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# A BRIDE FOR RANSOM

Renee Roszel





The man who had caused Sara so much mental anguish stood on the windswept cliff in front of her

“You are Ransom Shepard,” she proclaimed hoarsely. It came out sounding like an accusation, as though she’d said, “You are *slime*.”

He appeared curious, then nodded.

“Ooh!” Sara swung out blindly, smacking him across a lean cheek. “I’ll see you in prison!” she cried, venting all the rage she’d carried around with her since her younger sister’s disappearance.

Ransom took a step backward and appeared about to speak, although he didn’t seem particularly troubled by her attack. No doubt having women slap his face was an everyday experience for him.

Once more Sara’s fury overcame her, and she flung out her arm to strike his face again. “How dare you lure away an innocent girl to be your mail-order bride!”

Ransom caught her wrist in a strong grip and said, “So, your visit concerns our little Lynn.”

Dear Reader,

*A Bride for Ransom* is my twelfth romance novel, but it's special to me because it's the first time I've been able to actually attend my hero and heroine's wedding. I know we all finish a book we particularly like, with characters we've grown to love, and we imagine what their wedding will be like. What a pleasurable fantasy! Well, we authors are no different. So, when I was asked to be a part of the Bridal Collection, I was thrilled. A wedding, at last!

I'd already become enthralled by my chosen locale—the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. Part of Alaska, these tiny islands suited my purpose, because I needed a remote setting—a place from which a reluctant heroine could not easily escape. Unfortunately, even the remote Pribilofs have a perfectly wonderful telephone system (which works most of the time), and plenty of planes in and out, so I had to create an extra island—one slightly more remote and vastly less accessible.

Though St. Catherine Island doesn't exist, everything you discover about it holds true for the real islands, St. Paul and St. George. The Pribilof Islands are a fascinating place, with strong, friendly people and a rich Aleut heritage. I would be horribly remiss if I didn't express my deepest thanks to one person, in particular, on St. Paul Island. I was a stranger who called one day, out of the blue, asking if anyone would answer questions for me. He was a busy man with great responsibilities, but he gave selflessly of his time on numerous occasions. Because of his love for his land and his people, he assisted me in making *A Bride for Ransom* a story I'm proud of. Though my Pribilovian colleague is too modest to accept public accolades, he is a man to whom I will always be grateful.

So, thanks, fella!

I hope you all enjoy my story and this glimpse into a proud but little-known American culture. I also hope you fall in love with my hero and heroine, as I did, and thrill, as I did, when their wedding vows are exchanged in a truly unique and Pribilovian wedding.

Sincerely,

*Renee Roszel*

# A BRIDE FOR RANSOM

Renee Roszel



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**To my sons, Doug and Randy  
(Heroes-In-Training)**

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**A BRIDE FOR RANSOM**

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN WHO HAD CAUSED Sara so much mental anguish was barely one hundred yards ahead. Broad-shouldered, wearing a green turtleneck sweater, he was standing on the edge of a cliff facing the sea. It tested her mightily to see this . . . this *cradle robber* so at ease! What kind of man *was* he? What kind of man would lure away an awkward, naive sixteen-year-old girl to be his mail-order bride?

Sara promised herself she would be calm and rational when she confronted the man who'd prompted her sister to run away from home. But her week-long state of near hysteria made remaining composed a monumental task. Of course Sara was furious with her sister, Lynn, for packing up and sneaking off as she had. Lynn was more like a daughter to Sara than a sister, since Sara had raised her from the time she was eight. She prayed that her sister—such an innocent when it came to men and their passions—was safe and well. Her first order of business, when she finally saw Lynn again, was to hug the stuffing out of her; then she planned to wring her freckled little neck!

Sara's fears had ebbed slightly on the last leg of her long journey from Kansas to this remote island in the Bering Sea. The crusty old pilot who'd flown her from the larger St. Paul Island to this tiny dot on the ocean had heard of this . . . this conniving, underhanded Ransom Shepard. Sara realized she was prejudging the man, but fatigue and anguish had pushed her well beyond social niceties. To be fair,

the tobacco-chewing pilot had described Mr. Shepard simply as a bird-watcher—not as a corrupter of innocents.

Sara had formed a picture of him in her mind: bespectacled, bandy-legged, dreary. Exactly the type who might have to send away for a mail-order bride. That had eased her torment—momentarily. But when she was directed to this remote corner of St. Catherine Island, she'd been told that Ransom Shepard owned the whole peninsula. And the hulking brute ahead of her in thigh-hugging jeans was no bandy-legged, bespectacled birder!

