. Well, maybe he just wasn't the marrying kind. That was Miss Rosa's guess anyway. And maybe she was right. It didn't take most folks long to make up their minds and get hitched out here. There wasn't time for such nonsense as courting.

Scrunching her eyes shut, she leaned back against

the wall of the hallway. Feelings of regret swirled around in her stomach. Ellie knew she shouldn't feel guilty about what she'd done while Joe was gone. She really didn't have a choice. It was high time she thought about her future.

In her heart of hearts, she still hoped Joe would hop to it and ask her to marry him, but she knew he wouldn't. She knew he'd just keep carrying on as they had all this time 'til she was too old to have babies. Drastic measures were in order. And Lord help her, she'd stepped out on a limb this time, but one way or the other she'd be someone's wife by the end of the week.

After grabbing a broom, Ellie returned to the porch and began to sweep dirt and debris off its surface. Her mind, however, couldn't stop thinking about Joe. She couldn't help pondering on his gray-blue eyes, the way they crinkled when he smiled and the way her heart beat when he looked at her. *Oh, Joe! Why, why do you punish me so?*

A horse pulled to an abrupt halt in front of the boarding house, kicking more dirt onto the porch. She stopped sweeping as she snapped her attention to the street. Her heart began to hammer a million beats a second, or so it seemed.

"Ellie, darling, are you a sight for sore eyes!" Joe vaulted off his horse and came bounding up the stairs toward her.

She set the broom against the building and composed her trembling. It wouldn't do to let him know how much she'd missed him. How much she wanted him to sweep her into his arms and give her a nice kiss. The time had passed for such things.

"Welcome back, Joseph." She crossed her arms

low in front of her dingy, black skirt.

"Joseph?" He frowned at her. "Joseph is it? Is my Ellie irked at me? And here I thought she'd be happy to see me after three weeks."

"It is nice to see you, Joseph. I hope you're doing well."

"No more of this Ellie Westin." He grabbed her around the waist, hoisted her off the ground and swung her in a circle just as she imagined he would.

Though she couldn't let him know, she loved it. Loved being close to him and feeling his heart pounding through his homespun shirt. Pleasure spiraled through her to see the sparkle in his eyes and know he was well and safely home. How she would miss him when she left.

"Joseph Cameron, set me down."

"All right, woman. All right. Don't get your feathers all ruffled. Are you just anxious for the present I brought ya?"

"No, Mr. Cameron. Nothing of the kind. It's nice to see you again before I leave town, but I have some things to be getting to so I must say, good day, to you." She tipped her head, lifted her skirts, and was on her way to the doorway when Joe blocked her path.

He shifted his dust-covered hat to the back of his head with the gray of his eyes growing dark. "What's this you're saying about leaving town?"

"Just that. I'm engaged to Hank Andrews, and he's joining the wagon train for Nevada on Monday. We're to be married on Saturday."

She waited to see the result of her announcement register in his face. First his features froze as though he'd turned to granite; then his eyes softened to something that could only be described as sadness. Her

heart twisted. He'd been so happy to see her and now...well, she had no time to feel sorry for him. He might enjoy her company and tell her he loved her, but he must not love her enough if he couldn't pop that all important question.

"I see, Miss Westin." He took off his hat and slapped it against his leg. "If that don't beat all." The sadness disappeared and now he was just angry.

She'd seen that look in his face before. Like the time Aaron Hessenbeck outbid him for her basket at the box social. She'd never seen him so mad. Nor so gracious either when moments later he gave her a smile.

"And just when did this happen," he demanded.

"Last week," she lifted her chin up to him.

"Last week? You knew I was coming home. I sent you a letter from Cheyenne."

"Yes, you did. Honestly, Joe, I don't know what all the fuss is about. We've been friends for a good long time. I thought you'd be happy to see me married."

He stepped right up to her until they were inches apart—just barely respectable to all the townspeople's eyes—(especially Miss Rosa's) since Ellie was now an engaged woman. "I sure would be if you were marrying the right man." His deep, masculine voice had turned low and soft with a rough quality.

"And what's wrong with Hank Andrews?" Her face edged a bit closer to his.

"Hank's an old man."

"He's a God-fearin' man and able to provide for a wife. He inherited a silver mine near Eureka, and that's where we're headed."

