

## CHAPTER ONE

### HANNAH

“And then the train robbers came, and told everyone to give them their money, but the sheriff caught up with the train on his very fast horse!”

Hannah grinned at the two small children looking up at her, their attention rapt. Little Clara, five, had been begging for one of Hannah’s ‘adventure stories’ all day, and now she and her brother, two year old Edward, were curled up on the floor of the Abernathy Estate’s library, wide eyed and breathless with the thrill of it all.

Hannah continued, leaning in close and lowering her voice for effect. “The boss of the train robbers, a very bad man, looked out the train window, and he saw -”

“Hannah, please, it’s nearly time for the children to be in bed!” Millie Abernathy, Hannah’s cousin and employer, stood in the doorway of the library. Her eyes narrowed at the scene before her, her hands on her hips. “Edward isn’t even bathed - what have you two been doing?”

“Auntie Hannah is telling us stories!” Clara gave her mother a wide, beaming smile. “There are horses, and sheriffs, and train robbers!”

Hannah watched her cousin sigh, running a hand over her eyes as she tried to maintain her patience. “Hannah,” she said, her tone exasperated and tired, “I’ve asked you a dozen times to stop telling them those tall tales.”

“But they’re fun!” Clara protested, sticking her lip out in an adorable little pout. “I want to hear what happens!”

“Train robbers are not appropriate for little girls to hear stories about,” Millie scolded. “Run off to bed, now. And take your brother. I’ll send one of the maids in to give him a bath.”

Clara gave her mother one last whine, then grudgingly took her brother’s pudgy hand and led him out of the library.

“My apologies,” Hannah muttered, standing up from her spot on the floor and smoothing out her skirts. They were old enough that they wrinkled easily, and she knew that any semblance of an unkempt appearance irritated Millie.

“I hired you on as a nanny because your mother was a good woman, and family favors family.” Millie, a head taller than Hannah, looked down her sharp nose at the younger girl, her arms crossed. “But Clara is only getting older, and I can’t have you filling her head with dangerous nonsense.”

Hannah kept her eyes down, not wanting to face Millie's disappointed gaze. She was very grateful to her distant cousin for taking her in a few years ago, after Hannah's parents both died of influenza and left behind enough debt that Hannah had no choice but to sell off the Wilcoxie family home. Hannah needed a place to stay, and Millie needed help looking after the newborn Clara, so it seemed like the perfect arrangement.

Unfortunately, over the years, Hannah had chafed under Millie's strict housekeeping standards. She liked to play with the children, exploring the large Abernathy property, but when Edward came home with muddy knees and Clara with dirt under her fingernails, Millie would purse her lips, give Hannah a glare, and usher the children off to be scrubbed raw.

Hannah was a dreamer, often staying up long into the night thinking about the fantastical stories she hoped to one day write. But when she slept late the next morning, Millie absolutely hated having to wake her up, feeling that hired house staff - even ones that were, technically, also family - should always be up and working before the heads of the household.

"Clara is a lovely girl," Hannah said, finally looking up at Millie. "I don't think a few fairy tales can change that."

"Well, fortunately for my child's future, what you think is no longer going to govern her upbringing." Millie stepped forward and handed Hannah a folded newspaper, dated only a few days prior. "You'll find plenty of opportunities for employment here," she said, crossing her arms again once Hannah had taken the paper.

"What?" Hannah's heart was pounding, her voice trembling. "Are you sending me away?"

Millie sighed. "You're family, Hannah, and I'd never be able to face your good mother up in Heaven if I simply put you out on the street. But I'm concerned about the influence you're having on my children. Your quarters will be moved to the stableman's apartment, and you will have three months to find employment elsewhere."

Hannah swallowed, tears prickling at the edges of her eyes. "But..."

"I am not inclined to a discussion on this matter, Hannah."

Hannah shoved the newspaper in her pocket, nodding her head. "I understand, Mrs. Abernathy. Thank you."

Millie had wasted no time in having her servants move all of Hannah's belongings to the stableman's apartments, a tiny building just outside the stables and far from the main Abernathy Estate. She sat down heavily at the dusty, rickety desk and pulled out the newspaper Millie had given her.

