

*The Widower's
Christmas Wish*

Mail Order Brides of Dayton Falls
(Book One)

Copyright 2018 by Cheryl Wright

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the copyright owner of this book

Chapter One

Westlake, Wyoming – 1880

Charlotte Montgomery gagged from the revolting odor coming from Joseph Rainer.

Mr Rainer, as he preferred to be called, was far from her choice of ideal husband.

Her father insisted she marry this horrible old man.

The deal had been made when she was just fifteen years old – the threat had been hanging over her head for five years already.

“Charlotte, get here now!”

They weren’t even married yet, and he was already ordering her around. *What would it be like when they did marry?*

Her heart sank.

He sat in the parlor alone, much to Charlotte’s dismay. Where had her parents gone? They were supposed to be her chaperone.

She’d endured more than enough of his groping and prepared herself for even more.

As she approached, he stood. “Ah, there you are my lovely.” He sneered and pulled her close. His hands quickly went around her back. His pungent odor made her feel faint.

“Do you ever have a bath? Or change your clothing?” She was being bold, she knew she was, but she couldn’t marry this vulgar man. Surely her parents would understand.

“Give me a kiss, my lovely.” He leered at her and grabbed her face, pulling her toward him. Charlotte couldn’t take it any longer, the smell was just too overpowering.

Without warning, but much to her delight, her breakfast made its way to the surface. All over Mr Rainer. He shoved her to the floor, away from him.

“Henry! Henry!” he screeched. “Look at what this horrible girl of yours has done to me!”

Her father came running. "Martha," he shouted, commanding his wife to attend. "Look what this stupid girl has done," he shouted. "Get her out of here! Now!"

Rainer was pacing the room. He pulled off his expensive, but now foul-smelling Morning Coat, and threw it across the room, then sat back down, furious at what had occurred.

Her mother flustered about. "Oh my." She pulled her daughter to her feet, pulling her close. "Let's get you cleaned up and into bed." Charlotte nodded meekly. She had no intention of disagreeing. At least it got her away from the despicable old man she was to wed.

Mother reached across and rang the bell for the servants.

"Ah, there you are Allie." She smiled at the petite young woman standing in front of her. "Miss Charlotte is unwell. She's, ah, lost her breakfast. Clean it up." She motioned to the mess, then swiftly left the room with her only child.

"That man is vulgar, Mother. The smell..." She gagged again at the thought. "I'm certain that's what made me ill."

Her mother frowned. "Get used to it. You *will* marry Mr Rainer. And soon. Your marriage is worth a lot of money to your father's business."

She near shoved her daughter up the stairs and toward the bathroom. "Clean yourself up and get to bed. We could lose everything if he finds out what made you ill."

Charlotte glared at her mother. *She couldn't believe the words coming from her mother's mouth.*

"And for goodness sakes, don't say a word to your father!"

Martha stormed out, leaving Charlotte wondering how on earth she would get out of this predicament.

* * *

"As much as I love you, dear brother," Abigail said. "I cannot continue to help you."

Sheriff Angus Doyle frowned. Their arrangement had worked so far. Since Sarah died giving birth to their daughter, Abigail had taken care of baby Emma.

The child was almost three now, but he needed a mother for Emma now that Abigail had other obligations.

She'd been supplying the Mercantile with her glorious baked goods for as long as he could remember. Now she was no longer content with that.

When old Mrs Hanson had retired, Abigail had gone and brought the darned bakery. Leaving him totally in the lurch.

He loved his sister, he really did. But he had an obligation to his tiny daughter. He was not capable of rearing a child himself, which is why he'd handed her over to Abigail when he'd lost his dear Sarah.

"What am I supposed to do? I can't quit. I don't know anything else." He took off his hat and scratched his head.

"I'm sorry, Angus, I really am. But this is the chance of a lifetime. Will and I are selling up and will be moving to Dead Creek." She fiddled with her skirts, not looking in his direction. "Very soon."

Angus swallowed hard. What was he going to do? Emma needed a mother more than she needed a father. "I thought you might just go in there every day?"

He knew in his heart they wouldn't – it was too far away.

