

# The Hopeful Bride

## A Mail Order Bride Story

Katie Lockwood

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God Bless,

Katie, July 2018

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A teaser from “A Runaway Hope” from Hope Out West Book 1

Also by Katie Lockwood

## Chapter One

Clarissa's hands moved automatically, sliding sliced bacon into a glass jar, a whirring constant noise in the background that only stopped when she left the meat packing plant. She threw a glance at the huge clock on the wall. Her fingers ached from touching cold meat all day.

Half an hour later, she joined the throng of workers clad in white caps and aprons making their way towards the wage office. She stood in the long queue, behind Sarah and Mary, two girls she had begun making friends with. They were giggling over a newspaper and she inched closer to see.

"What's amusing then?" Clarissa asked.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Clarissa knew they were laughing at her accent. She threw her head back and pretended not to care.

"We're reading mail-order bride adverts from the west," Sarah said.

From the corner of her eye, she saw two men meandering around, their eyes scanning the queue. Then he appeared behind them. She saw his red curly hair first.

Michael McDonald. The Kingpin of the mafia in Chicago. Clarissa's stomach tightened. She grabbed the newspaper.

"Let me see that!" she said and lifted it high to cover her face.

"Look! There's Michael McDonald," Mary cried. "I wonder what he's doing here."

"Lord, he's handsome," Sarah said in a wistful tone. "My brother told me that he's keen on one of the girls who works in the packing plant with us. Rumor is that she looks exactly like his late wife. Blond with blue eyes."

Clarissa's heart raced. She hoped the two girls would not realize that Jenna had described Clarissa.

“There’s more,” Mary said. “I heard that Gino Colosimo has made a bet that he’ll be the one to marry the mysterious girl.”

Clarissa almost groaned aloud.

“She had better make up her mind fast,” Mary said. “If I were her, I’d choose McDonald—”

Satisfied that she was not in the queue, the three men left. Clarissa sighed in relief and let her hands drop.

“I’d go for Gino Colosimo,” Sarah said. “He’d protect her—”

Anger and indignation swelled in Clarissa’s chest. *What about her?* What about what she wanted?

“Perhaps she wants neither of them!” Clarissa hissed. “Some of us are not interested in matrimony to thugs.”

They both turned to her. Their expressions turned from surprise to understanding. Mary grabbed her shoulder.

“Are you that girl? Oh my goodness Clarissa!”

She could have kicked herself and her big mouth. Mrs. Smith from the poor house had told her every so often to think before she spoke.

“I have to go away. I want none of them!” Clarissa said with venom.

“You’re foolish Clarissa,” Mary said. “If I were you, I’d be engaged to Mister McDonald already.”

“Tell us,” Sarah whispered. “What do you tell them to make them fancy you?”

“I don’t do anything,” Clarissa protested. “I just want to be left alone but I know they won’t. What were you saying about the mail-order bride adverts?” she said and turned her attention back to the newspaper.

“You’d become a mail-order bride just to get away from them?” Sarah said.

It was not just being used as a replacement for a dead wife that Clarissa was against, it was who the men were. They were mob bosses! There was no way she was getting involved in such unsavory characters. She just wanted a quiet, happy life with a kind husband who stayed on the right side of the law. She would travel anywhere, even to the west, for such a gentleman.

“Yes, but first I have to know how it works,” Clarissa said.

“Men from the west advertise for wives. If you see an advert you like, you write to the gentleman and if he likes you, he invites you to go to the west to become his wife,” Sarah said.

“But what of love?” Clarissa said.

The two girls shook their heads.

“It’s not about love,” Sarah said. “It’s about a better life, that’s why I wouldn’t become a mail-order bride. I want to fall in love and to be loved.”

Clarissa bit her lower lip. She wanted love too. But she sure wasn’t going to get it in Chicago with those two mob bosses after her. They were not the kind of people one said no to. She had dodged Michael McDonald and kept him at a distance so far but Clarissa knew it was only a matter of time before he openly told her what he wanted.

What would she do then? The smart thing to do was to flee before he issued an ultimatum.

Clarissa’s eyes quickly scanned the adverts until one caught her attention.

**A farmer gentleman of 24 years old, six feet height, urgently requires a lady of a good disposition to correspond with, leading to matrimony.**

“Say I like this one, what do I do next?” Clarissa said, showing the two girls the advert.

Mary giggled. “You’ll be a farmer’s wife in Nebraska!”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Sarah asked.

Clarissa nodded. The idea had grown on to her in the last twenty minutes. Surely, marriage to a farmer in Nebraska was far better than to a mafia boss. The only drawback as far as she could see was that she would have to cast aside her dream. Ever since she was a little girl, she had dreamed of falling in love and marrying the man of her dreams.

“Well, you write him a letter and tell him a little about yourself,” Sarah explained. By now they had reached the door to the wage office. “You go in first,” Sarah said and shoved Mary into the office.

“But it must take long for a letter to reach the west,” Clarissa said. “I don’t have that time.”

“I’m just telling you how it works,” Sarah said, her tone sharp.

“I know and thank you for helping me,” Clarissa said, trying to return the other girl’s good mood. “Could I send a telegram instead?”

Sarah chuckled. "I've never heard of a mail-order bride sending a telegram of introduction!"

## Chapter Two

“How soon can I expect a reply?” Clarissa asked the bearded postman behind the counter.

He looked up at her with tired eyes, used to dealing with impatient customers.

“I don’t know ma’am,” he said and then added. “Perhaps in a day or two. A messenger will deliver a reply to your address. So do you want to send it or not?”

Clarissa glanced down at the wording of the telegram she had slaved over the previous night.

**Dear Sir, Eager to come to Nebraska to be your wife. Would love to live on a farm and will be an asset to you. Very important that I leave as soon as possible. Will explain as soon as we meet. Praying for a miracle. Clarissa Banks.**

Clarissa’s chest tightened. He would think she was a mad woman. Desperate. Oh Lord, what to do? She glanced out the window at the filthy streets, congested with people and violence simmering in the air and erupting without warning. The two people responsible for most of the violence both wanted to make her theirs. She held back a scream.

Michael McDonald and Gino Colosimo frightened her. She would take the risk of looking foolish to a stranger in Nebraska than being bullied into marrying one of the two. She turned to the postman.

“Yes please.”

Sending the telegram took a large chunk of her wages for that week and as she left the post office, her stomach in a twist at the thought of wasting money she could not afford. Clarissa kept her head bowed low as she dashed through the back alleys. She felt

better only when she entered the tenement building she had called home since she left the poor house.

Dread settled in her stomach as she shut the door to her dark, airless room on the second the floor. She should have been glad. Others had it worse. Like the family that lived in the basement rooms, competing for space and food with giant rats. It had been a hundred times better in the poor house.

For one, her room had no window and it served as both her sleeping quarters and kitchen. The stove leaked smoke into the room and she had to keep the door open when she was cooking to let out smoke. The weekend would be long, she thought as she sat down on the mattress.

She dreaded the coming week. Clarissa had made a decision. She would not return to work. She had dodged Michael McDonald for long enough and she knew he was probably running out of patience. Now that she had a plan, something in her heart had awoken. Visions of open fields with wild flowers sprouting in the least unexpected places. She dreamed of fresh clean air, of never smelling that rotten meat odor of the meat packing plant.

By Thursday evening she had not received a reply. Nausea whirled in her stomach, rose up and down her throat each time she thought of what she had done. For sure she was now out of a job. What if the gentleman from Nebraska ignored her telegram, what would she do? She had nowhere to go!

A knock sounded on her door making her jump. It had to be the postman! She hurried across the room and flung the door open.

“Clarissa! Are you alright? We got worried when you didn’t come in to work since Monday,” Sarah said, pushing her way into the room.