He was big, over six feet tall with a muscular physique and long, corded legs. The kind of man who could lift a truck if he felt an urge to. She clutched the handle of her overnight case almost desperately, feeling her hard-won control sliding even further. Something in the pit of her stomach told her this was not the sort of man who would order up a bride by mail and then care that she was a starry-eyed runaway looking for adventure or a mere high school girl. He looked like a man who took what he wanted when he wanted it, without regard for the consequences. Sara had an unattractive urge to tear him limb from limb, which wouldn't be all that easy, considering the fact that she was five foot five and probably about half his weight.

By the time she reached the rugged cliff and was nearing the stranger who had taken advantage of her sister's innocence, she was struggling to rein in her temper. Even though she was a redhead, Sara prided herself on being cool and logical rather than fiery and irrational. Still, the intense emotions she'd kept bottled up for nine horrible days were now at explosive levels, and unfortunately Ransom Shepard just might bear witness to an unprecedented eruption of temper. She struggled to keep her anger and panic in check; she gritted her teeth, clamped her jaws and marched steadfastly along. As she marched, she repeated a warning to herself: *Give him a chance to explain. Give him a chance to explain. Give him . . .*

Caught up in her mental turmoil, she paid scant heed to the salt air that wafted upward from the sea, the symphony of seabirds diving and fluttering overhead, or the shy purple and red wildflowers that kissed the cuffs of her jeans. She advanced determinedly, her blood pounding in her ears, her eyes fastened on the scoundrel—*No, no, don't think that!* she admonished herself—the *person* with the powerful shoulders and widely braced legs.

Nor did she take much notice of the charcoal-colored beach far below, where seals shuffled about on rubbery flippers. She was wholly intent on keeping herself from jumping on this mountain of a man, clawing and scratching for all her worth.

The rush of the sea breeze and the cacophony of darting birds had masked her approach. But when she was a few steps from the stranger, he seemed to sense her and turned. Dusky curls drifted across his broad brow. His expression was closed, as though he was deep in thought or perturbed in some way.

As she moved closer, something in her found it necessary to record his uncommonly good looks. His deep-set eyes were dark gray, like the beaches of his island. Glistening like antique pewter, they seemed knowing, sharply assessing, yet remote. And his nose was far from the beakish protrusion she'd envisioned. It was a straight nose, rather noble as noses go. But his mouth was what drew her gaze. Even set in a grim line, it was a masterpiece of masculinity, with lips that were neither too wide nor too full. A man's mouth. A mouth made for kissing. She cringed at the thought of her impressionable sister confronted by such masculine perfection.

Her emotions had swung from sheer dread to murderous violence when she'd discovered where Lynn had gone—to a bridegroom in the wilds of Alaska's Pribilof Islands. She'd had to spend every dime she'd saved to get up here to the ends of the earth. The money had been a nest egg, so that



one day Lynn could better herself by going to nursing college. But now, having seen the gorgeous stranger her sister was dealing with, Sara feared poor Lynn's virtue was long past saving.

He was so handsome! So horribly handsome! What appalling flaw did he have that he couldn't find a willing bride nearby? Why had he been forced to advertise for a wife? With this new dread slicing through her frayed emotions, her temper was cut free of its tenuous link to etiquette, and she found herself proclaiming hoarsely, "You are Ransom Shepard." It came out sounding like an accusation, as though she'd said, "You are *slime!*"

He appeared curious, then nodded.

"Ooh!" she howled. Dropping her overnight case, she swung out blindly, smacking him across a lean cheek. "I'll see you in prison!" she cried, venting all the rage she'd carried around with her since Lynn had disappeared. Somewhere a little voice was reminding her that Lynn was partly at fault, but Lynn wasn't here. Besides, Lynn was only sixteen. This man was in his midthirties. He was entirely too old—and too...too something! He looked like a man of great experience where women were concerned, and this fact made Sara even more frightened for her sister's welfare.

He took a step backward and appeared about to speak. His eyes narrowed, but he didn't seem particularly troubled by her attack. No doubt having a woman slap his face was an everyday experience for him. And the reasons he was accustomed to being slapped were doubtlessly why a man with such riveting physical presence had found it necessary to order his bride by mail. Once more Sara's fury overcame her, and she drew back her arm to strike his face again.

