



USA TODAY BESTSELLER
LILY GRAISON

Julia

Angel Creek
CHRISTMAS BRIDES

Prologue

Hiding behind a happy smile when your heart is grieving never gets easier. Julia stared out the window, watching the falling snow as memories of all those loved ones no longer with them brought tears to her eyes.

The laughter of the children gathered in the room was the only thing that kept the sadness from consuming her. It was Christmas Eve after all, and there was no room for frowns today.

Charity, one of her oldest and dearest friends, was telling her account of how they all came to be in Angel Creek and slowly, the memories of that first Christmas chased away her blues.

She heard her name and looked over her shoulder. Charity was staring at her. So was every child present. Her grandchildren and those of her friends were sitting in a semi-circle in the middle of the room, all with expectant looks on their faces.

Rebecca, her oldest great-granddaughter sat up on her knees. "Come tell us about when you first met grandpa."

"Yes!" Hannah yelled, a happy smile on her chubby face. "Tell us about you and grandpa Bailey."

They'd heard the story dozens of times but never seemed to grow tired of hearing it, which suited her fine. She never grew tired of telling it. Remembering the past gave her a chance to reminisce about those who had already left them.

She crossed the room and took a seat, then laid a finger to her chin as if thinking. "Well ... let me see. I believe it was right after the war." She grinned at Charity. "Someone had the absurd idea of us becoming mail-order brides so Charity, Ruby, Sarah, and Anna dragged me kicking and screaming all the way out here."

Anna laughed. "Liar."

Julia settled back in her seat and closed her eyes, the memories filling her mind's eye. "Angel Creek Montana was nothing like Charleston..."

Chapter One

November, 1865

The town was tucked into the shadow of several mountains and the crooked streets were filled with mud. The squat buildings lining the road through town were nothing more than square boxes of unadorned wood planks, several of them leaning a bit to one side—unless the weeks of travel while staring out the window to take in the scenery had permanently damaged her neck to the point everything looked tilted.

Julia Hamel stepped out of the stagecoach and pulled the hood of her cloak tighter around her neck as a gust of blistering wind whistled through the valley. She blinked against the falling snow and took in the small town that was to be her home and was unimpressed.

She certainly wasn't in Charleston anymore.

A deep inhaled breath to clear the musty smell of multiple bodies crammed into a too-small stagecoach filled her lungs with the scent of woodsmoke, and surprisingly, clean, fresh air. It wasn't the salt-tinged sea breezes she was used to but it was pleasant all the same.

She saw very few people on the wooden walkways in front of the buildings but those she did see were staring at them as if they were some sort of spectacle. She supposed they were. Their brightly colored dresses stood out amongst the garments of the people on the sidewalks. Most of the ladies she saw were in simple gingham dresses, unadorned boots, and close-fitting bonnets that covered so much of their head she could barely see their faces.

The town was eerily quiet. The sound of gulls flying over the harbor was missing, as were the sounds of horses and carriages traveling over cobblestone streets. All she heard here was the occasional voice, wind as it

whistled through the valley and every so often, the ting of a blacksmith's hammer. It seemed like a ghost town compared to Charleston. That gnawing feeling in her gut telling her she'd made a mistake in following her friends in this crazy adventure ached anew. Perhaps she should have never left South Carolina. Her father told her she was being foolish and she hated to admit, he may have been right.

"This way ladies. Someone will see to your bags and make sure they get to where they need to be."

Julia turned as she saw the others start walking away and only half-heard what the man escorting them from the stagecoach station said. She followed quietly, tiptoeing through the snow to prevent her kid boots from getting wet and was glad when their small party stepped onto the wooden sidewalk that ran in front of the buildings lining the street.

Her stomach grew more queasy with each step and by the time she stopped in front of a small church, she was praying her meager lunch stayed down.

She was the last to ascend the steps leading into the building and found it was quite warm inside and pleasantly quaint. Several men stood by a fireplace built into one of the sidewalls and those nervous butterflies returned the moment they all turned to look at them. Somewhere in that group of men was her new husband, a stranger she was to give herself to freely. She suddenly felt ill.

The next several minutes consisted of introductions and Julia had the sensation of being outside herself. As if she was watching from some great distance. It was fatigue. She knew it was when she couldn't even remember walking to the front of the church and joining hands with a complete stranger about to marry him.

She heard her friends talking quietly to their soon to be husbands and sneaked a peek up at her groom. The instant she did, her heart started to race.

