



June

BRIDES OF THE WEST

LORI COPELAND

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June

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Prologue

COLD WATER, MICHIGAN

Late 1800s

Billows of white smoke rolled from the train's stack as a shrill whistle announced its imminent arrival. Turning to give Aunt Thalia a final hug, June Kallahan blinked back tears.

"I'll write you the moment I get settled, Aunt Thalia."

The old woman's arms tightened around June's neck, holding on longer than necessary. "I'm going to miss you, child."

"Don't worry about me," June said softly. "It's you I worry about."

"I'll be going to a better place someday very soon. No need for anyone to worry about me. But *of course* I'll worry about you. My age ought to afford me *some* rights. And I'll worry about your sisters. Faith gone off to Texas, Hope to Kentucky." Thalia

Grayson shook her head. "Sakes alive. You've all taken leave of your senses."

June lovingly patted her old aunt's back. "God will take care of us, Auntie."

The engine came to a halt amid a whoosh of steam and squealing brakes. Passengers got off while others hurried to board. The stopover in Cold Water was brief. Smiling, June blew Aunt Thalia a final kiss as she reached for her bag. "Don't worry! I'll be fine!"

Running toward the coach, June determined to keep up her brave facade. Auntie would worry enough without sending her off in a flurry of tears. The conductor caught her hand and lifted her aboard as the train slowly pulled out of the station. Standing on the car's platform, June smiled and waved until Aunt Thalia's stooped frame faded into the distance.

Fighting her tears, June made her way into the coach, wondering if Faith and Hope had felt the same insecurities when they left, two weeks earlier.

A gentleman got up and offered his seat. Murmuring her thanks, June sat down, then buried her face in her handkerchief and bawled. Was she doing the right thing? Should she stay and take care of Auntie—let Faith and Hope be the mail-order brides? Aunt Thalia was old. Who would look after her?

The gentleman leaned forward. "Are you all right, miss?"

June wiped her tears, sitting up straighter. "Yes, thank you. I'm fine."

The enormity of what she was about to do over-

whelmed her. She was off to Seattle—hundreds and hundreds of miles from Cold Water, about to marry a man she knew only by the few letters they'd exchanged.

She was about to marry Eli Messenger, and she didn't even know him.

The idea had made so much sense a few weeks ago. With their father, Thomas Kallahan, dead and Aunt Thalia unable to bear the financial responsibility of three additional mouths to feed, she and her sisters knew they must be keepers of their own fates. The decision to become mail-order brides had not been made easily, nor without a great deal of prayer.

June stared out the window, listening to the wheels clacking against the metal rails, wheels carrying her away from Cold Water to a brand-new life. She thought about her soon-to-be husband, Eli Messenger, and the unfamiliar world that awaited her in Seattle. Eli was a man of God, associate pastor to the famed Isaac Inman, of the Isaac Inman Evangelistic Crusade. Everyone had heard of Isaac Inman—of his unflagging dedication to God, his charismatic personality, how he led hundreds of thousands of lost souls to find salvation. Goose bumps rose on her arms when she thought about meeting the world-renowned minister in person. Not only would she meet Isaac Inman, but she would work beside him! Papa would be so proud of her, were he still alive.

Removing Eli's letter from her purse, she scanned the last paragraph.

Together, we will work for God's Kingdom. Our life will be good, June. I know you must experience moments of doubts about your venture, but I believe God has destined us to be together, to work together for his glory. I eagerly anticipate your arrival and the beginning of what surely promises to be our wonderful life together.

She refolded the letter and tucked it safely back in her purse. Resting her head on the back of the seat, she willed herself to relax. Everything was as it should be.

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack.

Every turn of the wheel carried her farther and farther away from the only life she had ever known.

Biting down hard on her lower lip, she prayed that Eli Messenger was right and that God did, indeed, intend them for each other.

Otherwise, she was heading straight for the pits of—

She caught her wayward thoughts. She would surely, at best, be heading straight for trouble.



“Raining again?” June Kallahan stood on tiptoe to look out the ship porthole. “Doesn’t it ever let up?”

Samantha Harris pressed closer, elbowing a larger peephole in the dirty pane. “Can’t allow a bit o’ rain to spoil your day, lovey. Do you see your intended?”