This time she found her wrist caught in a strong grip as he cautioned, "Only one free slap to a customer, miss. Before you hit me a second time, I plan to deserve it."

She yanked at his hold, protesting, "Start planning, buster! You'll serve hard time for this, you low-crawling toad!"

That remark seemed to give him pause and his eyes widened a bit. Releasing her arm, he said, "Most women don't feel that strongly about men touching their wrists." One corner of his mouth lifted skeptically. "You must be fun on a date."

His nonchalance about the whole matter added fuel to the inferno of Sara's anger. She pulled herself up to her full height, crying, "Have you no shame? Do you think luring away an innocent sixteen-year-old girl for...for *carnal* purposes is something to joke about?"

There was the briefest moment when Sara thought his face registered surprise, but too quickly his expression changed back to the same grim one she'd seen when he'd first turned around. "So," he began, crossing his arms over his wide chest. "Your visit concerns our little Lynn."

She matched his stance, crossed arms for crossed arms. Somehow she didn't feel all that secure in her defiant posture. Nonetheless, with staunch bravado, she challenged, "My visit concerns *my* little Lynn, and to see you behind bars, you...you..."

"Low-crawling toad?" he said helpfully.

Sara blinked, fighting sudden tears. "I'm glad you think this is so funny!"

"Look," he said, wearily, "you're clearly overwrought, so I won't take offense—"

"Take all the offense you want," she fairly hissed.

As she cut across his attempt at appeasement, he clamped his jaws together as if trying to control his own temper.

All Sara's plans to give this man a chance to explain were trampled beneath her burgeoning fear and distrust. She knew she was overreacting, but she couldn't help herself. Lynn was the only family she had left. She'd lost both her mother and father in a car accident when she was seven-

teen, and for the past week she'd been plagued with terror that she might have lost Lynn, too. Working to keep from visibly trembling, she cried, "What have you done with Lynn Eller?"

"I have no idea where she is," he remarked coolly.

Sara's lips opened in shock. She'd never figured on this. St. Catherine Island was only twenty-two square miles of untamed tundra, alive with arctic foxes, reindeer and seabirds. There weren't many places Lynn could have fled. "Did she run away? What did you do to her?" Sara asked in a frightened whisper. "If she's hurt I'll—"

"I know." He nodded, frowning. "You'll have me behind bars. This is where I came in." Cocking his head, he indicated the beach below. "She went walking. She said she'd be back more than an hour ago. Apparently she changed her mind."

Sara peered over the cliff. The beach glistened like a narrow carpet of black pearls as the cobalt water lapped across its surface. "Well...well, go look for her! Didn't it occur to you she might have drowned?" she demanded her voice anguished.

He turned to face the sea. "No one in his right mind would get near the water. As you've probably noticed, the temperature is forty degrees. But I admit," he added, sounding slightly annoyed, "I wouldn't put much past that little piece of work. Taggart's with her, though. He's a good swimmer."

"*Taggart?*" she twisted around to stare at him, her temper surging. "Oh, my dear Lord. She's your bride, yet you've allowed her to go off alone with another man!"

One brow arched dubiously as he peered at her. "Miss whatever-your-name-is, you have quite a dirty mind. Taggart happens to be my fourteen-year-old—"

"I don't want the details!" she ranted on. "This whole mail-order-bride thing is so upset—" She halted, finally registering what he'd said. "Your fourteen-year-old what?"

His mouth twitched, exhibiting amused contempt. "Son," he stated curtly. "I admit Tag's no angel, but I don't think he'd violate Lynn." His glance sharp and inquisitive, he added, "Now I seem to be at a disadvantage here. You know who I am, but I can only imagine that you're either a relative of Lynn's or possibly her parole officer?"

His wry tone irked Sara, and she blurted hotly, "Eller! Sara Eller—*Miss* Eller to you. I'm Lynn's sister. And her guardian, I might add. Don't change the subject."

"Forgive me, *Miss* Eller." His gaze ranged over her, assessing what he saw. She had the uncomfortable feeling he found her lacking, especially when he said, "There are those who might say you're not doing a very good job as Lynn's guardian at the moment."

His words felt like a slap, though the reprimand had been softly spoken. It was true, no matter how painful it was to hear. She hadn't been an effective guardian to Lynn. But then, she'd been little more than a child herself when she'd taken over Lynn's care. She supposed she should have disciplined her sister more, not put up with so much back talk. But she'd loved her; Lynn was all she had. Sara might have made mistakes, but she'd done the best she could.