Don't be fooled by his good looks, Julia. He could be deranged and end up killing you. Or you could die out here in the middle of nowhere by freezing to death. Or be eaten by some wild animal. You could be taken by Indians or trampled by wild horses!

Julia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply in an attempt to calm her nerves. The scent of burning wood from the fireplace filled her head, along with the faint smell of gun oil and fresh cut cedar, the last two clinging to the man in front of her.

The small sounds the others were making and the soft ping of sleet as it hit the church did nothing to distract her from the “what-ifs” whispering through her head on repeat. She opened her eyes and stared at her hands held in the firm grip of a man she knew nothing about other than his name.

The preacher, Reverend Tilly, was fumbling his way through their marriage ceremony and she listened with half an ear. She knew her duties as a wife. She was to love, cherish and obey her husband and she’d try her best to do just that—eventually. Once she knew who this stranger in front of her was.

“Miss Julia?”

She blinked and focused her attention on the reverend. “Yes?”

“Do you take this man as your husband?”

“Oh!” She took a peek over her shoulder to find her friends looking at her. Her face heated as she said, “Yes, I do.” Julia peeked up at her soon to be husband, Matthew Bailey, he’d introduced himself as, and felt the butterflies in her stomach take flight as she briefly met his gaze. He certainly wasn’t what she’d been expecting.

A mail-order bride could end up with any sort of man and the man her mind conjured had been old, possibly poor as dirt, and skinny to boot. Her friends had reassured her that wouldn’t be the case and she was glad to see they had been right. Seeing this man step forward and say her name had nearly caused her knees to buckle. Matthew Bailey didn’t fit the picture she’d painted in her mind of her future husband at all. He wasn’t old, nor was he skinny, and to her great surprise, was quite possibly the best-looking man she’d ever seen.

Which made those nervous butterflies all the worse. He was too good to be true. Her luck was never this good. Something was bound to go wrong.

She peeked a glance up at him again. He was staring at her, his blue eyes taking in every inch of her face. Of all the men who showed up to marry them,

Matthew was the most handsome—at least she thought so. Not that the others were unpleasant to look at, Matthew Bailey just seemed—more. More rugged. Stronger built. More—manly.

Maybe it was the breadth of his shoulders or the close-cut beard or the work-worn calluses she could feel on the palm of his hands. Or maybe she was so used to men in fancy dress suits with tailored vests that seeing a man in simple trousers and a long-sleeved shirt made him appear to be more—brawny.

And yet—she was going to marry the brute. What if he was mean? He outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds. He could—

“I do.”

His voice drew her from her thoughts. She inhaled a deep breath, let it out and took another. *Breathe, Julia. Everything will be all right.*

“You may kiss your bride.”

Julia raised her eyes, meeting Matthew’s gaze and when he just stood there staring at her, she wondered if he was having the same doubts she was.

Long seconds ticked by before he leaned toward her, that kiss the preacher said he could give her moments away, and Julia didn’t realize she was holding her breath until he kissed her on the cheek.

Her heart started pounding as she took a breath. He gave her hands a small squeeze and said, “I don’t wish to rush you but there’s a storm blowing in and we have a long ride back to the house. You need to say goodbye to your friends so we can be on our way.”

The parting was bittersweet. Her girlfriends all seemed to be happy. If they were as nervous as she was, they hid it well. There were more than a few tears shed but she was cheered up by the knowledge that Anna would at least be close by. She lived outside of town, as Matthew said he did. The others would all be within walking distance of each other. She envied them for that. They wouldn’t feel as isolated as she already did. They’d have each other for support and she’d have—she turned her head to where her new husband stood by the door. He was watching her.

She gave Anna a tight hug, then embraced Sarah, Charity, and Ruby each in turn and told them she'd see them as soon as she was able.

Then she faced her husband and crossed the room to where he stood.

"Ready?"

"Yes." She tried to smile but failed miserably as he helped her into her cloak. When she'd secured it, he opened the door, a blast of cold air hitting her so fast she shivered. Once again, she was reminded she wasn't in South Carolina anymore and knew by the time winter was over, she'd be homesick for the milder temperatures she was used to.

The light dusting of snow that had been on the ground when they arrived had deepened. Matthew took her hand and helped her down the slick steps and to the waiting wagon. The carpet bag she'd used to store her things in while traveling was sitting in the back and several blankets were stacked on the seat.

In all her twenty-two years of life, she'd never ridden in an open wagon. She'd seen her share of the inside of carriages and surreys but this plain wooden wagon was so—ordinary.