“Mister Michael McDonald was asking after you,” Mary said, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

“Clarissa he’s offering a reward to anyone who can find you,” she continued.

Clarissa’s eyes widened. “You didn’t tell him where I live did you?”

Mary made a face. “What do you take us for? Of course we didn’t. Besides, we weren’t sure you were home. Are you sick?”

“No,” Clarissa admitted and wrung her hands together. “I’m frightened Michael MacDonald will force me to be his wife. I wrote to the farmer in Nebraska and I’m waiting for his reply. I know he’ll invite me to Nebraska.”

Saying it aloud made Clarissa realize how farfetched her plan was. She sounded foolish and childish. The girls exchanged a glance.

“What if he doesn’t?” Sarah asked. “Why not just accept Mister McDonald’s advances and you’ll be taken care of the rest of your life. You’ll never lack for anything Clarissa. We were born poor and we don’t have the choices that well-to-do folk have.”

Tears sprung to her eyes. Perhaps Sarah had a point. What point was there to fight it when she would still end up as Michael McDonald’s wife? Why anger him? A knock on the door interrupted the intense conversation. Feeling like someone been led to the gallows, Clarissa trudged to the door. To her complete surprise, it was the post man.

“Are you Clarissa Banks?” he said.

Clarissa nodded.

“This came for you today ma’am,” he said and handed her a brown envelope.

“Thank you,” she said and more or less grabbed the envelope.

She tore it open even before the postman had turned away. Inside was a sheet of paper and several dollar bills and most importantly, a train ticket.

“Oh dear Lord! Thank you,” Clarissa said over and over again.

Tears flowed freely from her eyes. The relief was indescribable.

“I’m going to Nebraska!” she yelled.

“Is there a letter?” Sarah asked.

Clarissa unfolded the sheet of paper.

*Dear Miss. Banks,*

*I’m known for doing things that most people do not agree with but that does not make me a bad person, merely a curious one. Your telegram intrigued me and my mind conjured up all sorts of reasons why a young woman would be in such a rush to leave Chicago. I cannot wait to meet you so that you can tell me the whole story in person. I suppose I do crave a little excitement hence my agreeing to invite you to Nebraska without knowing anything about you apart from your name. I’m a great believer in my instincts and they tell me that you’re a good person who has probably run into a spot of trouble through no fault of your own. I believe we’ll make a good match for I admire a*

*person with grit. In writing that telegram Miss. Banks, you show a great deal of character and I cannot wait to meet you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Mickey Myers*

## Chapter Three

“All aboard!”

Clarissa sighed in disappointment and with a last glance at the train depot entrance, she hurried towards the passenger car. She had waited against the wall until the last possible moment but Mary and Sarah had not come to say goodbye like they had promised.

She shrugged away her disappointment as she climbed up the platform. At least now she knew she had no friends in Chicago. Still, it was a lonely moment to sit alone in the car and watch other people hug and call out goodbyes to their loved ones.

“Hurry up,” a woman’s voice said.

Five wide-eyed children of varying ages entered the car, followed by a harassed looking woman with a child on her hip and a man, also holding a child. The woman shot Clarissa a smile before she turned her attention to arranging her children on the bench. Clarissa reached out and helped the two younger girls to climb onto the bench.

“Thank you,” both man and the woman said at the same time.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “You have a beautiful family.”

The compliment lit the woman’s eyes. “Yes, we should be thankful but sometimes, they are a bit of a handful.”

The man and woman exchanged a deep understanding look. A language that only both of them understood. The chances of having a marriage like that were very slim, especially when you got your fiancé off a newspaper advertisement. To make it even worse, her own reasons for replying to the ad were less than noble.

She had no real interest in marriage. She just needed a place to hide, where Gino and Michael could not get to her. Nobody, even a mob boss would force her to marry

against her will. They would help each other. Her fiancé needed a wife for whatever reason and she needed the security of a husband and the distance.

Still, a bad taste filled her mouth as she covertly watched the family. They didn't appear well off, but they looked happy and content with each other. She swallowed excess saliva from her mouth. She just had to remember what was in store for her back in Chicago and marriage to a stranger would be preferable.

The other three boys poked their heads outside the windows.

"Oh look, there's Mister McDonald!" one of them said.

Blood drained from Clarissa's face. She shot from her seat.

"Excuse me," she said and hurried to the other end of the car where the toilet was. Heart thumping wildly, she closed the door behind her and crouched on the ground. This was it. She would not get away! She wanted to scream and punch the walls of the train. She knew without a doubt that Michael McDonald would find her.

He always got what he wanted. What had made her think she could outsmart a mob boss? She cocked her ear. There was some commotion in the car.

"We're looking for a young woman by the name of Clarissa Banks!" Michael McDonald said, his booming voice unmistakable. "Anyone who tells me where she is will get a hefty reward. Two hundred dollars."

Clarissa's folded knees nagged against each other. No one could resist an offer of money. The silence in the car stretched on for what seemed like hours. Finally, the man spoke.

"There's been no one here but us," the man spoke.

The next thing Clarissa heard was the pounding on the floor as Michael McDonald and his men left the car. Then a whistle blew. Clutching her stomach and praying they would not return, Clarissa almost wept with relief when the whistle blew again and the train begun moving.

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Everything inside the house was satisfactory, Mickey Myers thought as he strolled out of his one story sprawling ranch house. It was his pride and joy and he couldn't wait to show it off to Miss. Clarissa Banks. Mrs. Harris had done a good job preparing for his new bride.

His wagon waited at the front of the house. Mickey grabbed the reins and hopped up to the driver's seat. The next time he returned to the ranch, he would have Miss Clarissa with him. The town of Springville consisted of one street and a handful of stores. Everyone knew everyone else and as he rode through the town to the depot which was at the very end of the Main street, Mickey waved to everyone he passed.

Mickey nodded at Mr. Clark, the train's station master and the only person in the depot. Few people traveled all the way to the North of the state. Springville was the second last town and stop before the end of the track. He leaned on a post and kept his glance trained on the horizon, searching for signs of an approaching train.

Clarissa Banks, soon to be Clarissa Myers. He had dreamed of and worked for this moment all his life. It was the final step to the life he had envisioned while growing up in the orphanage. Clarissa was the final piece that would complete him. Together, they would make a family and a large one at that, Mickey mused.

He hoped she loved children because his plan was to fill the ranch house with the sounds of laughter and love. Everything he had lacked as a child. What if he had made a mistake? The truth was that he had gone about it in a very irresponsible manner. Those were Mrs. Harris's words. She was his cook and housekeeper but had taken a mother's role towards him.

She had encouraged him to advertise for a wife and with her help, he had done so, but the speed at which he had invited Clarissa to Nebraska had knocked the wind out of his housekeeper. Mickey chuckled. He liked doing the unexpected and so far, his gut instinct had never let him down. A distant hum alerted him to the approach of the train.

The gray smoke curling into rings as it rose up got closer and closer until he could make out the train. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, unable to keep still. Finally, the train reached the platform and came to a stop. He did not need to be told when his Clarissa stepped down from the train.

She had striking blue eyes and sweet oval-shaped face, framed by a mass of curly brown hair. She beamed as soon as she saw him and quickened her step.

"I didn't expect you to be so fetching," she said and then her hand flew to her mouth.

Mickey let out a bellow of delighted laughter. She was beautiful. He took her hand and kissed it.

“What a pleasure it is to finally have you here Miss. Banks,” he said.

“Thank you, please call me Clarissa,” Clarissa said, smiling broadly.

“I would like that very much. Please call me Mickey. I hope you’ll like it here. It’s quiet and certainly not what you’re used to,” Mickey said.

Why was he speaking non-stop? He forced himself to shut up.

“I’m certain I will,” she said. “The view from the train was glorious.”