June anxiously searched the landing area. Eli had said to look for a man, five foot ten, fair skinned, with sandy brown hair and hazel eyes. As she scanned the milling crowd, her heartbeat quickened. Where could he be?

“Do you think he’ll like me, Sam?”

“Oh, ’ow could ’e *not* like you?” Sam gave June’s arm a jaunty squeeze. “You bein’ so comely and all.”

“Comely?” June laughed. She’d struck up an instant friendship with this charming English waif the moment they boarded ship in San Francisco. Sam was en route to Seattle to assist her ailing aunt, who ran a small orphanage. Sam’s accent was pure delight—a touch of cockney and Irish brogue amid the English, with Sam’s own particular manners of speech thrown in for color.

“Goodness, Sam. There isn’t a comely thing about me. My nose is too long, my eyes are too close-set, and this hair! Just look at it, Sam! It’s a bundle of frizz.”

“Shame on ya! It’s beautiful! So dark and curly. Truly, lovey, it is. And those big brown eyes o’ yours are sure to melt his heart.”

June gave a quick shake of her head. “The only comely daughter my papa sired was my sister Hope, although Faith had her share of gentleman admirers.” June patted her hair. “I’d give my aunt Thalia’s prize setting hen for a hot bath and clean clothes before I meet Eli.”

Sam jumped up and down. “Is that him?”

Flattening her nose against the pane, June squinted. “I don’t think so—” Disappointment flooded her. The short, portly man standing at the railing looked nothing like Eli’s description. Did Eli neglect to mention his true age? His letters said that he was twenty-three, but the man standing at the side of the railing, his gaze eagerly skimming debarking passengers, looked older than her papa had been.

Sam pressed closer. “Oh, dear. He’s a bit older than I ’spected.”

“Yes . . . he is—a bit.” A good twenty years older, but it wasn’t the age that mattered so much. What mattered was the trickery. She didn’t approve of trickery—not in any form. Eli was an old man!

She clamped her eyes shut, then quickly reopened them. The man on the dock was still there. Closing

her eyes again, she silently prayed. *Please, please, please don't let that be Eli.*

Again opening her eyes, she sighed. Well, perhaps Eli thought himself young. What did Aunt Thalia say? Age was a state of mind; if you didn't mind, it didn't matter. But then, Aunt Thalia wasn't marrying Eli!

"You say he's an assistant pastor?"

"Yes, to Isaac Inman, the evangelist."

Mustering a stiff upper lip, she gathered her belongings and prepared to meet Eli Messenger.

Sam trailed behind as June descended the gang-plank. June dreaded parting company with the young cockney girl. Sam had been a comfort during the seven-day voyage, and June had grown very fond of her. She hoped they would see each other from time to time.

"I'll miss our teatime talks," Sam confided as she hurried to keep up.

"As will I." June smiled. "Once you're settled, perhaps you can attend services one evening. You can go with Eli and me. You'll be our guest."

"Oh, I'd not be knowing lots about godly men. Met more of the other kind, I have. But Auntie's written of Mr. Inman's Evangelistic Crusade and the wonderful work he's doin'."

June was awash with pride. "Eli is proud to be working with Reverend Inman. He raves about the man's dedication."

"Well, I'll not be in church often. Me mum says

me old auntie is a good woman but a very sick one. I suspect I'll have me work cut out, taking care of orphaned tykes. There'll be no time for churchin'."

"There's always time for churching, Sam."

June returned Eli's smile as she stepped off the gangplank. He had kind eyes—dare she hope he had a youngish heart, too? The man extended his hand with a warm smile. "June Kallahan?"

Nodding, June switched her valise to the opposite hand and accepted his outstretched hand. "Eli Messenger?"

The man appeared momentarily abashed before breaking into hearty laughter. "Oh, my, no! I'm Isaac—Isaac Inman, Eli's employer. But thank you, young lady! You've certainly brightened my day!" He pumped her hand vigorously.

Relief flooded June. "You're not Eli! That's wonderful!" She was instantly ashamed. Her cheeks burned, but Reverend Inman just laughed harder.