Life as she'd known it was about to change drastically.

Matthew helped her onto the seat and Julia sat nervously as he walked around to the other side and climbed up to sit beside her. He lifted one of the blankets and opened it, offering it to her before taking the reins in hand—and then they were moving.

Julia covered her legs with the blanket then looked back at the church. The others were coming outside and her heart clenched painfully in her chest seeing them. They'd been together for so long now. Leaving them felt so—final.

* * * *

"You'll see them again, I promise. I'll not keep you from them."

Her bright green eyes locked with his for a brief moment. With effort, Matt tore his gaze from her and stared at the snow-covered road.

The screaming matches he'd had with his sister over the past week replayed inside his head as the gentle clomp of the horse's hooves churned up dirty snow and ice. Those fights seemed a bit childish now.

He'd balked at the idea of a mail-order bride the moment Prudence told him about it and once he found out she'd sent away for one without his knowledge, he'd yelled, cursed, and threatened to choke the life out of her. But the moment he got his first look at those women, he'd had to rethink his plans of torturing Prudence for the rest of her life.

The women who stepped inside that church looked nothing like what he expected them to. If the expression on the other men's faces were any indication, those ladies weren't what they had envisioned them to be either.

Any woman desperate enough to pick a husband from a paper did so because she had no other prospects and likely never would, but the five ladies that traveled all the way from South Carolina to marry left them all speechless. They weren't bedraggled or homely. They were—well, too fancy for Angel Creek and he'd studied them all, bewildered, wondering which one was to be his new wife—and forgot all about telling her there had been a mistake, that he couldn't marry her after all. No, he'd said his new bride's name and when the tall one with dark hair took a step forward and locked eyes with him, he'd forgotten how to breathe. He might still be mad at Prudence for deceiving him but he couldn't be mad at how the entire ordeal ended. What man would when his new wife was simply—breathtaking.

Matthew glanced over at her. She looked half frozen. He picked up another blanket, opened it and draped it around her shoulders, something in his chest pulling tight when she gave him a small smile and said, "Thank you."

She pulled the blanket in tight around her slim frame. Julia was tall for a woman, not that he minded. He'd kissed his share of girls when he was younger and being over six-foot-tall meant every single time he did, he'd had to bend nearly double. When he'd placed a soft kiss to Julia's cheek in the church, he'd only had to lower his head. It was a nice change, so was her voice.

She was soft-spoken, the cadence making her seem as delicate as she appeared. She was lovely and as much as he hated to admit it, for once, Prudence had been right. He was indeed pleased with his new bride.

* * * *

The extra blanket Matthew placed around her shoulders warmed her in only a few minutes. Other than her thanking him, neither had said a word and the silence was deafening. It gave Julia time to reflect on her journey from Charleston, though, and she was still questioning her decision to come out west. Even more so now as the wind felt like it was cutting her to the bone and the snow that was falling didn't look to be letting up. If anything, it was falling harder, the path they were taking slowly disappearing under several inches of fresh powder.

This certainly wasn't what she'd been expecting. When Charity arrived at their weekly sewing circle with a copy of the Groom's Gazette in hand, she'd thought her friend had been teasing them about wanting to be a mail-order bride—until she saw the determination in her eyes. She'd been quite serious and it didn't take long for the others to sit up straight and listen to her idea intently. By the time Charity told them of her plan, they'd all been excited, rambling on about what an adventure it would be, and when everyone turned to her, for one brief moment, she'd thought they'd all lost their minds.

Then reality sank in.

They weren't getting any younger and the prospects in Charleston were next to nothing now that much of the city was in ruins and most of the eligible young men hadn't come home after the war ended. There was nothing left for her there, for any of them, really. Unless she wanted to grow old and become a spinster, she had no choice.

They'd all been happy when she agreed to join them—under the condition they all went to the same place. She got her wish, but as the wagon traveled

over the bumpy road further away from town, she realized she should have been more specific. They were all in the same town but she wasn't going to live anywhere near them. What would become of their weekly sewing circle now?

She pulled the blanket Matthew placed over her shoulders tighter around her and peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. Would he take her into town every week? For some reason, she doubted it, so didn't ask. She supposed there was time for such conversations later.

The trip across the prairie seemed to take forever. They passed very few houses and every minute that ticked by took her further away from the others. The road up ahead forked in two different directions. Matthew steered the wagon toward the right. The worn tracks from numerous wagons traveling the same path weren't as heavy here.