His excitement went down a notch. This was a real lady. Springville was no place for a lady and he certainly was not husband material for some fancy lady from the east. He discreetly looked at her clothes. She wore a shabby dress which was once a dark red but the material and style told him it was an expensive dress. She probably came from a wealthy family that had run out of luck. *What had he done? It was Bridget all over again.*

## Chapter Four

Clarissa kept throwing sideways glances at her beau unable to believe how handsome and sweet he was. She had expected an older man.

“How old are you?” she blurted out when he climbed up to the driver’s seat next to her.

He grinned at her. Sweet Lord, but did he have a beautiful smile?

“I’m twenty-four years old but I feel so much older.”

Clarissa nodded. “I feel like that most of the time too. I’m almost nineteen but I feel like I’m fifty years old.”

He burst out laughing, a sound that pleased her.

“You’ll be pleased to know you don’t look fifty years old. Mrs. Harris on the other hand, does.”

“Who is Mrs. Harris?” Clarissa asked.

“She’s my cook and housekeeper,” Mickey said and then grew solemn. “That’s not quite right. She’s more like family. Her husband is my foreman and they’ve been with me since the beginning, almost four years ago. They’re family now.”

Could he get any more perfect? Clarissa sent a prayer of thanks to the Lord. For the first time, she felt as though luck was on her side. She felt, what was the emotion? Yes—hopeful. A surge of happiness lifted her chest. She had finally arrived home. This was who she had been waiting for all her life.

“I thought we would go home first for Mrs. Harris’s hearty breakfast and then after a rest, I can show you around. In the evening I’ll return you to town to the boarding house. It’s very respectable and clean, you’ll be comfortable there. How does that sound?”

Worry clouded his impossibly blue eyes. She spoke quickly to reassure him.

“It sounds perfect,” Clarissa said. As perfect as you are, she added silently.

“The ranch is less than fifteen minutes away,” he said as he expertly guided the wagon away from the main street.

She looked around her in awe. The grass and sage brush stretched on for miles on every end. In the distance, mountain and sky melted into one. She sighed and leaned back into the bench. This was as close to heaven as one could get.

“I’ve never been anywhere as pretty as here,” she said.

“You’ve never been out of the city?” he asked.

“No,” Clarissa admitted with a sheepish glance. She was about to tell him about growing up in the poor house before she bit down her lip.

She was enjoying herself immensely and didn’t want to spoil it. She threw a quick glance at Mickey’s profile. He seemed too nice but who knew how he’d react when she told him she was an orphan and poor. She had met friendly folk who immediately treated her with disdain when she told them her background.

“Well, you’re in for a treat then,” he beamed at her.

Mickey was easy to talk to. They spoke about the weather and the folk who lived in Springville, making her laugh with his descriptions.

“We’re nearly there now,” Mickey said.

For the first time since leaving Chicago, she felt safe. She could now forget Michael McDonald and Gino Colosimo. They would never find her here, and besides, she thought throwing a quick glance at Mickey’s bulky body, she had someone to protect her.

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In the distance, galloping on a brown horse towards them was a man wearing a hat that came low, almost covering his eyes. Mickey recognized him immediately. Hermann Sweeney. He was a known rustler though nothing had ever been proven. The trouble was that in the last couple of months, a few ranches had reported stolen cattle.

Not large amounts, not enough to warrant an investigation. He was clever all right. Mickey had no doubt that Hermann Sweeney was behind the wave of theft. Mickey quickly took the entrance to the left and then stopped the wagon.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said to Clarissa. “I want to have a word with that gentleman headed this way.”

She smiled and nodded. He checked that his pistol was tucked in his belt before he got off the wagon and hurried back to the road.

“I say Mister,” Mickey called when the horse rider got within hearing distance. “Are you Hermann Sweeney?”

He stopped his horse, a wary look coming over his features. “Who’s asking?”

“I am,” Mickey said and in two quick strides, he was by the man’s side.

He grabbed his shirt and pulled him from the horse. He came tumbling down, his hands letting go of the reins. His hand made to reach for his gun but before he could move, Mickey stepped on his right wrist. He gave a yelp of pain.

“Who are you and why are you pushing me around?” he groaned.

“My name’s Mickey Myers,” he said in a pleasant voice. “I just thought I’d issue you with a friendly warning. I have a feeling that you’re behind the disappearance of cows around here.”

“You can’t accuse me of something like that without proof!” the thug said.

Mickey lifted his boot clad foot and brought it down on his back. Hermann Sweeney screamed.

“Sure I can, who will stop me,” Mickey said. “Now, I have a proposition. Where are you from?”

“What’s it to you?”

In one swift movement, Mickey grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. He then landed a punch that got him squarely on the nose. Mickey moved sideways to duck the blood that spluttered from his nostrils.

“All right, don’t hit me again,” he said. “I’m from Virginia.”

The man proved what Mickey had always known. Thugs were generally cowards. A little shoving and they were ready to do your bidding.

“Now listen to me very carefully. There’ll be a train passing through Springville in three hours. I want you on that train. And don’t think of leaving town for a spell and then returning. The next time I see you, I’ll tear you into more pieces than anyone can count. Now go!”

Mickey felt no satisfaction at watching the man scramble up his horse and take off like the coward he was. If it were up to him, he would do everything in his power to keep

the bad sorts out of Springville, but as the town grew, it was bound to attract all sorts of people. He turned and saw Clarissa standing there her eyes wide with shock.

He was about to explain to her and then immediately changed his mind. No point scaring her more than she already was.

## Chapter Five

In muted shock, Clarissa followed Mickey into the sprawling house. She had never been inside such a huge house. The porch opened into a square hallway, with a table arranged on the wall and a riot of colored flowers on a vase.

“Mrs. Harris put this here for you. She said most ladies find flowers welcoming,” Mickey said.

The scene on the road played over and over in her mind. She looked at Mickey and was unable to reconcile the horrible, violent person beating an innocent man, to the sweet talking Mickey showing her flowers for her approval. He had switched between the two roles in an erringly effortless manner.

He reminded her of someone. Michael McDonald. Clarissa momentarily closed her eyes. She had jumped from a hot pan to a frying pot. Tears prickled at her eyes. What awful luck she had. How could she have escaped two mafia bosses in Chicago only to run into the arms of another violent man? Her legs trembled as she followed Mickey into a large rectangle shaped, warmly furnished parlor.

“What do you think?” he stopped and asked.

She took in the large comfortable looking chairs, sturdy and intricately made table, central rug and a large fireplace with two rocking chairs side by side.

“It’s very nice,” she said in a polite voice.

His smile disappeared. He narrowed his eyes and frowned. Clarissa looked away. He continued further into the dining room and then through a door.

“Mrs. Harris,” Mickey called as they entered what turned out to be a spacious kitchen with a huge table at the center.

A tiny woman standing by the stove turned and faced them, a smile on her face.

“Meet Miss. Clarissa Banks, my fiancé, and this here is Mrs. Harris who keeps this house running,” Mickey said, favoring the older woman with a smile.

Clarissa stepped forward and shook the outstretched hand which was surprisingly strong for such a tiny woman.

“Welcome,” Mrs. Harris said. “I know you must be hungry from lack of proper food on the train. I’ll show you to your room and then I’ll serve breakfast.” Her loud voice did not match her size.

The mention of food made her tummy growl.

“Thank you, that sounds lovely,” Clarissa said.

“I’ll be waiting in the parlor for you,” Mickey said as she followed Mrs. Harris out of the room.

“Please freshen up here,” Mrs. Harris said opening the door to a washroom with a large washtub in it. “The water should still be hot, I brought it up when I heard the wagon.”

Clarissa salivated at the thought of immersing her tired body in the tub.

“And here’s the guest room,” Mrs. Harris said, opening the door to an adjoining room. “I’ll have your things brought up and then when you take what you need, someone can take the rest of your luggage to the boarding house.”