"Mining? You're going to be a miner's wife. You don't know a thing about mining, and neither does

Hank. It's folly, Ellie. This whole antic is ridiculous."

Hands on hips, she stared him down. "You think it's ridiculous that someone wants to marry me, do you?"

"I didn't say that." His voice lowered into a near growl, and then he heaved out a breath. "Any man would be happy to have you for his wife."

"Humph! I don't believe it. I don't believe one word of it, Joe Cameron." She swished away and into the house with a bang of the front door in his face.

Joe slammed the door to the bunk house glad to find it empty. He dropped his flea trap and saddlebag to the ground and then slumped onto the lower bunk bed. Curving his arms under his head, he wondered what on God's green earth had happened to his world. When he left last month, Ellie was still his girl—the woman he planned to marry and have a future with. Now she'd jilted him. Jilted him for Hank Andrews!

He brought his hands together in front of his chest and punched one hand into his other palm wishing he was hitting a wall, or better yet Hank's nose. What right had Hank to ask Ellie to marry him? And even more so, why had Ellie said yes? Did she care so little for him that she'd forgotten all the loving things he'd said to her over the years. All the hopes and dreams he'd shared with her? Had it all meant nothing?

He leaned over and put his head in his hands. No, he knew Ellie. She had the warmest heart of anyone he'd ever met. She loved him. He knew she did. But then why?

Dear God, why? Why is she doing this to me...to us?

Suddenly he knew as though the Lord Himself had whispered it into his ear. It was his own fault.

He'd never spoken of marriage. In all his big talk about his plans for the future, marriage had never been something he'd stated to her. In his heart it had always been implied. Of course he'd marry Ellie. He loved her. She was everything to him. And he'd blown it. She was going to marry another man.

A sense of misery settled near his heart at the thought of never seeing Ellie's pretty smile, never touching her silky soft hair, never growing old with the woman he loved. All because he'd neglected her—neglected to show her how important she was to him. All his hopes and dreams of owning his own land and raising beeves for the market meant nothing if he didn't have her.

Joe clasped his hands together as a tear rolled down his cheek. *Dear God, I can't let her go. What can I do to prove to her that we're meant to be together? What reason would she ever have to take me back now that she has a dependable man offering her marriage and a future?*

Ellie wiped the falling tears from her eyes with her apron and tried to calm the sobs racking deep inside her chest. She knew if she let them out Miss Rosa would know she was crying and come to ask her why. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to think about Joe Cameron ever again. She only wished she was already married and on her way to the silver mines.

Oh, dear God, I'm doing the right thing, aren't I? She fell to her knees. I'm not just being impatient. Joe was never going to marry me, was he? I have a chance to have my own life and my own family. Isn't that what you want for me?

A knock sounded at the door and Ellie jumped to

her feet and started removing her apron. "Ellie, dear, Mr. Andrews is here to take you to prayer meeting."

"Thanks, Miss Rosa. Tell him I'll be right there."

Ellie poured water into the basin and began to wash her face. She looked at her red puffy eyes in the tiny mirror on the wall. "I'm doing the right thing. Hank may not love me now, but he will, and we'll be very happy together."

She finished cleaning up and then quickly dressed in the blue gingham dress with the lace collar—the one Joe said brought out the blue of her eyes. Why did she do it? It wasn't like Joe would even see them at church tonight. He rarely had a chance to make it to mid-week service. But maybe she did hope he'd come and that he'd see her with Hank so he'd be inspired enough to speak his piece. Maybe she did. Perhaps she wanted to give him one more chance to make amends.

No! It was too late for that.

Moments later, she met Hank at the bottom of the stairs. He smiled when he saw her, but he didn't have sparkling blue-gray eyes that made her heart beat pitter-pat. Hank had kind brown eyes and ordinary brown hair just starting to gray. At forty-three years, he wasn't old but he wasn't young either. He'd make a good husband, and at this point that was all Ellie was hoping for.

After the service, Ellie and Hank stepped up to speak with the preacher about their upcoming wedding. It wasn't much later that Hank was called away on some matter regarding his property. While Ellie waited for him at the front of the church, she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and watched as the rest of the congregation headed out of the

church building. That was when she noticed Joe standing near the doorway.