Trees lined the road on both sides and she had to admit, with ice and snow coating the limbs, it was breathtaking to behold. She could hear the rush of water too and looked for the source of it, barely seeing it through the trees and the snow that continued to fall.

"That's Angel Creek. It runs directly behind the house."

Julia didn't reply, her focus still on those brief glances of water she could see. Long minutes later, they came to a wide wooden bridge that crossed the creek, the horse and wagon clanking across it, and as much noise as they made, it wasn't enough to drown out the sound of the water as it rushed over the rocks.

Large sections along the creek banks, and nearly every rock she saw, had frozen over, small waterfalls being carved into the ice, and it was the most beautiful thing she'd seen on the entire trip from the east coast. Had it not been so cold, she would have been content to sit there half the day watching it.

Once they reached the other side of the bridge, the ranch came into view. She wasn't really sure what she expected but—this wasn't it.

They'd read the listings in the Groom's Gazette of men in Angel Creek looking for a wife and once she found out her new husband was a rancher, she'd tried to imagine what his home would look like. She'd had the impression of land filled with animals and wide-open barren fields, the grass

trampled down to nothing as hordes of animal hooves marred the ground. The wide-open fields were here, but the animals weren't. For as far as she could see, it was nothing but rolling hills all the way to the mountains in the distance.

The house was two stories with a porch that ran along the entire front of it. Not quite the wide veranda around her father's home, but close. She could picture herself there on hot summer days while she and her friends gossiped over tea, assuming they would all come out this far if she invited them.

A large barn and several outbuildings were off to the left. A few men were walking around and more than a few stopped to look their way as Matthew set the foot brake on the wagon and jumped to the ground.

He came around to her side before lifting a hand to help her down. When her feet hit the snow-strewn grass, the fatigue she'd been trying to ignore since stepping off the stagecoach caused her knees to buckle. She gasped and stared wide-eyed at Matthew when he caught her before she hit the ground.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, heat filling her face. "I guess the trip has taken more out of me than I thought it had."

"Understandable." He helped her upright again, holding on to her until she was steady. "Can you walk?"

Could she? She was still shaky but she wasn't so weak she couldn't walk.

She apparently waited too long to answer. Matthew scooped her off the ground and into his arms before she could get a single word out and she stifled a startled yelp as he started for the house.

It took every ounce of willpower she had to relax and not protest him carrying her, especially when he asked her to open the front door, then proceeded to carry her inside and up a flight of stairs to a bedroom at the end of the hall.

The room wasn't as large as the one she'd had back home but it wasn't small by any means. Matthew set her on the bed and stepped away and Julia's heart was once again pounding. The scent of peppermint hung in the air and she instantly longed to see her father. His room had always smelled of sweet

treats too and she wondered if her new husband had a stash of candy hidden somewhere. Her father hid his in the top drawer of his dresser and she'd snuck in many times as a child to take a piece.

She glanced around the space, taking in the furnishings. This was definitely a man's room. There was nothing feminine about it at all. It was all brown wood and dark colored curtains, the bedspread she sat on was a dark color as well. She'd remedy that soon enough, though. It was nothing new curtains and the marriage quilt she spent months making wouldn't improve upon. It just needed a woman's touch.

She spotted the trunks she'd shipped ahead of her departure from Charleston stacked against the wall. "I see my things arrived."

Matthew nodded his head and moved to the door. "They were delivered last week. I'll bring your traveling bag in once I've seen to the horse. Rest for a while. Take a nap or just relax." He started to close the door but stopped. "Unless you're hungry. I can rustle up something for you to eat if you'd like."

"No, thank you. I think I'd rather rest for a while."

He nodded his head once, then left the room, pulling the door closed behind him. As she listened to his footsteps growing more distant, her pounding pulse slowed to normal.

The bed underneath her caused the butterflies she'd finally won control over to take flight again. She was twenty-two years old and had never been kissed. Had never even been in a room alone with a man, and now she was sitting on a bed she was to share with one. To be intimate and lie with, naked.

Her heart was fluttering like a caged bird in seconds at the thought. Sarah had told her what to expect on her wedding night and she had let more than a few thoughts pop into her head, right or wrong. Now, she was a new bride and ready or not, come nightfall, Matthew Bailey would come to her bed, and despite Sarah's reassurance that everything would be fine, she was absolutely terrified.