“Thank you so much,” Clarissa murmured.

When the door shut behind her, she leant on it and covered her face. What would she do now? She couldn’t return to Chicago and she certainly did not want to marry Mickey Myers. He was attractive and charming, but he had a side to her that she did not like. The worst thing would be to fall in love with such a character.

She weighed her options. Mickey Myers was bound to hurt her at some point. The best way to protect herself was to keep him at arm’s length. She would be friendly and would spend as much time as she could with him. That was the only way to study his character. Her decision made, she entered the room and stretched.

Her back ached from seating for five days on the train. She thought of the bath waiting for her. For now, she would soak her weary body in that tub, eat the promised hearty breakfast, rest and then take a day at a time.

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Something had changed, Mickey thought as they ate their breakfast in the dining room. It was his first time to eat in the big room that could seat up to fifteen people. The

cheerful girl who had arrived at the depot an hour ago was gone. Clarissa looked as though she was frightened. What had caused that?

His mouth went dry. Had she found out that he was uneducated? That he could barely write his own name? No, it wasn't possible. Mrs. Harris was the only one who knew his secret and he had sworn her to secrecy.

"Are you all right?" Mickey said.

She looked up, her watery blue eyes wide. "Yes of course."

His core grew cold. He only knew one other person who liked to use the words 'of course' and sounded like a school mistress. Bridget. Mickey cleared his throat and pushed away memories of his first love. His heart constricted as he watched Clarissa. He wanted to hear her laugh again.

"Would you like to see the ranch now or after you have a rest?"

"Now if you don't mind," Clarissa said.

"The best way to enjoy your surroundings is by walking," Mickey said to her as they strolled out of the house through the back door.

The sun was warm on his bare hands and the ranch was at its best. The grass had not been burnt by the sun so much and it was still a lovely shade of green.

"So what made you decide to reply to my advert and in such haste?" he said, leading the way towards the open prairie. He would show her the barns another time.

She was silent for a while and he thought she wouldn't answer. A silky brown stray strand of hair fell on her face. Was it too soon to reach out and smooth it back?

"I don't know where to begin," she finally said.

Guilt bubbled inside his chest. Why was he asking her so many questions on the very day she had arrived? She was probably tired and worried whether she would get used to living away from a city.

"I too came to the west from a city—New York. I thought it would be difficult but I fit right in immediately. I felt at home, as though I finally belonged," Mickey said, his mind returning to the lonely years of his life in the poorhouse.

"I'm not worried about not liking it here," Clarissa said.

"I really hope you do," Mickey said, meaning it. "But if you don't and decide to return home, please don't be afraid to tell me. I'll understand."

His heart twisted at the thought of Clarissa returning home. He ought to be glad when that happened, he told himself sternly. Girls who grew up in privileged homes were to be feared. He felt her glance and turned to her.

“I won’t,” she said and then turned to the land. “How big is the ranch?”

“Three thousand acres,” Mickey said. “I started with six hundred and forty acres and then kept buying small portions until it’s where it is now. My goal is to have ten thousand acres in five years.”

She let out a whistle. “You sure do aim low.”

Mickey laughed. He had been accused of worse. He spied the herd on the northern pasture, his ranch hands on horseback between them.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” he said.

She shook her head.

“Would you like to learn?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?” she said and to his delight, the twinkle returned to her eyes.

## Chapter Six

Clarissa turned, half asleep, and felt a shaft of light warm her face. She flicked her eyes open and sat up with a start. The events of the previous day came back to her. She fell back to the bed. The image of Mickey Myers floated to her mind. She could see him as clearly as if he was standing right there with her in the boarding house room.

He was of medium height but what caught one's attention was the size of his shoulders. One glance was enough to tell you that he was a man who spent a lot of time outdoors. He'd promised to start their horse riding lessons today. Excited at the day ahead, Clarissa jumped out of bed and proceeded to the washroom down the hallway.

She pushed open the boarding house front door just as Mickey's wagon came rolling down the street. Despite her worries over Mickey's character, she felt happy. Perhaps it was the warmth of the sun, or the unfamiliar sweet smell of flowers. Whatever the reason, she felt ready to embrace the day.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Mickey said as he brought the wagon to a stop.

He had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, exposing hairy, muscular arms. She sucked in a breath and wrenched her eyes away.

"Good morning," she said, shading her eyes with her hand.

He held out a hand and she hopped up. She arranged herself next to him, their legs touching. Bolts of something went up and down her legs. She had never been physically affected by a man ever in her life. It was an odd sensation but not unpleasant.

"Did you have a good night? Was it comfortable?" Mickey asked as he drove the wagon.

"I didn't see much of it," Clarissa quipped. "I was dead to the world."

Mickey laughed. "That explains your cheerful mood."

She adopted a pained look. "What do you mean? Aren't I always pleasant?"

"Yes you are," he said solemnly bringing her heart to a stop. "What do you have there?"

Shyly, Clarissa lay her book flat on her lap. She had bought it with the last of her money before leaving Chicago. Mickey glanced at it and then continued driving.

"I bought this a few days ago. It's about beef cattle ranching," Clarissa said.

He nodded and kept his glance trained ahead. Clarissa swallowed a ball of disappointment. Maybe when they reached the ranch and he wasn't occupied with driving the wagon, he would take a look at it. This time, Mickey guided the wagon to the back of the house and they used the back door to enter.

After exchanging greetings with Mrs. Harris, Clarissa followed Mickey to the dining room.

"I have to leave you for a bit," Mickey said. "There's something I need to tend to in the pastures, I'll be back before you finish breakfast."

Clarissa searched his face. He looked away as if he did not want to make eye contact with her. What had she done wrong? The dining room felt lonely and empty when Mickey left. She stayed for a minute longer and then unable to bear the silence she went to the kitchen.

"Have I taken too long?" Mrs. Harris asked.

"No, it's just that..." she searched for the right words. "May I eat breakfast here? It's very quiet in there."

Mrs. Harris chuckled. "I always said that dining room is too large, but perhaps it won't be when it's full of children?"

Clarissa felt her face burn. She pulled a chair and plopped down on it, the sweet smell of bacon assailing her nostrils.

"How are you liking Springville so far," Mrs. Harris asked as she placed a mug of tea on the table.

"It's very nice. I'm getting used to the silence," Clarissa said.

"A year from now and the thought of living in the city will turn your tummy in," the housekeeper said. "Here, I hope you like bacon and pancakes."

Clarissa made appreciative noises as Mrs. Harris placed the plate brimming with bacon and a pancake before her. Her tummy growled. She had never been a heavy eater.

There was something about Springville that brought out her appetite. She attacked the food with vigor, cleaning out her plate in a few minutes.

Mrs. Harris nodded approvingly as she cleared the plate. "You'll fit right in here. We enjoy our food out here."

She put the dirty plate in the sink and returned to the table. She pulled a chair and sat down. Clarissa's heart skipped a beat.

"I can't tell you how happy Mr. Harris and I are that Mr. Myers has found himself a wife. I've prayed so many times that he may find someone as good hearted as he is."

Clarissa gave her a faltering smile. "He's a good man then?"

Mrs. Harris gave her a wide smile. "The very best. Why, just six months ago, he insisted that Mr. Harris buy a few herd cattle and keep them in the ranch pastures. Have you ever heard of such generosity?"

Clarissa shook her head. It was on the tip of her tongue to confide in Mrs. Harris about the incident on the road. Then it occurred to her that her loyalty lay with her employer, not his newly arrived bride.

"That's good to know. I worried because I came here too fast. We didn't really get to know each other."

Mrs. Harris chuckled. "I know. I must say, I was shocked myself when the Mister said you were arriving the following day. Why, it was only a few weeks ago that I wrote the advert for him."

Her mouth flew to her mouth and as quick as lightning, she bolted from her chair.