She clutched the worn leather cover of her Bible between her hands and held it against her heart which began beating out an Indian war party rhythm. He'd come. She didn't think he would, but there he was as big as life. Did this mean he hadn't given up on them?

He wore a fresh, white shirt under a navy blue vest with his dark hair brushed back off his forehead. Ellie had to admit she hadn't seen him looking quite so neat and clean in some time. He started coming down the aisle toward her and all of a sudden she realized she'd been staring at him. Staring at his tall, broad frame. Staring at those tender eyes. Staring at the man who would no doubt always have her heart no matter how much she wished he didn't.

Holding his hat under one arm, he gave her a nod and a smile. "Good evening, Ellie." His tone was soft and gentle. Whatever anger she'd seen in him in the afternoon had dissipated, at least for the moment.

"Good evening, Joe." Her voice faltered as she spoke, and she didn't know where to look. If he peeked into her eyes, he'd no doubt know exactly what she was feeling. And she couldn't have that. He couldn't know how much it hurt inside to know that her future would be spent with another man.

"It's a lovely night just perfect for walking." He cleared his throat as though he were nervous. If Ellie hadn't been such an emotional mess inside, she might have laughed. Her Joe nervous?

No, that wasn't right.

He wasn't hers any longer.

Not that he ever had been. Not in a legal sense. Not in a Biblical sense. And now he never would be.

She cast her gaze to the wooden floor as a lump of sadness formed in her throat. If she stood here a second longer, she'd be crying, and she couldn't have Joe see her cry. He needed to believe she was happy—that she'd chosen the life she wanted. It was the only way he would go on happily living the ranching life he loved.

Joe twirled the brim of his hat between his fingers, playing with it over and over. "I've been thinking and I've been praying...well, I'd love to escort you home if that's all right."

She peered into his face to see his eyes fill with hope. Her heart did a double beat, and for one second she almost contemplated accepting even though she knew Hank would return any moment. Hank! Oh, yes, her intended. He'd be back and would be expecting to walk her home to the boarding house.

"Joe..." She couldn't go on. As her chest raised and lowered rapidly, she forced the tears at bay. "That's very kind of you, Joe." Her words came out thick with emotion. "But..."

"Look, Ellie," he took a step closer and lowered his voice. "I want you to be happy."

She forced a smile to her lips. "And I am. I'm getting exactly what I want." Without thinking, she took his hand. "And I want you to be happy too. Be happy, Joe. Be happy and may God bless you."

She dropped his hand and ran out of the building with the tears finally coming to the surface and blurring her vision as she went. Without waiting for Hank, she continued up the street to the boarding house. Obviously she had a lot more praying to do.

"Thank you, Mr. Merritt." Joe stood to shake the

land agent's hand.

"You're very welcome, Mr. Cameron. It's a pretty piece of property. I think you'll be very happy with it. Mr. Andrews is anxious to have the land sold before he leaves town next week."

"Yes, I'm sure he is." Joe folded the deed to his new property and slid it inside his vest pocket. No doubt, Hank Andrews was very anxious to be rid of his Wyoming holding before taking Ellie on some insane quest for wealth in the silver mines.

Outside, the fall weather was cool, the breeze making circles of dust in the street. No one besides Joe seemed to notice the change in temperature. They hurried by on foot, horse or wagon carrying on with whatever business had brought them to town.

Joe had finished his business—at least this part of it. He'd emptied his bank account and taken out a loan for the remainder to buy this property. Now he had to get back to the Davis ranch, his current place of employment. He still had a lot of work ahead of him. And despite all his efforts, Ellie still might not forgive him, but at least he would have tried. At least, he had an alternative for her besides riding out of his life forever.

He mounted his horse and began trotting down the street toward the boarding house. He slowed the mare to a walk as he neared the establishment. The side door swung open, and out came Ellie with a load of wash in a basket. She didn't see him as she plunged full ahead, heading for the back of the building. She pushed back golden hair from her eyes and hoisted the basket onto her hip as she strode over the ankle high grasses.

He wouldn't stop to talk to her. Not yet. But he

had plans, and she was the center of them all.

“Really, Miss Rosa, this is too much. I don’t need such a fine wedding dress. Many a young frontier bride has been married in whatever she considers her Sunday best and I have that blue silk.”

“Now you stay put, Eleanor Westin. Your mamma was my closest friend and when she died I promised I’d look out for you.”