Chapter Two

Matthew could hear the squeaky wheels of a wagon coming down the road as he stepped out onto the porch. He knew it was Prudence without even looking.

Since the day he found out Pru had sent off for a mail-order bride in his name, he'd been plotting ways to make her life as miserable as his was. Killing her would brand him a murderer and he'd been willing to live with the consequences but knew that wasn't possible now. Not once people saw his new wife. They'd think he was an idiot for even complaining about what his sister had done and probably hire the ornery busybody to find them wives, too.

Her wagon rounded the bend and came into view a few moments later and she threw her hand up and waved when she saw him. He walked down the steps and into the yard toward his wagon and hoped she had no intentions of staying or introducing herself to his new wife, but something told him that's the very reason she risked coming out in the storm. If she didn't live so close by he would have been angry she even tried. The storm moving in was probably the only reason she hadn't been at the church.

Prudence meddled in his affairs too much. She gossiped as if it were her job and liked to make decisions without his knowledge and as infuriated as he'd been when he found out what she'd done, he'd begrudgingly have to admit—for once—her sending off for a mail-order bride without his knowledge hadn't turned out so bad. Not that he'd ever tell her he thought so. As far as his sister was concerned, he was still mad as hell.

She was grinning when she pulled her wagon up beside his own and set the foot brake. "I ran into Pete on the way over here. Talk in town is those

southern belles were a sight to behold! The fanciest things to hit Angel Creek since Elijah Oliver built his eatery and laid those lace tablecloths down.”

“I’m still mad at you, Pru.”

She laughed. “Liar.” Jumping to the ground, she rounded the wagon and looked toward the house. “She in there?”

“Where else would she be?”

“Back in town looking for a husband. I do recall you saying you weren’t marrying a woman you’ve never set eyes on.”

He pulled the blankets from the wagon seat, folded them and tucked them under his arm before reaching in to grab Julia’s bag. “Well I couldn’t leave her stranded in town after she traveled halfway across the country to get here, now could I. Besides, if anyone else in town would have wanted a wife, they would have sent for one, not hung around the church in hopes an extra would just happen to be there.”

She was smirking at him. She didn’t believe the sorry excuse he’d been trying to convince himself of any more than he did. He scowled at her. “She’s resting, so go home. You can talk to her later.”

Prudence pulled her cloak up around her neck when a blast of cold air swept over the valley. “Is she pretty?”

He ignored her question as he turned to the house and set the blankets and the carpetbag down, then headed back to the horse and wagon.

“She is, isn’t she?” She laughed. “And all that fuss you made about me sending off for you a wife—”

“—Has caused me more trouble than I needed.”

“Hogwash.” She waved a hand in the air as if his words meant nothing. “I saved you from the biggest mistake of your life, is what I’ve done.”

Matthew took the horse’s reins, walking the animal to the barn. Prudence dogged his every step, talking nonstop and he ignored her, glancing back at the house as he pulled the barn doors open and all he could think about was Julia, who was more than likely asleep in his bed.

“Are you even listening to me?”

He motioned for one of the ranch hands to come take care of the horse then turned to his sister. “Not really, why? Did you say anything different from the same old conversation we’ve been having since you started this whole mess?”

“You’re an ornery old goat, anyone ever tell you that?”

“You, at least once a week.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. “When can I meet her?”

“A week from Tuesday.”

She scowled. “I’m serious—Matthew.”

“So am I—Prudence.”

She clenched her jaw once, her lips pursing. “Fine. I know how it is when a man takes a wife so I’ll give you some privacy but,” she pointed a finger at him, “don’t think to keep me away forever. She may be your wife but she’s my new sister and I’ve waited a long time to have another woman in this family and you won’t deny me that or so help me, Matt, I’ll skin you alive!”

She turned on her heel and stomped off toward her wagon, climbing up and giving him a rude gesture with her hand before flicking the horse’s reins and heading back down the road. He watched her until she was out of sight then turned back toward the house. He should take Julia’s bag up to her. See if she needed anything.

Something in his chest clenched tight. Prudence had made a real mess of things. He hadn’t told a soul he had a wife coming, secretly hoping she’d never show up, but Julia’s arrival made his life a bit more complicated. Pru may have thought she was doing him a favor by sending away for Julia but she made things worse. Now, not only did he have a new wife to learn to live with, he had to figure out how to tell the girl he promised to marry that he already had a wife.

End of Excerpt

Julia releases on Nov. 9th, 2018. Find links at www.lilygraison.com/Julia