"I should not have said that," she said and paced up and down the width of the kitchen.

"Said what?" Clarissa asked, puzzled. "That you wrote the advert?"

In two steps Mrs. Harris was beside her. She gripped her arm. "The Mister made me promise that I would never tell anybody he can't read and write! Oh Lord, me and my big mouth? He'll relieve me from my position! What will happen to us?"

## Chapter Seven

Mickey exhaled softly as he held the door open for Clarissa. She did not have that dreaded book with her. Feeling the tension ebb away, he widened his arm and she slid her hand through his. They walked across the patch of grass that divided the ranch house and the barns.

He was particularly proud of the barns and he could not wait to see her reaction.

“Oh, it’s so large and airy! Wait, what’s that noise?” Clarissa came to an abrupt stop.

Mickey burst out laughing. She was a city girl through and through. He took her arm and led her to the lady’s stall. She was a silky brown mare, mild mannered and just right for someone with no experience with horses.

The horse neighed when they reached her stall. She brought her muzzle to Mickey and he reached out and stroked her head.

“Do you want to stroke Lady?” he said.

Clarissa stood a foot away, blinking rapidly at the horse.

“I promise, she won’t hurt you. She’s one of our most docile horses. Here,” he said and stretched out his hand.

After a little hesitation, she placed her hand into his. He let out a sharp intake of breath, her touch sending rivulets of yearning through him. She took a step forward. He guided her hand to Lady’s flank. Clarissa froze and then stroked the horse, her hands cold.

“Here, give her this,” he said and gave her a carrot stick.

His heart swelled with pride and admiration. He knew how much it took for Clarissa to hold out the carrot with the fear that the horse would bite off her hand. After

feeding and getting Clarissa used to the horse's presence, Mickey let the horse out of the stall and led her into the exercise ring.

He walked Lady around in circles and then with a gesture, invited Clarissa to take over the reins. White faced, she stepped into the ring and took the reins.

"That's it, well done," he said to her as she led Lady around in circles.

"This is not so difficult," she beamed.

"No it's not," Mickey said. "Soon, the east will be a distant memory,"

She smiled. "It already is. I love it here, the air is pure not like Chicago but what I love most is the silence. The Meat—"

She clamped up and wouldn't finish what she had been about to say. Still, she seemed relaxed and he decided to seize the opportunity.

"I don't want to rush you into matrimony," Mickey begun. "But I want you to know how much I like having you here."

She beamed. "I like it too."

He let her lead the horse for another ten minutes as they chatted easily about the differences between the west and the city.

"Will you be all right? I want to muck the stalls while you walk Lady," Mickey said.

"I'm fine," she said and reached out with her other hand and patted Lady's flank. She lifted her tail in response. "We're friends now."

With stray hair framing her face and joy drawn on her face, she resembled an angel. For a minute, Mickey forgot where he was or what he was about to do, as he greedily soaked in her beauty. He could spend all day happily watching her, counting the different expressions that flitted across her face and not experience a moment of boredom.

Lady moved her head and nibbled on Clarissa's neck. She let out a surprised but pleased chuckle. His body uncomfortably warm, he went for a pitchfork on the side of the barn, relieved to have something to distract him from his bride. After one more glance at Clarissa, Mickey started with the stall at the very end.

He worked steadily, using his pitchfork to dig out the wet manure.

"Can I give you a hand?" Clarissa's voice said behind him.

He glanced at the pile of stinky manure and then at Clarissa, standing with one hand on a pitchfork and another on her hips.

"I don't think—"

He stopped mid-sentence when he realized she was not listening. He watched with amusement as she tackled the other corner of the stall, digging into the ground. After a few jabs, she straightened, looked at him and pinched her face. He chuckled. The stench of manure required getting used to.

“Are you just going to stand there watching me?” she demanded.

He grinned. “No ma’am.”

They worked in perfect harmony, moving through the stalls until they reached the second last one. Clarissa’s face glistened with sweat and her breath came out heavy.

“I’ll do these two last ones,” Mickey said. “You’ve done well, take a rest.”

She wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her dress.

“I intend to finish,” she said and went on to clean out the last two barns, matching his pace.

Mickey shook his head. He could not understand Clarissa. On one hand, she spoke like a real lady, pronouncing each word carefully. Then there was this Clarissa who had no qualms about dipping her boots in manure and getting herself dirty. His heart swelled with admiration.

There was no reason to be afraid of his feelings for her. Apart from the posh accent, she did not resemble Bridget. Memories of the past engulfed him, but this time there was no bitterness. For two years, he had worked on a large spread to familiarize himself with the workings of a ranch.

He had fallen in love with the boss’s daughter and she had led him to believe she felt the same. The next thing he heard, she was engaged to a fellow. He confronted her. Mickey never forgot the incredulous look she gave him and the laugh that followed.

“Surely you never thought there could be anything serious between us. A handsome face is all very well but an uneducated person? You’re not serious?”

“Where does all this go?” Clarissa said bringing him back to the present. She gestured to the pile of manure in the middle of the barn.

“It goes outside to the heap behind the barn. Let me get a wheelbarrow,” Mickey said.

He returned moments later with a wooden wheelbarrow he had fashioned himself. Feeling playful, he pushed it up to where Clarissa stood.

“One person has to sit at the edge,” he said straight faced. “Go on.”

He fought to maintain a serious countenance while her features pinched in doubt. After searching his face and finding nothing suspicious, she took a step, turned and perched herself on the wheelbarrow.

“Like this?” she asked.

“Slide in,” Mickey said, enjoying himself.

When she was settled in the wheel barrow, he lifted up the two handles and pushed it around in circles. Clarissa was quiet at first and then a muted giggle erupted from her throat. It grew until she was sprawled on the wheel barrow laughing as if her body would explode from mirth.

“You tricked me,” she finally said, throwing him an accusing look.

He stopped the wheelbarrow and gave in to his laughter. She looked so sweet perched on the wheelbarrow been ridden around in circles.

“I know you’ve never ridden in a wheel barrow and you’d not have agreed to get on it, had I asked. Now you can say you have,” Mickey said.

She jumped from the wheel barrow and ran to him. She laughingly grabbed his shoulders. His arms automatically went around her waist and their laughter died. Their eyes locked. It required every ounce of his self-control not to give in to his natural urges. Instead he leaned towards her and kissed her cheek.

## Chapter Eight

They fell into a comfortable routine in the week that followed. Mickey picked her up from the boarding house in the morning and returned her after an early dinner. Clarissa's favorite part of the day was when Mickey took their riding lesson out in the prairie.

"Do you sometimes wonder why it is that some children suffer so much?" he asked her as he held the horse's reins, leading them through long sage brush.

Clarissa swallowed a lump of saliva. Mickey's question took her straight to the past. She had asked herself that too many times to count. She remembered pestering Mr. and Mrs. Jones, who ran the poorhouse for information on where she had come from. Finally Mr. Jones had told her. A policeman had heard weak cries of a child from an alley. He had found a day old baby wrapped up in newspapers.

She still couldn't decide what was worse. Not knowing your origins or the knowledge that your Ma had dumped you in an alley; unwanted.

"My parents were too poor to take care of us twelve children," Mickey continued. "We all started working for pay when we were very young. My sisters all got married before they were fifteen years old," Mickey continued.

From where she sat astride the horse, Clarissa could not see his facial expression but the raw pain in his voice told her how painful his memories were. If Mickey started working early in life, that explained why he could not read and write. He had not had a chance to go to school.

To Clarissa's surprise, her heart swelled with a need to protect him.

"But look how it has all come together for you," Clarissa said with feeling. "I'm sure your people are very proud of you."

“They probably would be if they agreed to come down for a visit. Maybe Pa and Ma will once I tell them I have a wife now,” Mickey said and stopped to glance at her.