"Oh—no, I didn't mean 'wonderful you weren't Eli'; I only meant—" Realizing she didn't know *what* she meant, much less what she was saying, she simply returned his smile. "How nice to meet you, Reverend Inman. Eli speaks highly of you in his letters." Drawing Sam to her side, June introduced her. "Reverend Inman, I'd like for you to meet Sam—Samantha Harris."

Reverend Inman grasped Sam's hand in a friendly grip. "I didn't expect to find two lovely creatures coming off that boat."

“Sam and I met on the voyage.” June anxiously searched the crowd. “Where is Eli?”

Reverend Inman’s features sobered. “Eli has taken ill. He’s asked that I escort you to your quarters.”

June frowned. “Ill?”

Taking her arm, Reverend Inman turned her toward a long row of waiting carriages. Departing passengers milled about, carrying heavy baggage. “Nothing serious,” he assured her. “He’s been afield most of the week, and the weather’s taken a nasty turn. Seems he’s caught a bit of a chill. He thought it best that I come to meet you.” Reverend Inman reached for the women’s valises. “May I take you somewhere, Miss Harris?”

Sam searched the rows of waiting wagons. “Thank you ever so much, but me auntie said she’d send a driver. . . .” She broke into a grin. “Ow, there ’e is now!” A weathered buckboard with *Angeline’s Orphanage* spelled out in large, colorful letters was parked at the back of the row. A white-haired Indian man stood beside the wagon, waiting.

“Are you Angeline’s niece?” Reverend Inman asked, surprised.

Sam brightened. “You know me old auntie?”

“Know of her,” Reverend Inman said. “Fine woman—doing a good job with the children. I understand she’s not feeling well.”

“No, sir, that’s why I’m here. Goin’ to ’elp her, I am.”

Giving June a hug, Sam reached for her battered

valise, her youthful face radiant with excitement. “Promise you’ll come see me? And soon!”

Hugging back, June promised. “The orphanage is located where?”

“On the outskirts of town—not far from the crusade grounds. Me auntie says every man, woman, and child in Seattle ’as heard of Angeline’s Orphanage.”

The two women shared a final brief, warm embrace.

“I’ll be keepin’ you in me prayers, June Kallahan,” Sam whispered.

“As I’ll keep you in mine,” June promised.

Sam walked to the waiting wagon, and Reverend Inman helped June into the carriage, then took his place behind the reins. As the buggy pulled away, June glanced over her shoulder for a final glimpse of Sam. The elderly driver was loading her valise into the buckboard. Scared and filled with apprehension, she turned back to face the road. Homesickness nearly felled her.

Look on the bright side, June! Soon she would be married, taking care of her new husband.

Tomorrow she wouldn’t miss her sisters so much.

Tomorrow she wouldn’t listen so intently for the sound of Sam’s lyrical cockney accent.

Tomorrow God would remove all her fears.

The pungent air reeked of the vast forests of Douglas firs and red cedars. The smell of wet vegetation stung her nose. The rain had slowed to a light drizzle.

“Oh, my! Just look at those mountains! Aren’t they spectacular!” She’d seen pictures of mountains but had never hoped to actually see one.

Reverend Inman clucked, urging the horse through a muddy pothole. “To the east we have the Cascades. To the west, the Olympics. They are quite magnificent, some of God’s finest work.”

From the moment June had accepted Eli’s proposal, she read every book she could get her hands on concerning Seattle. She learned the town was located on a hilly isthmus on Puget Sound. Seattle served primarily as a lumber town and was noted for its abundant natural resources of water, timber, and fish.

“Have you been here long?”

“Seattle is my home. I left for a while, but when my wife passed on, I returned.” His eyes grew distant. “The area is fertile for harvest.”

The clouds lowered, and a cold wind blew off the inlets as the buggy traveled deeper inland. June burrowed into her cloak, wishing she’d worn something heavier. The worsening weather made it impossible to talk. Instead she watched the road, praying God would safely deliver them from the inclement weather.

It was some time before Reverend Inman finally drew the horse to a halt. June’s breath caught at the sight below. A tent, the size of which June had never before witnessed, spread out like a vast city before them. Men, dressed in yellow oilcloth slickers, wrestled with heavy ropes and cables. The heavens

suddenly opened, and the drizzle turned into a deluge. Lightning forked, and the mountains reverberated with the mighty sound of thunder.

