

**EXCERPT NO. 4**  
*OF COTTONWOODS, A NOVEL*  
**TEN:**  
**“THE MAIL ORDER BRIDE”**

ONE DAY EARLY IN AUGUST, Will Malcolm came back from town with a letter for Torval. The envelope was pink with a fancy watermark. Noticing that it was something out of the ordinary, Will sniffed it teasingly and let out a wistful hum.

Finally, he handed it to Torval.

Will and Rolf stood there, waiting to see what Torval's letter was all about. After a quick glance, Torval crammed it into his back pocket and walked off, back to work. From the look on his face, Rolf thought the letter must have come from Lucifer himself.

Suddenly, Torval was possessed by terror. For three days he went around distracted and grumpy. He couldn't sit still, but he couldn't keep his mind on his work, either. This time, Rolf decided not to pry. *In time he'll tell me*, he decided. Still, he was aching to know about that letter.

The next Saturday morning—four days later—Rolf and Torval were talking about some things they needed to pick up in town: Some three-eighths-inch carriage bolts, the binder canvasses they had taken in to be repaired, some gall salve for the workhorses and whatnot. Torval liked to make the trip at the end of the week to hobnob around, maybe get a haircut and visit some of the dives on Saloon Street. Rolf took it for granted Torval was going to Belle Fourche. As for himself, Rolf planned to go to a dance in Snoma, where he hoped to see some young women he wanted to get to know better.

Torval's fingers trembled as he gripped the stubby wooden pencil and tried to write down a list of things to be done. He was more nervous than ever.

“You're pretty excited about going to town this afternoon, I see,” Rolf offered as a little joke.

“G-g-gawd, you don’t know... “ He stopped and gave his brother a hopeless look. “I-I c-can’t do it!”

“That’s all right. Give me the pencil. I’ll make out your list for you.”

“No!” he protested. “*I can’t go to town!*” Terror filled his eyes.

“Why not?” Now Rolf wondered if Torval had gotten a threatening letter like Will Malcolm had.

“I’m supposed to meet the six o’clock train and I just can’t do it.”

“*What?*” Rolf didn’t understand.

“A woman is coming on that train. I wrote her a few times and all at once she said she’s coming. No asking whether she could. Or did I want her to come.”

Talking about it only seemed to make it worse for Torval.

“Well, when she gets there, tell her you’ve changed your mind. That you like batchin’ out here at the ranch. Or that we have only one bed for five or six people.”

Rolf grinned at him, but he didn’t see any humor in what Rolf said.

“*You got to do it!*” Torval declared.

“Not me!”

“But you talk to women good. You know what to say.”

“Just say, ‘Hello. Nice to see you.’” Rolf smiled.

“It’s not funny,” Torval said narrowing his eyes at his brother.

“Well, this is some fix. Did you agree to marry her or something like that?”

“I don’t think so. . .”

“*What do you mean, you don’t think so?*”

“I said something about being tired of living alone, that’s all.”

“And she took that for a marriage proposal?”

“Maybe. Only...” Torval stared at the ground for a while and then gazed off into the distance. “Only I didn’t straighten her out on that score right away. That was three, four months ago.”

“Don’t meet her.” That seemed simple enough to Rolf. If he wasn’t there when she arrived, she’d soon get the idea that he wasn’t terribly interested in her. Rolf had to admit that was a nasty way to treat a person, but maybe she was asking for it.

Torval shot Rolf a puzzled look. “If you don’t show up, maybe she’ll just go away.”

“No, if we don’t meet her train, she’ll get someone to bring her out here to the ranch. *That’d even be worse yet.*”

“Then you’ll just have to be there and send her away.”



Torval started to shake and looked like he might cry. “*I can’t do it.*” Seeing how upset he was and recalling the sadness of Daisy Smith’s funeral made Rolf soft-hearted for just a moment. Poor Torval. He had gotten himself into such a mess, starting out with good intentions.

At least Rolf *supposed* it all started with good intentions. Sure, he could do it. No matter who it was, he could go to the railroad station, meet the woman and tell her it was all a mistake. If Rolf were in the same fix, Torval might do the same for him. But he couldn’t imagine ever getting himself into that kind of quandary. Then again, why should he put himself in such a position? Sup-*pose* she made a big fuss at the station.

Or attacked him with her handbag or called the police? Then what? Maybe he shouldn’t be in such a hurry to come to Torval’s rescue. Rolf hadn’t decided to help Torval yet when he took a small photo out of his shirt pocket and thrust it into Rolf’s hand. It was a picture of a young woman with large eyes and a pointed chin.

She appeared to have dark hair and a tiny nose. “She doesn’t look so bad to me. Maybe you’ll like her.”

“Don’t you see?” he said desperately. “*I can’t do it.*”

That’s when Rolf finally caved in and said he’d go.

“*YOO-HOO! Torval! Here I am!*” Rolf could hear a strange voice calling, but couldn’t see who it was as people streamed off the train and poured around Rolf on the platform. Next thing he knew, a squat, pink toad of a woman stood in front of him, looking like she was about to gulp up an unsuspecting bug.

“*Torval Hauge! It’s me—Judith Porterhouse from Cleveland!*” Her voice was oddly deep and gravelly for a woman. This couldn’t be Judith Porterhouse, the slip of a girl with large eyes in the picture Torval had given Rolf. He had a notion to pull it out and compare it with the barrel-shaped person standing in front of him. Maybe show her she wasn’t who she claimed she was. She had no neck. Just a face painted on a stump of a head rooted somewhere within the acreage of her bright pink dress. Amazingly, the hue of her florid face matched the color of her loose garment.

Rolf didn’t know what to say. He just shook his head

“no.”

“*Yes it is!*” she insisted. “*I am Judith Porterhouse and you are Torval Hauge.*” 4 – *The Mail Order Bride*

End of Excerpt No. 2 of COTTONWOODS  
*[Click Here to Return to Previous Menu.](#)*