Pride stiffening her spine, she shot back, "How dare you? You, who would entice an underage girl away from her home with promises of marriage to a wealthy man and an easy life on an island paradise. How dare you find fault with me!"

"Your sister came here of her own free will. Beyond that, she told me she had no home, no family. Where would *you* place blame, *Miss* Eller?" he challenged gently.

She swallowed hard, feeling as though she'd been stabbed. Lynn couldn't have dismissed her so completely after all the years Sara had worked and scrimped to keep a roof over their heads. Maybe she'd been overprotective, but not to the extent that Lynn would do something this rash. Refusing to believe such a thing about the sister she loved



more than her own life, she cried, "Liar! She wouldn't have said that!"

His lean face darkened, growing more forbidding. Without comment, he looked toward the somber sky. "It's going to rain, Miss Eller. Would you care to continue my character assassination inside?"

"I wouldn't set foot inside your den of iniquity if the hounds of hell were nipping at my heels! Find Lynn, and we'll be on our way."

He eyed her speculatively. "On your way where?"

"Why, back to that dilapidated excuse for an airplane and on to St. Paul, then to the first available connecting flight to Anchorage and Kansas, of course."

His chuckle was contemptuous. "That dilapidated excuse for an airplane is long gone. What do you think St. Catherine's air strip is—LAX?"

"What are you talking about?" she breathed, an odd helplessness enveloping her.

He pursed his lips, and his silence had begun to infuriate her before he finally explained. "I fear the hounds of hell are going to get in some good nibbles before you catch that connecting flight. Old Krukoff only makes a trip to St. Catherine on Wednesdays, to bring in supplies and transport the occasional visitor. Barring bad weather, he should be back in a week."

"A week?" Sara echoed, incredulous.

"Or longer, if the plane breaks down," he amended. "That happens every couple of—"

"What are you, some kind of sadist?" Sara was sure he was goading her with this catalog of potential calamities. "I bet it thrills you to pieces to see women suffer!"

His gray eyes flashed. "I've had better thrills," he informed her, his tone colored by disgust.

Wincing at his rebuke, she spun away from him, her thoughts churning. What was she to do? She was going to have to spend the next week on this tiny island—all too near

this distressing man! She had little money for lodging, though what she'd seen of the island didn't leave her optimistic of finding any. She'd seen nothing that resembled a hotel. There'd been a church and a cluster of cottages around a modest harbor. Still, maybe there was a small inn. A small cheap inn. She clung to that hope.

Calling up her waning courage, she retorted, "Well, I see no point in discussing this further. Just direct me to the nearest guest house."

He didn't answer her until she had unwillingly faced him. She knew he was being manipulative, but she couldn't help lifting her eyes to meet his. His expression was impassive, but his gaze sparkled with mirth at her expense. "Would you prefer a beachfront condo?" he inquired, "Or perhaps the penthouse of the St. Catherine Hilton?"

Renewed foreboding crept up her spine. "Are you saying there are no hotels on this island?"

"Notice any nipping from those hellhounds yet?"

She felt stung by his sarcasm and to hide her turmoil tossed him a haughty glance. "Surely someone could put us up."

His perusal continued to be direct and disconcerting, telling her he could put her up if he chose to. The message was so unsubtle she blurted, "I'd rather shoot myself in the foot than endure your hospitality."

"I haven't offered you my hospitality, Miss Eller," he reminded her with a slow half grin.

Taken aback, she glared at him. "Well, then, where would you suggest I go?"

When his brows lifted expressively, she realized she'd left herself wide open for a variety of insults. But all he said was, "It's not a very big island, Miss Eller. Most of the village folks live modest lives and have no excess of either space or food."

"We can stay in the church!" she declared.

“It’s one large room, Miss Eller, and it’s open to villagers twenty-four hours a day. You might find that less than satisfactory at times.”

At a loss, Sara floundered about for a solution. After several false starts, she gave up, deciding to be brutally direct. “I couldn’t stay with you, Mr. Shepard. And I must remove Lynn from your...authority. It’s clear that you have some, er, character flaw that requires you to engage your female companionship by mail. I assure you, I don’t care to be in close enough contact with you to discover what that flaw might be.”