June gripped the side of the wagon as Reverend Inman urged the team down the slippery incline. Aunt Thalia's warning rang in her ears. *You're making a mistake, young lady!*

The wagon finally rolled to a stop in front of an unusual-looking octagon-shaped dwelling. June stared at the odd-shaped cinder-block building, thinking it looked very out of place among the ocean of canvas. Sitting low to the ground, the earth-tone complex zigzagged in varying directions, covering at least a half acre of ground. The land surrounding the house unit was barren, with not one blade of grass. In the summer, colorful marigolds and asters might relieve the naked landscape, but today the rain only made it look more bleak.

"We're here," Reverend Inman announced. "Home—for now."

June looked about, fighting another wave of homesickness. The immense revival tent flapped like a giant, awkward bird, two hundred yards to the right of the complex. Home. The connotation sounded peculiar to her, almost frightening.

Climbing out of the buckboard, Reverend Inman extended his hand. "Hurry now, let's get you inside, where it's dry!"

June gathered her damp skirt and stepped down. Thankful to be on solid ground again, she hurried behind Reverend Inman into the shelter of her

strange-looking new home. Shivering, she trailed the minister through the corridor and emerged in a brightly lit parlor where a coal stove burned in the middle of the octagon-shaped room.

Reverend Inman shrugged out of his wet coat, then reached for a small bell and rang it. "I'll have Ettie bring tea."

Momentarily a tiny woman appeared, wearing a flannel nightgown and wrapper. Salt-and-pepper strands peeked from beneath the nightcap framing her weathered face and friendly blue eyes. As Papa would say, she couldn't weigh eighty pounds soaking wet. "You rang, Reverend?"

Reverend Inman smiled with weary gratitude. "I know it's late, but Miss Kallahan and I could use a cup of tea, Ettie. Do you mind?"

"Mind? Of course I don't mind, Reverend. I've been worried about you." She tsked. "Not a fit night for man or beast." She crossed the room, snagging a crocheted throw from a wing chair beside the fire. "You must be Eli's intended."

June nodded, trying to still her chattering teeth. "Yes, ma'am."

"Ettie keeps my house and cooks my meals," Reverend Inman explained. He viewed the wiry woman with open affection. "But, of course, she's much more than a housekeeper. I couldn't manage without her."

"And I couldn't do without you, Reverend. Here now, we need to get you out of those wet clothes. Rain, rain, and more rain," Ettie clucked. "My old

bones can't take much more." Pointing to a door on the right, she ordered June, "Go on, now. I'll bring your things in to you. When you've changed, I'll have tea waiting. Reverend, take off those wet shoes." Scurrying purposefully across the floor, she bent down and stoked the fire. Sparks flew up the stovepipe as the embers caught and the flames grew.

June did as she was told, returning a short time later dressed in a dry pewter-colored wool. The smell of fresh-baked bread drew her to the small table Ettie had set. A heaping plate of scones, blackberry jelly, and a bowl of rich yellow butter surrounded a colorful clay pot of steeping tea. June realized she hadn't eaten since breakfast—a meager fare of tea with toast and butter.

"Come. Sit," Ettie ordered.

Reverend Inman appeared through a second doorway. June wondered how many rooms the quaint-looking building had. "Ahh, Ettie, my dear. Hot scones on a rainy night. How did you know that's exactly what I prayed for on the way home?"

Ettie winked at June. "You've prayed the same prayer for the thirty years I've known you, Reverend. By now, the Lord knows it by heart."

Reverend Inman chuckled, holding his hands to the crackling stove.

Ettie poured cups of steaming tea, adding a generous dollop of cream to the reverend's cup. June listened to the affectionate banter between Ettie and the reverend, deciding she was going to like the friendly housekeeper and the gentle evangelist.

Heavy rain pelted the windowpanes as they drank tea and buttered the hot scones. The room was cozy, with an overstuffed sofa, wing chairs, and wool rugs on the pine floors. Reverend Inman's private quarters, June surmised. A long row of bookshelves on the east wall contained books concerning the ministries of Dwight L. Moody and other prominent evangelists of the time. June thought of how eager Papa would have been to read works about these great men. He'd spoken often of Moody and chorister Ira Sankey. The two men traveled the country, preaching to huge crowds and converting thousands to Christianity.