"We might still be in Montana," she said. "But it's way too far to travel there daily."

A thought struck him. "You could take her with you. I would come and visit occasionally."

"Sounds like a good idea," she said. "But I can't run a full-time business with a small child running about."

Abigail stared down at her hands that were resting in her lap, not wanting to meet his gaze. "Have you thought of getting a mail order bride?"

His head shot up. "A mail order bride? Are you crazy, woman?"

“Not so crazy. Pete at the post office got a mail order bride early last year. They’re very happy together. They even have a baby and another one on the way.”

He stood suddenly. “Well it’s the craziest thing I ever heard of. And it ain’t gonna happen.”

Abigail stood at the door, ready to leave. “Go talk to Pete. He says it’s the best thing that ever happened to him.”

Angus stared at his sister for long moments, then stomped from the room, leaving his sister to stare after him.

* * *

Charlotte sat with her back straight and her nose in the air.

It wasn’t every day a young lady of her high standard visited a person such as Miss Bethany Wilde of the *Westlake Mail Order Bride Agency*

She was truly at the end of her tether. Mother and Father insisted she marry that revolting man. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t go through life with him.

He truly was horrible. On top of all his other vices, he even ate with his mouth open!

The man was easily thirty-five years her senior.

She shuddered. There was no way in hades she could marry him, even if he was rich, and she would *live a life of luxury*, as her mother had put it.

But this wasn’t about her, as her mother had also indicated. It was about her father’s business thriving as a result of her forced marriage.

She wondered what they’d been promised to hand over the prize of their only daughter.

She could feel the bile rise in her throat and swallowed down on it. Just the thought of it made her ill.

It certainly wouldn’t do to vomit over Miss Bethany. After all, the poor woman was trying to help her.

"I have five gentlemen looking for a mail order bride at this time," Miss Bethany told her as she handed over their handwritten letters. "Take a look and tell me what you think."

Charlotte leaned forward and took the crumpled papers from her. "Have you read these," she asked, not sure how she would choose.

"Of course, but I am not here to influence your decision. You need to choose for yourself." Miss Bethany sat back in her chair, and Charlotte could see the questions in her expression. Why would an heiress such as herself be looking to marry a man she'd never met?

It was blatantly clear to Charlotte, of course. She didn't want a man older than her father to bed her.

The older woman leaned forward. "Why?"

"Why?" Charlotte repeated, knowing full well what the other woman meant.

"Yes, why do you want to be a mail order bride? You come from a particularly good family and are in line for your father's fortune. Surely..."

Charlotte interrupted her. "My parents wish for me to marry Mr Joseph Rainer, who owns the bank." She sighed. "Yes, he is rich, but I am only twenty and he is at least fifty-five!" She sniffed, and wiped a stray tear from her eyes, despite her best intentions to stay strong. "How could they?"

"Oh, my dear girl! That is appalling." She ran to Charlotte's side and began to comfort her. "There have been whispers about Mr Rainer. He's been married twice before, did you know?" Charlotte shook her head, and the older woman continued. "His first wife just... disappeared. Wife number two is in the mental asylum." She straightened her back. "There is nothing wrong with Gwendolyn Rainer. I know her very well. He just wanted to get his hands on her money."

She winced, as though she too, were fighting back tears. "Yes, he is a vile creature, and we can't let him get his clutches on you, my dear!"

Charlotte gasped. She had no idea. Neither one of her parents had told her any of this. She felt faint with the shock.

She must have paled, since dear Miss Bethany rushed toward her with water.

She fanned Charlotte with some papers she'd scooped up off her desk. "Don't you worry, my dear. We will find you a decent young man to marry. Someone more your own age." She pushed two letters closer to Charlotte's hand. "These two may be more to your liking. Both wonderful young gentlemen going by their letters."

As Charlotte carefully read each letter, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. She loved her parents, but she simply couldn't marry Mr Rainer. She felt quite repulsed by the man.

How could she live the rest of her life with a man that she reviled? She simply couldn't, which meant she had no choice but to marry a complete stranger.

She read each letter carefully – for the third time. They both sounded like wonderful men. Like someone who would cherish her and look out for her. And let her be herself.