For a long moment, he stared at her, his jaw working. His silence and unwavering gaze were unnerving. At odds with her desire to do so, she found herself curious about what possible defect this man might have. Did he kick puppies and spit tobacco on the floor? Whatever the blot on his character, it certainly wasn’t evident in his looks.

After a tense minute, an ironic smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “In defense of those who order their brides by mail,” he said, “have you considered the fact that there are simply more men in the Alaskan wilds than there are women?” His expression became increasingly rueful as he added, “It might be exactly the avenue for a sharp-tongued spitfire such as yourself to snag a not-too-choosy mate.”

She gasped, mortification heating her cheeks. “Why you...I—I’m not a sharp-tongued spitfire!”

“No?” He appeared skeptical, almost amused. “You slap me, then call me a low-crawling worm—”

“Toad!” she corrected defiantly.

“This may startle you, Miss Eller, but being called a toad is not viewed as an endearment by most men.”

A raindrop pelted Sara in the eye, and she flinched. In the next few seconds the clouds were spitting fat drops all about them. In a futile gesture to ward off the coming storm, she lifted her hands above her head, looking at Ransom She-

pard with distress. He was right of course. She'd acted abominably. With less rancor, she sputtered, "Well, uh, 'toad' may have been a bit strong, but look at it from my side. My sister's only sixteen, and you're...why, you've got a son almost as old as Lynn. For a week I've been sick with worry about her! How would you have expected me to act?"

His features grew less harsh. "I understand." And with a brief nod toward his home, he offered, "We really should go inside."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I'd rather not—"

"I'm no happier about this than you. But I do have room, and I'm partly responsible for your being here. Besides, your sister's already staying with me. Remember?"

This prompting made her anger return with a vengeance. Pinning him with a hostile glare, she opened her mouth, bent on rejecting his offer, and was startled to discover she couldn't find her voice. His silver eyes held an unexpected hypnotic quality. Fighting a crazy desire to be drawn into his gaze, she stared mutely off into the distance. A solid-looking house loomed ahead of them. Blunt and square, it had cement walls that were hidden by overlapping wood shingles—a style, Sara had noticed, peculiar to the Pribilof Islands. The structure's shingles were gray and unpainted. All in all, it was a humble dwelling devoid of architectural excesses.

An enclosed covered porch jutted from the nearest wall, its door standing open. The house appeared both strong and sheltering, and it emanated an oddly welcoming yet forbidding appeal—like the man who resided there. She chewed the inside of her cheek, knowing she had to seek refuge with him, but not wanting to. There was something...unorthodox about this man. Something brooding and unpredictable that made her apprehensive.

At her continued silence, he said, "For the record, I don't coerce women to stay in my home against their will—or to sleep in my bed."



His remark brought back a vivid reminder of Lynn's predicament. Knowing her sister as she did—a book-smart pudgy dreamer who'd never dated, with schoolgirl notions of love and princes on white chargers—she worried that this attractive, soft-spoken man would have had to say very little to “coerce” Lynn into his bed.

Sara felt a shaft of dismay. For the first time, she fully understood what she'd refused to face when Ransom Shepard turned around and she'd been struck by his bold good looks. She understood why she'd been absolutely blinded with rage. It wasn't because Lynn had left Kansas for him. No, seeing him in the flesh, so powerfully handsome, the truth had hit her like a ton of bricks. The choice Lynn had made was irrevocable by now. Surely with this man's seduction, Lynn was lost to her forever, and Sara was alone. Impressionable Lynn could never have resisted this man, no matter what his flaws. Feeling beaten, she warned almost pleadingly, “If you've damaged my sister in any way, I'll—”

He grabbed her overnight case and took her arms, pivoting her away from the cliff. “It's raining, Miss Eller. If you stand here in that thin jacket much longer, you'll catch pneumonia. Why don't we go inside and wait for your allegedly damaged sister?” He glanced sidelong at Sara, catching her hesitant gaze. “She does have the sense to come in out of the rain, doesn't she?”

Inside her head, a bothersome voice asked, *Just how much sense does Lynn have to get you both involved in such a terrible mess?* But Sara had too much family pride to voice her doubts about her sister's rash behavior, especially to this man. Smarting from his censure, she tried to jerk free of his hold, but failed. Without much choice, she was pulled along beside him. He was right about one thing at least. Her windbreaker and cotton sweater weren't much protection from the rain. Feeling thwarted and still fretting over her