Ettie fussed around the warm room, setting damp shoes on the brick hearth and draping wet coats over a line strung behind the stove. The room smelled of baked bread and steamed wool.

"Will you be needing anything else, Reverend?"

"No, thank you, Ettie. Is Eli awake?"

"Yes, sir. Parker is with him."

"Parker?" The reverend lifted his cup thoughtfully. "Terrible night for visiting."

"Yes, sir. Terrible. But you know how Parker feels about Eli. He refuses to leave his side."

"Yes, yes. He and Eli are good friends."

"That they are, close as bark on a tree. I'll be taking them both tea and scones now."

"You do that, Ettie. Tell Eli we'll be in to say good night shortly."

Ettie left through yet another doorway, which June assumed led to the kitchen. Swallowing the last

bite of scone and jelly, she stood up, anxious to meet her intended husband. The trip had been long, and her curiosity was blooming. Who was this man she was about to marry? Was he as kind and gentle as Reverend Inman? Was there anything she could do to hasten his recovery?

Wiping his mouth on a white napkin, Reverend Inman smiled. "I see you're anxious to meet your fiancé."

June smoothed the folds of her skirt, hoping her excitement didn't show. "Yes, sir, I am most anxious to meet Eli."

"Then we must delay no longer." Pushing back from the table, the reverend got slowly to his feet. "Follow me."

June accompanied him through a fourth doorway leading down a long, winding hallway. They passed many closed doors before finally stopping. Rapping softly, the reverend called, "Eli? Do you feel up to visitors?"

Momentarily the door opened, and June shrank back when a man so tall, with shoulders so broad she suddenly felt breathless, blocked their way.

His eyes—incredibly blue eyes—looked past her and fixed on the reverend. He nodded. "Isaac."

Reverend Inman met the man's steady gaze. "I know it's late, but Eli's bride has arrived. Does he feel up to a brief visit?"

The man turned and spoke quietly. June couldn't make out his words. In the background, a weak male voice answered.

Stepping aside, the man ushered them into the room. June walked past him, aware of the faint smell of soap and water. The red-and-black flannel shirt and dark trousers he wore were neatly pressed.

Moving to the bedside, Reverend Inman adjusted the wick on the lamp higher. Shadows danced off the walls as rain pelted the windowpane.

A figure on the bed stirred. "Is that you, Reverend?"

"I've collected your bride safely, Eli."

"Thank you, Brother Isaac. Bring her closer to the light," Eli murmured.

June was troubled by the tremor in his voice. He sounded so very weak. What had the reverend said? Eli had taken ill suddenly? He had caught a chill—well, a chill could take the starch right out of a body. If Eli would permit her, first thing tomorrow morning she would concoct Aunt Thalia's poultice, made from garlic, honey, and herbs. Very unpleasant to smell but guaranteed to cure whatever ailed a person.

Reverend Inman reached for June's hand and drew her closer to the light. Smiling, she focused on the man who was soon to be her husband. Illness shadowed his lean face. Hazel eyes—much too bright—searched the shadows for her. His boyish features were flushed red, and an inadequate reddish growth that passed for a beard covered his youthful chin. A line of angry sores dotted his bottom lip from the high fever.

Groping for her hand, he said softly, "Hello, June."

June squeezed his fingers, hot to the touch. "Hello, Eli. I'm sorry to hear you're sick. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

He shook his head, closing his eyes. "No . . . no, they're taking very good care of me. I'm sorry I wasn't able to meet you. I trust the voyage from San Francisco was uneventful?"

"Yes, quite uneventful—with the exception that I met—" June stepped back as Eli dissolved in a fit of coughing. The attack was so violent, so all-consuming, that she immediately grew concerned. Reaching for the pitcher on the bedside table, she steadied her hand and poured a glass of water. "Perhaps some water . . ."

The man with the broad shoulders suddenly blocked her efforts. She glanced up to meet his stern look. "Water only makes it worse."

She immediately set the glass down. "I'm sorry."

"This is my friend Parker. Parker Sentell," Eli whispered. "Parker, my intended bride, June Kallahan. She's come all the way from Michigan—" Another round of coughing interrupted the introductions.