Her heart skipped a beat. He had the bluest eyes she had ever seen on anyone. A smile wiped off the earlier pain. She could no longer see the ranch house even from atop the horse. The scent of wild flowers wafted up her nostrils. All around them was swaying grass and sparsely growing trees.

Further ahead, the flat land dipped into a valley. They got to the edge and looked down. Clarissa exhaled slowly. She had never seen such natural beauty. The grass below seemed greener and lusher. As her eyes adjusted to the dark colors, she made out a thin wisp of smoke, curling into the sky.

It came from a farm house chimney, nestled at the bottom between two small hills. On the right side of the house maize plants swayed, and between the rows, she made out a woman and more children than she could count.

“Help me down please,” Clarissa requested.

Still holding the reins, Mickey reached up, held her waist firmly and eased her off the saddle.

“Who are those people?” she asked.

“That’s Mrs. Wood,” Mickey explained. “Come, let’s go down and you can meet her.”

Fascinated as to why Mrs. Wood and her many children lived on the edge of Mickey’s property, she followed him down the valley. On noticing them, the smallest children, the youngest of whom was about three years old came running to them.

“Mr. Myers,” they called.

Mickey stopped and laughingly patted heads of the ones clinging to his knees. It was an endearing sight. A side of him she had not seen and it made tears prickle at the sides of her eyes.

“Mickey,” Mrs. Woods said, wiping her hands on her apron as she came towards them. A girl grabbed her skirt. Mrs. Woods bent and kissed the girls forehead.

She was as thin as a rake, but surprised Clarissa with the strength of her arms when they shook hands. She had scraped her dark hair away from her face, revealing an open expression and the kindest brown eyes Clarissa had ever seen.

“Mrs. Woods, meet Miss. Clarissa Banks, soon to be my wife,” Mickey said. “And this here is Mrs. Woods, she and her husband have lived here with us for the last two years and we expect them to be here for a long time.”

Mrs. Woods folded her hands together as if in prayer. “Our Lord has been kind. It’s a pleasure to meet you Miss. Banks. I know you’ll enjoy leaving here with us.”

“Mr. Myers, come and see the train Homer and I made,” a little boy of about six years old said and took Mickey’s hand.

“Excuse me ladies,” Mickey said and winked at Clarissa, her face burning in response.

“You’ve found yourself a man with a heart of gold. He’s a younger version of my own Mr. Woods,” Mrs. Woods said, gazing at Mickey’s back as he was led away by the children.

Clarissa smiled. Mrs. Woods turned back to her.

“I don’t know what would have happened had he not offered us this parcel of land. We were in a small lot in town and it was difficult to make ends meet with nowhere to grow our food. And we kept getting more children, from parents who passed on before they got to their destinations,” Mrs. Woods explained.

Clarissa understood then. The children were orphans whom the Woods took under their care.

“He even goes as far as catering to the children’s other needs like clothes.”

“How many children do you have here?” Clarissa asked.

“Twenty but about to increase. There was a train accident miles from here and there are several children who lost their parents and their families cannot be traced. That’s where Mr. Woods has gone.”

“People here are so kind,” Clarissa mused out aloud.

She could not imagine people doing that back in the city. The ones who ran poor homes were paid by the government.

“We all look out for each other.”

Mickey returned at that moment and after conversing a while longer with Mrs. Woods, they excused themselves, said goodbye to the children and retraced their steps. Clarissa’s chest was tight with unshed tears. She knew how important it was for orphans to have a warm place to call home and to have people to love them.

She had had a warm bed and food every night, but what she had lacked was a Mrs. Woods to wrap her arms around her. What a difference a little love would have made. She had been accused of being cold and indifferent. Clarissa had not understood why until now when she saw the joy in the children under Mrs. Woods care.

“Are you all right Clarissa?” Mickey asked as he untied the reins of the horse where they had left her.

His tone was soft and gentle. She nodded and gave him a reassuring smile. She had learned to keep her feelings under control. Mickey stepped on the stirrups and hoisted himself onto the saddle. Clarissa froze. Was he intending on leaving her in the prairies? He got comfortable and then held out a hand.

On seeing her stricken expression, he grinned. “Thought I’d leave you? I’d rather leave one of my limbs.”

Pleasure flushed through her. She took his hand, placed her boot inside the stirrup and allowed herself to be pulled up into the saddle. Clarissa could not breathe and she sat snuggled in front of Mickey. She could feel his every movement as he pulled the reins and they took off towards the ranch in an easy gallop.

She relaxed and allowed her back to lean on him. Her limbs felt weightless as though she was floating. For the first time in her life, Clarissa felt content, and something else. She examined it until she could identify it. It was a sense of belonging, something she had never felt all of her life.

The land, the people, the man behind her on the saddle whose strong thighs and arms told her she was safe—she belonged here.

## Chapter Nine

For the first time, she was alone in the house with Mickey. Mrs. Harris had taken the morning off to see to some personal business in town. Clarissa felt very wifely as she flipped over the cooking bacon. She heard Mickey's footsteps before she saw him.

"Something smells delicious!" he shouted from the parlor as he came towards the kitchen.

His presence filled the kitchen as soon as he entered. She smiled at him and drew in a deep breath. She had tossed and turned the whole night before deciding. She would tell Mickey everything. She had to know what kind of person he was. She was quiet as she served their breakfast of creamed potatoes and bacon.

"I'm thinking of adding two hundred beef cows to the herd," Mickey said.

"Oh that's nice," Clarissa said, understanding very little of it. "How many do you have now?"

He beamed. "One thousand and a few hundred."

"I'd like to understand beef cattle one day," Clarissa said. "Do you keep records?"

Her stomach churned as she waited for her answer. She needed to be sure of her suspicions. Seated across him on the kitchen table she gazed at him, sure not to miss any movements he made. He shifted about in his chair and then cleared his throat before changing the topic.

"You've never asked about my family," Clarissa said, sipping on her tea to wet her dry mouth.

"I knew you'd tell me when you were ready," he said.

She blinked back the emotion swelling in her at the simplicity of his answer. She lowered her head and gazed at the tea in the mug.

“My mother or father or whoever left me in an alley when I was a day old. A policeman discovered me wrapped in a newspaper, hidden under trash.”

Her voice caught but she refused to stop. She had to tell him all of it. She loved him and if he was going to reject her, it might as well be now. Clarissa had seen how people reacted to orphans. They did not deserve consideration like other normal people with families.

“I was taken into the poor house and that’s where I grew up,” she said. “I lived there until I was eighteen and then I had to go and fend for myself.”

It was too quiet. She risked a glance and met Mickey’s eyes. They brimmed with an emotion she did not recognize. Disgust maybe. She dropped her gaze and continued her story.

“I found a position in a meat packing plant until the mob boss in Chicago noticed me,” Clarissa said, unconsciously trembling as she recalled that frightening period of her life.

She told him all of it. How she saw his advert in the newspaper and the joy and relief she felt when he replied to her telegram. When she finished, she looked up to find his eyes wet with tears.

“I’ll understand if you send me back to Chicago,” Clarissa said. “I know you thought I was someone else because of the way I speak. I learned how to speak posh English from a young woman who was stayed at the poor house for a year. It was a punishment for something I never did find out, but she taught me a lot of things,” Clarissa explained.

Mickey placed his hands on top of the table and beckoned for hers. Tentatively, she placed her hands in his big warm ones and he promptly enclosed them.

“You’ll be safe from now onwards,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. “No one will harm you here.”

Relief washed through her. He was not going to send her away.

“You’re the most remarkable lady I have ever met,” he said. “And I feel humbled by your courage considering what you have been through.”

She loved him! That was the feeling she had been searching for. She loved Mickey Myers. Her intention had been to get married to him as long as she was safe from Michael McDonald and Gino Colosimo. It was not about them now. It was about her and Mickey Myers and the life they could have together.