Scanning the classified ads, she saw very little opportunities. Someone was looking for a seamstress, but Hannah hated to sew, and the salary offered was less than a pittance. She turned the page, hoping to find another family seeking a nanny or governess.

Hannah adored children, and she knew she would miss Clara and Edward bitterly. Life within the walls of the Abernathy Estate might be rigid, but at least there was a family there, Mr. and Mrs. Abernathy and their adorable son and daughter. Hannah couldn't stand the thought of living on her own, of having no one to giggle with over breakfast or chase around the yard after lunch.

Every morning, the classified section of the paper arrived on the door of her cramped apartment, along with a basket of food packed by the kitchen staff. Hannah dutifully searched each one for a suitable job, but all she saw were ads for factory girls, scullery maids, and some more cryptically worded positions that set off danger alarms in Hannah's mind. It seemed, unfortunately, that all of the families in Stamford and the surrounding area were already satisfied with their childcare, and as the days passed, Hannah began to despair of ever finding another position.

One morning, after two months had passed and Millie's deadline for Hannah's departure loomed even larger, Hannah had just finished her daily attempts to find something, anything, that she could do without condemning herself to squalid and solitary conditions in one of Connecticut's large, unfriendly cities. After coming up empty yet again, Hannah's frustration was near its boiling point. She grabbed the sheet of newspaper in her fists, balling it up with swift, angry gestures and moving to toss it into the fire.

Then something caught her eye. She had never looked at the other ads placed in the paper, since she was not in need of a new horse, nor was she interested in a cure-all potion sold by a man with a strange name. Now, however, she saw another type of advertisement.

A rancher all the way out in Utah, on the edge of the Western frontier, was looking for a wife.

Hannah leaned close over the paper, smoothing out the creases, and began to read.

*WANTED: A WIFE & COMPANION FOR LONESOME RANCHER. Ricky Reed, heir of the Reed ranch, seeks a woman of adventurous spirit and family loyalty to once again help fill Reed ranch with children and company. All inquiries welcome.*

Hannah smiled at the simplicity of the advertisement. She had heard about women her age heading west as mail order brides for men on the frontier, but never considered it for herself.

Perhaps, she thought, it might not be such a terrible idea. There wasn't much left for her in Stamford, and she certainly had an adventurous spirit. Plus, running off to Utah to marry a rancher would absolutely set Millie's nerves on fire, which seemed like as good a reason to do something as any other.

Then again, it might be reckless and foolish. Wasn't this exactly the type of behavior that Millie was worried about Clara learning? Hannah didn't know anything about this man, or the life he was offering.

*Well,* said a voice inside Hannah, *there's only one way to find out.*

She was curious, after all, and the ad did say that all inquiries were welcome. What could it hurt, she wondered, to simply write to this man with some questions? He might not even respond. Maybe he had already found a wife, or maybe he wouldn't be interested in someone like Hannah.

Telling herself that simply responding to the ad didn't obligate her to do anything, and that she might as well keep her options open, Hannah dug her stationery set out of her half-unpacked trunk and began to write.

## CHAPTER TWO

### RICKY

"There, there, old girl." Ricky Reed patted his cream colored mare on her neck, calming the animal as they rode into town. Her name was Canvas, after the similarly colored fabric that stretched out over stagecoach roofs and saloon awnings, but she didn't seem to appreciate her namesake much. Canvas was fussy and skittish whenever Ricky rode her into town, nervous at the bustle of its wide roads and chattering locals.

Ricky's father had been one of the first men to settle in this part of the frontier, long before the town of Colt Creek was even founded. Now, there were a good number of ranchers and homesteaders in the area. The town had grown large enough to support two saloons, a stagecoach station, a schoolhouse, a church, and Howard's General Store. Ricky was one of the only residents of Colt Creek to have grown up there, having inherited the Reed ranch, and this was the only place he could ever call home.

Canvas, if she had her way, would have never ventured into the gentle chaos of town life. She preferred instead to stay out on the Reed ranch, where the loudest noise was the rooster crowing at sunrise, and strangers were visible a long way down the dirt road.