“And you have. You have.” She rotated around to where Rosa had been pinning a hemline on the white silk and lace dress—Rosa’s own wedding dress thirty years ago. “You took me in, gave me a job, and offered me direction after ma and pa.” Uneasiness settled in her chest knowing how much she’d miss them the day she walked down the aisle.

“I wish they were here too, deary.” Taking in a view of Ellie in her gown, Rosa took Ellie’s hands and spread them wide. “Oh, but what a picture you make in this gown. You’re the prettiest bride this town ever did see.”

The creep of a blush moved into Ellie’s face. “I do wish ma and pa were here. Then maybe I’d know for sure if I was doing the right thing.”

“Child, if you aren’t certain there is no reason you have to marry Hank Andrews. You can continue here with me. Point of fact, I’m going to miss you something fierce.”

Ellie leaned over and hugged the plump woman. “I’m going to miss you, too.” A soft sob escaped her. “I’m going to miss a whole lot of things.”

They came apart and the older woman’s nose had reddened and a tear clung to her eyelash. “Deary, if you’re wondering about that good-for-nothing Joe

Cameron, don't."

"Oh, Rosa, he's not a good-for-nothing. He's respectable, kind, and..."

"Yes, and yet he's kept you waiting all these years. It's about time you shook him up."

Ellie stood tall and raised her chin. "I didn't accept Hank's offer of marriage to shake him up. I just figured this might be my only chance for a family of my own."

"And rightly so, I reckon. You poor thing. Well, never you mind. I heard in town that Joe quit the Davis ranch today and plans to take off for Cheyenne."

"He what?" Ellie's stomach seemed to plummet to her toes. Covering her mouth with her hand, she walked a few paces until she could see out the second story window to the town below.

Oh, good Lord, whatever have I done? She'd hoped Joe would just go on as he always had. He seemed happy working the Davis ranch. Why would he quit and leave so suddenly? She'd hurt him more than she'd bargained for, and that had never been her intention.

"Why don't you go ahead and take off the dress now, Ellie. You've had enough for today. We'll finish up tomorrow. Only two more days 'til your weddin'."

"Yes, two more days," she murmured still looking out the window. *Two more days and Joe's already left me.* Loneliness enveloped her like a deep, dark shadow with an ache in her heart which didn't seem likely to go away.

Joe packed his last few things from the bunk house and looked around at the space which had served as home for two years. He'd been happy at the Bar S, but he'd become too comfortable and for that

he'd lost Ellie...maybe. But perhaps God would grant him the opportunity to woo her back. With only one more day until she became Mrs. Hank Andrews, he'd have to think quickly of a way to let her know he wanted her—and not as his girl but as his wife.

He draped his saddle bags over his shoulder and took one more look around. "So long," he whispered to no one and gave a two finger salute. He pushed through the door just in time to get a face full of dust as a horse came to a stomping halt. When the air cleared, he couldn't have been more surprised to see Ellie. He never even knew she could sit a horse and here she was riding like a madwoman. His heart soared at the possibility that she'd come to see him.

She hopped down and came around Miss Rosa's old mare like she was racing a grass fire. The anxiety he'd seen in her when she arrived had vanished and now she was mad. Yes, before him was one angry female.

"Joe Cameron!"

"Yes, Ma'am." He stood still and let her come to him as she pounded down the planks of the breezeway.

"What do you mean leaving the ranch? You love it here. I can't believe you'd just up and leave."

He had a mind to smile at her and his mouth started to curve upwards, but he thought better of it and forced his jaw into a clenched expression. "What do you care what I do, Ellie Westin. As far as I know, you're done with me."

"I ain't done with you, not one little bit."

A spark of hope ignited in his heart. What had she meant by that?

She pulled up a couple feet from him, her temper

cooling as she must have realized how her words sounded. "Joe," she said more gently. "I never meant for you...I mean, you belong here. Don't give it up on my account. You'll get over me before you know it and have a new sweetheart."

"Ellie Westin, I won't ever get over you." He dropped his saddle bags to the ground and strode right over to her. "I love you." Tilting her chin up and leaning down, he kissed her hard and good.

She flung her arms around his neck and answered his kiss with light pleasure.