Something nagged at her. That first day, only a week ago when Mickey brought her to the ranch.

“I need to ask you something,” she said, knowing how much his answer mattered to her.

“Please do,” he said. “I want you to know you can talk to me about anything. I want us to be friends first.”

She gave him a faltering smile. “My first time to come here, we stopped at the entrance of the ranch and you went to speak to a gentleman on horseback.”

Mickey’s eyes hardened. “I wouldn’t call what I did as having a word with him.”

She pulled her hands away and wrapped them across her chest. “I know. I followed you.”

“One thing about the west my dear is that it is wild, and so are the people. The only way to survive is to protect your property as well as your loved ones.”

His eyes bore into hers when he said “loved ones.” She shivered in response.

“One thing Clarissa, that man was no gentleman. Most ranches have reported a few missing cattle and right from the start I knew he had something to do with it. Don’t ask me how. That’s another long, violent story. I needed to scare him into leaving town. I’m not sorry you saw that, it makes it easier to say what I need to say.”

Her mouth went dry.

“I have to teach you how to handle a gun Clarissa. I might not always be here to protect you and I want to know you’ll always be safe. Sometimes the wrong kind of people pass through the town.”

She nodded, relief and a feeling of foolishness descending on her. She had been so quick to judge when it would have been easier to ask him.

“I’d like that too,” she said softly and then reached for his hands and held them. He smiled, pleased. “And now I’d like to teach you something.”

A shadow of wariness came over his eyes. She let go of his hand and slipped a book from the pocket of her apron and placed it on the table. “I want to teach you how to read. It might take six months, a year or even five, but I promise you Mickey Myers, you’ll learn how to read. I’ll be a tough teacher and there will be no—”

He stood up abruptly, pushed his chair back and rounded the table. He took her hand and pulled her to him. He made strange noises as he embraced her tightly. Sobbing noises.

## Chapter Ten

The sweat of the day had been replaced by a chilly breeze that made the hairs on his bare arms stand. Still, he did not want to part from Clarissa. They stood outside the boarding house holding hands.

“I feel as if I’ve known you all my life,” he said to her and then reached out and tenderly touched strands of her hair falling on the side of her face.

“Me too,” Clarissa said and dropped her head.

He grinned. She was the bravest lady he knew and yet, he managed to make her shy with a few words. He darted his eyes around, saw there was no one about and leaned in and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“I shall see you tomorrow my love,” he said.

Her cheeks became crimson. She smiled and to Mickey’s surprise, she went on her toes and touched her soft lips to his cheek. She smelt of soap and flowers. When she took a step away from him, he wanted to pull her back to him. He wasn’t ready for Clarissa to leave him even though it was just for a night.

The door to the boarding house shut and with a heavy step, he went to the buggy and entered for the lonely drive back to the ranch. Shadows danced on the side of the road and beyond, crickets chirped as the day wound down. The ache in his heart was real. He needed Clarissa with him during the day and at night.

He wanted to go to bed with her by his side and wake up to her beautiful face. The time had come to make her his wife. Mickey pulled the reins and increased the speed of the buggy. The front of the ranch house was dark but as he navigated the buggy to the back, he saw Mrs. Harris silhouette from the kitchen window.

After seeing to the horse and buggy, Mickey hurried into the house.

“Evening Mr. Myers, you’re back quickly,” Mrs. Harris teased from where she and her husband sat around the kitchen table. “Can I pour you a cup of tea?”

“Yes please,” Mickey said and pulled out a chair. “Howdy Tom.”

Mr. Harris grunted in response. Mickey waited until his housekeeper finished serving him and sat back down.

“I’m glad I found you before you left for the evening,” he said. “There’s something I need help with. I plan on proposing to Miss. Banks tomorrow—”

Mrs. Harris shrieked. Her hands flew to her mouth. “Finally! We get to have a wedding here at the ranch.”

“Why don’t you let him finish woman!” Mr. Harris said in a gruff but loving voice.

Mickey was touched by the tears in Mrs. Harris’s eyes. “The weather is fine, just perfect for a picnic tomorrow.”

“I’ll prepare the picnic basket first thing in the morning,” she said, clapping her hands together.

“Thank you,” Mickey said, shooting his housekeeper a grateful look. “As for the wedding, I’ll speak to the circuit preacher tomorrow. If he agrees, he can marry us on Saturday.”

“That’s five days from now!” Mrs. Harris cried out. He had been expecting that response.

“Hire all the extra women you need to help with the cooking. We’ll do it here and invite the whole town to celebrate with us,” Mickey announced, his own heart racing.

“You don’t want to waste any time,” Mr. Harris said in his gruff voice.

“Not if I can help it,” Mickey said.

“She’s a wonderful lady Mr. Myers,” his housekeeper gushed. “A real good addition to the house. Soon we shall have little ones running about the place.”

Mickey nodded. “That’s my plan.”

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Clarissa basked in the morning sunshine as she waited for Mickey. She adjusted her navy blue dress and then her hair. Why was she nervous? Something had shifted. She had opened her heart to him, allowed herself to love him. She wanted to scream in delight. How lucky was she to get such a wonderful fiancé.

Just then, she spied his buggy rounding a corner. He parked the buggy and got out, his eyes on her.

“You, my lady are a sight for sore eyes,” he said and reached out and ran a finger down her jaw causing all sorts of sensations in her. “Ready?”

“I am,” she said, feeling suddenly shy.

He helped her into the buggy and went around to his side.

“Today, we take a different route,” he said. “Somewhere you haven’t been.”

She felt like a little girl. “Where is that? How far?”

“Not far at all,” Mickey said, his tone playful. “Perhaps I should have you close your eyes?”

“No please,” Clarissa cried out in mock horror. “I fear the darkness.”

He locked gazes with her. “You never have to be afraid of anything when you’re with me.”

It was a beautiful summer morning, the kind that made one thankful to be alive. Still, she had felt that way from the very first time she met Mickey. There was something solid and strong about him that made her feel safe and cared for.

“We’re nearly there,” Mickey said after fifteen minutes.

It turned out to be a lake teeming with life. Birds flitted on the sun drenched surface of the water, and lily pads covered some surface. A deep sense of serenity engulfed her as she took in the surroundings.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“I thought you’d like it,” Mickey said. “It’s quiet at this time of morning.”

“Thank you for bringing me,” Clarissa said.

Mickey raked a hand through his hair as they stood on the lake bank. He cleared his throat.

“I brought a picnic basket,” he said, his words coming out in clipped tones.

Clarissa bit down on her lip, her earlier joy evaporating. She had become very sensitive to Mickey’s moods and now she could feel something was worrying him. Unable to bear the discomfort any more, she placed her hands on her hips and faced him.

“Stop right there Mickey Myers,” she said with false bravado. “We’re not sitting down to a picnic before you tell me what the matter is. Why! Nothing can go down my constricted throat!”

He turned to her and grinned. “Why do you have to go and spoil my surprise Miss. Banks?” He took two long strides and took her hand into his. His features grew solemn.

“Clarissa, when I first saw you, I thought I had found my bride but the more I got to know you, I knew without a shadow of doubt that I had met the love of my life. I love you Clarissa and I don’t want to spend another night away from you. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Her eyes filled with tears and unable to contain her emotions she broke down into loud noisy sobs.

“Is that a yes or a no?” Mickey asked.

“It’s a yes, of course,” Clarissa said and buried her face into his chest. “Oh Mickey, I love you too, so very much.”

She had never once thought that she would fall in love with the man who would become her husband. And what a feeling it was! She could do anything with Mickey by her side. She could even fly if she wished to! What a silly thought, Clarissa mused as her sobs mingled with giggles.