June lifted her eyes to meet Parker Sentell's. For a moment their gaze held. Shivers raced down June's spine, and she suddenly felt chilled. He was scrutinizing her—looking her over closely, and she detected resentment in his stormy blue eyes. An awkward moment passed before he briefly inclined his head, silently acknowledging the introduction. A man of few words, June decided. Instinct told her that Parker Sentell was trouble.

She wondered how two complete opposites could form such a close friendship, yet Eli had written that the bond between Parker and himself was as strong as that of brothers.

Parker stationed himself at the doorway, crossing his arms over his massive chest. The width of his biceps was as impressive as the breadth of his shoulders.

He fixed his cool eyes on her.

When the coughing refused to abate, Reverend Inman gently eased June toward the doorway. "We'll return in the morning when you're feeling stronger."

"Thank you . . . Reverend." Eli feebly lifted an imploring hand to June. "I'm sorry. . . . Perhaps tomorrow . . ."

"Of course. Tomorrow. I'll come and sit with you—all day if you'd like."

Nodding, Eli doubled up in another coughing spasm.

As June slipped past Parker Sentell, their eyes met again. She resisted the urge to assure him that nothing would change for him once she and Eli married. She would have many friends, as Eli would. Parker needn't feel threatened by her presence.

But he did. She could see it in the cool depth of his eyes.

Accusation? Animosity? She wasn't sure what was mirrored in his eyes. Nor was she sure why, but the implication was clear: She was an intruder.

Brushing past him, she made a mental note to ask Reverend Inman why this man, this

powerful-looking man who was Eli's best friend, was so hostile.

She glanced over her shoulder and shivered at the sight of his intimidating stature. Then again, maybe she didn't want to know.

The reverend retraced their steps through the corridor, and he showed her to her room. The cubicle was adequate but sparse. Octagon-shaped, the small space held a single bed, a washstand, a simple clothespress, and a stove. Wind whistled around the cracks in the walls.

She shivered, spying her valise sitting on the bed. "Breakfast is at seven."

"Thank you, Reverend." Saying good night, she closed the door and leaned against it as the long day closed in on her. Rain battered the windowpane with unrelenting velocity. What a week this had been. The long trip from Cold Water, Eli's unexpected illness. She sank to the side of the bed, trying to organize her thoughts. Tomorrow she would sit with Eli, and they could talk. They would tell one another all about themselves, and she would get to know her soon-to-be husband. The same intuition that told her Parker Sentell was trouble also told her she was going to like Eli Messenger. He seemed a gentle soul, and he had been most polite, even as bad as he felt.

Yawning, she slipped off the bed and rummaged through her valise for pen, ink, and writing paper. She wanted to share this first exciting day in Seattle with Aunt Thalia.

Dear Auntie,

I am so weary I can hardly keep my eyes open, but I wanted to inform you I have arrived in Seattle without incident. The Lord protected my way, and I made a new friend, Samantha Harris. Sam is here in Seattle to assist her ailing aunt, who runs a small orphanage not far from the crusade grounds. I hope to visit there one day soon.

A few minutes ago Isaac Inman, of the Isaac Inman Evangelistic Crusade, introduced me to my husband-to-be, Eli Messenger. Eli is presently under the weather, but Reverend Inman assures me he will be fit again very soon. Eli's friend Parker Sentell was visiting Eli tonight. I understand the two men are good friends. Although I like Eli very much, I personally didn't take to Mr. Sentell. He's certainly one giant of a man, tall, powerfully built, with arms so large they resemble small hams, and eyes . . . eyes, Auntie, so blue they remind me of that robin egg I found one day when I was six. Remember? I brought it to your house for safekeeping.

I sense Mr. Sentell resents my presence here, though why I can't imagine. I will pray that he will be of comfort to Eli during his illness and that in time he will consider me a friend. That said, Auntie, I will say an extra special thank-you to the Lord that he has sent

me to be a helpmate to Eli and not to a man like Mr. Sentell.

I hope this letter finds you well and happy in the Lord. I miss you, and I hope I can send money for your passage to Seattle very soon. We will have a long visit and rejoice in my new life.

*Your loving niece,
June Kallahan*

Blotting the letter, she folded it, then laid it aside. Stretching out on the bed, she listened to the rain pelting the window, wishing she were home in Cold Water, in her warm bed in Aunt Thalia's normal-shaped attic.