He held her face between his hands and felt the wetness of tears on her cheeks. "Ellie, Ellie, I don't want any sweetheart other than you."

"Joe, no..." She tried to break out of his embrace but he held her firm. "We can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this."

"You're right. We can't. I'm going to shake the whole thing up and ask you to jilt that good, God-fearin' man, Hank Andrews, and marry me instead."

"What?" She couldn't have looked more astonished or more adorable as her deep blue eyes, still glistening with tears, grew large. "Marry you? How...how can you marry me?"

"Yesterday I quit my situation here and bought Hank's old place. I'm an independent rancher now. Or I will be when I get me some cattle. It won't seem like home without you, Ellie. I figured you knew I meant to marry you someday. I kept thinking it wasn't the right time instead of relying on the Lord to supply our needs."

"No, Joe, it's my fault. I've been too impatient."

He smiled at her with all the love in his heart. "Ellie, darling, you are the most patient woman I

know. What other woman would wait two years for a man who'd never asked. I should have told you I wanted to marry you—to be your husband, the father of your children. You are the love of my life and it would serve me right if you turned me down. I deserve it. But Ellie I certainly don't want what I deserve. I want you. I love you. Please say you'll marry me."

"Oh, Joe..." more tears careened down her cheeks as she nodded as though she couldn't speak. "Yes," she finally got out before laying her head on his chest. He folded her up in his arms knowing he'd never let her go.

Ellie exited the boarding house for the very last time as a single lady. She held on to her veil as her wedding gown whipped in the wind and thunder bellowed in the distance. Smiling, she began to descend the steps. She couldn't care less if they ended up in a world wide flood as long as she still got to marry Joe today.

As she made it to the bottom, a wagon started jiggling by. She looked up to see Hank Andrews. He gave her a polite nod with a straight face. After he passed her, he pulled up on the reigns bringing his packed rig to a stop. He hopped out of the wagon, and Ellie wondered what he had to say to her. He'd been very quiet when she told him she couldn't go with him to Nevada. Perhaps the angry words he'd been searching for had finally come to him.

"Ellie," he nodded again and removed his hat with his hair being blown forward over his forehead as he stood there.

"Morning, Hank. Looks like we're in for quite a storm." Holding on to her veil with one hand, she

shaded her eyes from the debris carried in the wind with the other.

"I thought with it being your wedding day that I might offer you a ride to the church."

Ellie's stomach gurgled a bit with guilt. "Oh, Hank, this was supposed to be your wedding day too. I'm so sorry."

"Never you mind that, Ellie. I knew it was too good to be true when you accepted my offer. I always knew you were meant to be with Cameron." He paused for a second and the wind howled as gusts caused tiny whirlwinds in the street.

Ellie didn't know what to think. He would have done his best to make her happy, but in her heart she knew she would have been yearning for Joe all her life.

"Thank you, Hank. You are a good man." She glanced in his wagon packed up full. "I see you're leaving already."

"Figured I may as well get a head start. He gave a small almost sad smile. "I hope Cameron deserves you."

"He tells me he doesn't deserve me."

"Smart man. I guess no man deserves the woman he loves. He just thanks God she doesn't know it." His mouth curved slightly to one side.

He helped her into the wagon and drove her to the steps of the church where he deposited her back to the ground and drove off.

Ellie pushed open the doors to the church to be met by Miss Rosa standing in the vestibule. "Ellie, child, what's been keeping you?" She rushed over and began adjusting Ellie's veil. "I knew I should have waited and brought you along myself."

"Well, I'm here now. It's not like they can start

without me." She gave the older woman a smile.

After Rosa finished primping on her and handed her a bouquet of wildflowers, Ellie moved to the doorway leading into the church. It pulled open and she saw most of the seats were filled with all their friends and family throughout the White Bluff area. Her heart swelled when she saw Joe waiting for her at the end of the aisle before the preacher. He wore a new shirt and coat as well as a tie. She'd never seen him in a tie. She squeezed her bouquet a bit as she began advancing down the aisle.

Oh, Lord, I never thought this day would come, but you knew for you are a God of second chances.

She met Joe and he took one of her hands while looking lovingly into her eyes. The blue of his eyes looked clearer and brighter than she'd ever seen them. He mouthed the words 'I Love You' just as the preacher started to speak and then Ellie knew her life was finally complete.