Ricky felt for the old mare, but she was his best riding horse by far, and he needed to visit town more frequently these days. Poor old Canvas would have to make do, because the general store in town also served as the post office, and Ricky was waiting for a letter to arrive.

He hopped off the saddle, patting Canvas's nose again and feeding her a sugar cube before tying her up outside the general store. "I'll only be a minute," he promised, and Canvas nickered in reply.

Inside, Howard's General Store was the same as it always was. Neat, brightly colored rows of home goods sat on tidy shelves. There was soap wrapped in waxed paper; coils of rope tied with floppy bows; and even a tin of hard candies that Howard claimed to sell for a penny, but typically just gave away. Howard, in his heavy apron and perfectly round glasses, looked up with a smile as Ricky pushed open the door.

"Hey there, Ricky. Here for the mail?"

"If there is any, please, Howard." Ricky took off his hat and blinked, his eyes adjusting to low light of the store compared to the harsh sunlight outside. He hoped that voice didn't betray how desperate he felt, and how dejected he would be if there was nothing waiting for him again today.

"I'll certainly go back and check for you," Howard said. "Don't despair, son. There's a lady out there for us all. I was halfway to the grave before I met my Lucy."

"Thanks, Howard." Ricky twisted his hat in his hands, embarrassed at how easily the older man had seen right through him. Three months ago, he'd placed an ad, sent out from this very post office, seeking a wife to join him on his ranch. But there had been no response.

"Be patient," Howard had counseled. "Ladies take time to make up their minds, and once they do, their letters take even longer to arrive."

As the weeks went by, though, Ricky started to feel more and more hopeless. He wondered whether he had written his ad so poorly that no one was interested, or whether there were simply no women who wanted to share a rancher's life with a man like him. Ricky worried that he might never find a wife, might never know the happy companionship that Lucy and Howard enjoyed.

And it was just that - happy companionship - that Ricky craved. Some of the men he knew sought out wives to bear and raise their children, or to keep their home and garden, but Ricky was more interested in a balm to soothe his loneliness.

In his childhood, the Reed ranch home was filled with laughter and chatter, and Ricky fondly remembered the way he and his brothers and sisters would play, racing horses bareback over the mesas that surrounded their Utah home and chasing rabbits and quail. Now, it was quiet enough to echo Ricky's own solitude back to him in unpleasant ways.

After Ricky's mother and father both died, all of his siblings married and moved away in search of their own fortunes, leaving Ricky as the only Reed remaining in Colt Creek. He was grateful to have inherited the ranch home, but without a family to fill its walls, it didn't bring him nearly as much joy as it once had.

He missed the way his mother and father would share an evening on the porch, discussing the affairs of the ranch and its big family. Ricky's bedroom had a window that looked out over the porch, and he used to lay in his bed and listen to the warm tones of his parents' conversation, his father's easy jokes, his mother's bubbly giggles. He would dream of the day when he and his own wife would share a similar scene, a bond formed through the hard work of ranching and hearts that beat in harmony.

"You're in luck, son!" Howard returned, his crooked teeth fully visible in a wide smile, holding a letter aloft in one gnarled hand.

Ricky was startled out of his reverie and snapped his attention to the letter Howard was holding. Refusing to get his hopes up, he told himself it might just be another update from his sister in Chicago, or his twin brothers, who had gone west together to mine for gold. With a trembling hand, he reached for it.

The handwriting belonged to none of the Reed siblings - Ricky could tell that at a glance. It was postmarked from Stamford, Connecticut, a town Ricky had never heard of before. Holding his breath, Ricky turned the letter over. Its sender's name was written in delicate cursive, reading *Hannah M. Wilcoxie*.

Howard was nearly hovering over Ricky's shoulder, anxious for him to open the letter. Ricky slid one finger under the envelope's seal, gently tugging out the paper inside. It was plush and creamy, nothing like the rough, cheap paper he'd used to pencil out his ad. He held the letter by the edges, careful not to smudge or crease it, and began to read.