## Chapter Eleven

True to Mickey's word, the whole town came to their wedding, but at that moment, Clarissa only had eyes for her husband. He squeezed her hands in encouragement as she said her vows. Her voice shook a little from the emotions swirling in her heart. For the first time in her life, she had something to call her own. Her husband and her home. It was a heady feeling.

When it was Mickey's turn, his voice never wavered and he kept his gaze locked with hers as he promised to be faithful to her for the rest of his life. Only after they had been declared husband and wife and they were walking out of the makeshift garden at the front of the ranch house did Clarissa notice her surroundings.

"No more going to the boarding house," Clarissa teased Mickey as they made their way into the house where the wedding breakfast had been laid out in the dining room.

Mickey made an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Thank God for that."

Their guests followed them into the dining room where a feast had been laid out on the long table. The arrangement was for guests to serve themselves and eat wherever they pleased inside the house.

They stood to the side and watched their guests filing into the room, their eyes roaming to take in the decorations in the room.

"Mrs. Harris has outdone herself," Clarissa whispered to her new husband.

"It's because she loves you," Mickey said, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "We all do. How did I manage without you for all those years my Clarissa?"

Joy spread from her heart to the rest of her body. She would never tire of Mickey's sweet words.

“Mr. and Mrs. Myers,” a five-year-old blond-haired girl said, coming towards them. “Jane said that you’ll have a baby soon, is that true?”

Her voice, sharp and loud carried echoed all over the room. Laughter rang out. Mrs. Woods came hurrying towards them and admonished the little girl.

“No it’s fine,” Clarissa said, touching the other woman’s shoulder and then turning to the girl, she said, “I hope so my dear. Will you be coming to play with the baby when we do have one?”

“Yes,” the little girl said solemnly. “I shall even help to care for the baby.”

“Thank you,” Clarissa said just as solemnly. “I shall remind you of it.”

“You’ll make a wonderful mother,” Mickey said in between good wishes from their guests.

“Thank you,” Clarissa said. “And you a good Pa.”

Her eyes shifted from Mickey to the children from the poor house now serving food under the watchful eye of Mrs. Woods, to the guests milling about. She knew most of them by name and so did they. She belonged. She leaned towards her husband and let her head rest on his shoulders. She was now Mrs. Myers and she could not be happier.

## A teaser from “A Runaway Hope” from Hope Out West Book 1

### **Book description:**

Beth Simpson is desperate to escape her dark secrets and leave her past behind. Answering an ad to be wife to David and mother to his three little angelic girls was an offer she couldn't pass up. So she leaves everything behind to attempt a new life out west.

Amelia Miller, her coach mate, shares her journey in that she too seeks a new life for herself. But where Beth is escaping, Amelia is seeking adventure. And where David and his girls are a dream, Amelia is becoming mother to two wild, constantly fighting twin boys who could make anyone wish they didn't exist, their own father included. And as Amelia discovers, he's not exactly brimming with warmth himself.

Little Grove holds both promise and fear for both women and their new lives as mail order brides. For the one, she cries herself to sleep, questioning everything that brought her here as wife to a gruff, seemingly uncaring man and his unruly and undisciplined boys.

For the other, she can't believe her incredible luck, and finally starts to relax and feel truly at home as wife and homemaker, feeling blessed beyond measure. That is, until a surprise from her past catches up to her, threatening to unravel the careful plans she's made to leave it all behind...

This is part 1 of a 3-book clean and wholesome Mail Order Bride sweet romance series by Katie Lockwood and Emma Maas.

## **Chapter 1**

Beth Simpson closed her eyes and let the wagon bounce back and forth beneath her. The traveling was certainly rough, but there was something about the passing of each mile that put a little more peace in her heart.

She was finally getting away. It felt like the cages of a prison had released her from their grip.

With each turn of the wheels, she traveled a little farther from the woman that she had been and toward whatever the future might hold. At this point, she knew that the future could not hold anything worse than what she had already experienced.

Clutching the letter tightly against her chest, she raised it to her eyes to reread it once again.

*Dear Beth,*

*I was so very glad to receive your letter in reply to my advertisement. It is true that raising a family of three small children is hard work without a wife. I understand your lack of desire for a romantic relationship. If you will come to my home, take care of my girls and make sure that they are raised right, I will be more than satisfied with our marriage. I am not looking for love for myself – I only want love for my children. I look forward to meeting you and making you a part of my family.*

*-David*

David. Something about the name seemed to fit the man who had written to her. From the moment that she had first picked up a newspaper and accidentally found his advertisement for a bride, she had known that David would be a kind, gentle man who would provide her with not only a family of her own, but also an escape. And an escape was certainly something she needed!

Each night since she received that letter, Beth had held it in her hand, carefully tracing the words that this man had written, memorizing every swirl of his penmanship.

The opportunity to take the place of a mother to three lonely children was almost more pleasant than Beth could imagine. She longed desperately for the peace and pure

decency of a life spent doing simple tasks such as washing laundry, cooking meals, and cleaning up grubby fingers on a tiny child.

Closing her eyes, Beth breathed deeply of the honeysuckle that grew along the wagon trail. She tried to will herself not to cry as the reality of this experience grasped her tightly. She had never thought that she would be able to get away from her bad choices, but here she was on a wagon train leaving the city behind and embracing life on the prairie.

This was her new start, her new beginning, her one chance to change the direction in which her life had been heading.

But it all hinged on her ability to maintain a façade of someone she truly was not. Could she do it? Could she trick this man into believing she was a different type of woman than she truly was? Writing the letters had been easy but actually maintaining her act in person would be much more difficult.

Bracing herself and jutting her jaw out in determination, Beth reminded herself that she had no alternatives. She would have to keep up the act, no matter how hard the task proved. There was no way that she was letting this opportunity pass her by. She couldn't go back to the life that she had led in the past – she wouldn't allow herself to fail.

As the wagon grew ever closer to her destination, Beth sought to leave behind every piece of her past, stripping it away from her very soul. From this point on, only she and God would know the person that she had been before she answered David's advertisement. She could only pray that God would be merciful and give her the opportunity to trick everyone she met for the rest of her life.

Amelia Miller sat at Beth's side, watching as the other woman fingered her letter. They had been traveling across this prairie land for weeks now with Beth saying little to nothing, just sitting and rereading her letters over and over again.

Amelia knew what it meant to value letters. Like Beth, Amelia had also responded to a newspaper advertisement written by a man searching for a bride. The advertisement had been simple and short: *Forty-year-old Christian widower seeking a wife. I have two children. They are very wild. Be prepared for a challenge.*

Amelia could still remember reading that advertisement. She had been sitting in her father's dress shop in the city, looking through his paper while she waited on another customer to arrive when the advertisement caught her eye.

*Be prepared for a challenge.*

That line had grabbed onto her attention and held it in its grasp, taunting her and mesmerizing her. Even after she laid the paper aside and tried to forget it, the words continued to run through her mind.

When she replied to the advertisement, it had not taken long for Luke Richmond to reply. He was a farmer who had lost his wife five years ago. He simply explained that his children were monsters who were uncontrollable. He was in no hurry to be married, but he knew that he could no longer manage them alone.

The more Amelia learned about his situation, the more enchanted she became. Since she was a little girl, she had always been the one to hunt down excitement and try to save the day. Life in the city had held so few challenges for Amelia, that moving away to find adventure on the prairie was not an opportunity she could ignore.

So, she had boarded a train headed west and then got on a wagon that would take her the rest of the way. Filled with supplies, the wagon train was also transporting Beth to a husband of her own.

Leaning back, Amelia felt her heart go wild as she realized that, within a day's time, they should reach the town of Little Grove where both she and Beth would meet the men that they would marry.

The moment simply could not come quickly enough!

[Read more...](#)

Also by Katie Lockwood

**Hope Out West**

[A Runaway Hope Book 1](#)

A Hope Deferred Book 2

A Hope Realized Book 3