It only made the decision harder. Charlotte chewed at her bottom lip.

"Oh my dear girl! I know the decision is a hard one, and it's one that will affect your whole life, but don't harm yourself." Miss Bethany rubbed her hands across Charlotte's back, then hugged her tight.

Miss Bethany comforted her more than her own mother had ever done. It made tears come to her eyes.

Suddenly Charlotte straightened her back and set her resolve.

"This one," she said, pointing to the first letter. "He's a rancher. Out in the wide-open spaces. He could be good."

"Or it may be a lot of work for you, my dear," Miss Bethany added. "But he does sound nice."

"This second one – he's the sheriff," Charlotte said dreamily. "I'll bet he is handsome as well as strong. He would look after me, I just know it."

She pounced her finger on the sheriff's letter, over and over again. "I think I want the sheriff."

"You think, or you know?"

Of course, she had to be sure, because once she married this man, it was too late to take it back.

* * *

Charlotte lounged in bed longer than normal.

She simply couldn't face the day knowing she was to marry that horrid man. When, she had no idea, but hopefully it would be long enough for her to get away.

"Good morning, Miss Charlotte," Allie said, sliding back the curtains.

Charlotte winced. "I'm really sorry," Allie whispered. "Your mother told me I had to get you up. Mr Rainer is coming for luncheon."

She winced again. "What time is it now, Allie?" Her mind was ticking over. How could she get out of this meeting? The truth was, she knew she couldn't. A terrible sadness overtook her. Without being told, it appeared her wedding day was getting ever closer.

"Eleven o'clock, Miss."

Allie laid out her clothes, and filled the basin with warm water, and then she was gone.

* * *

Such an influence did Mr Rainer have over her father, that he sat at the head of the table, a place normally reserved for Henry Montgomery.

He lifted his wine glass and offered a toast. "To my beautiful young bride. May we have a long and happy marriage." His voice was loaded with insincerity and Charlotte's heart rate accelerated. She felt faint, yet her parents noticed nothing amiss.

"To Joseph and Charlotte." Her father lifted his glass and clinked it with the other man's glass.

Rainer looked her up and down much like he was appraising an animal he was about to buy.

"The food is delicious my dear," he said to her mother, as though Martha had prepared it herself.

Her mother hadn't cooked a thing in her entire life. Why would she do that when she had servants to do every little thing for her?

Of course, when, *if* Charlotte married this despot, she too would have servants.

Her head began to ache.

"Please excuse me," she said. "I have an awful headache. I must lay down." She pushed her chair back and began to walk away.

"Charlotte, stop!" Rainer bellowed. She turned back and glared at the man. "You haven't heard the wonderful news yet. I came here to make an announcement." His face softened. "You and I – we're getting married on Saturday." He gave a smug smile.

"I, I..." Charlotte slid to the floor. The shock was too much to handle.

"Quick, get the smelling salts," she heard her mother say.

"I can't," she whispered to her mother.

Her mother waved the smelling salts under her nose again. "You can, and you *will*," she said between clenched teeth.

Martha helped her daughter onto a chair. Charlotte noticed Rainer didn't move from his seat to help her and continued to drink his expensive wine. She worried over the life she had ahead of her.

* * *

Four days.

Her wedding was to be in four days.

The seamstress had already been to fit Charlotte for her wedding dress, much to her disgust. And distress.

She'd cried the entire time the woman had measured her for her extravagantly expensive wedding gown.

"It's just nerves," Martha had told the anxious woman, who had nodded and accepted the explanation.

What else could she do? Charlotte's wedding gown was worth a lot of money to her.

She felt extremely guilty, but despite all the fuss and measuring, Charlotte would never wear that gown.

After the fitting, she stepped outside their mansion and headed into town. She fingered the expensive brooch sitting on her lapel, wondering how much it would bring.

She pulled her bonnet up over her head.

"Charlotte? Where are you going?"

She'd hoped to sneak out without anyone noticing. She should have known her mother would notice. "I'm going for a walk, Mother. I need some fresh air."

Martha nodded. "Be back in plenty of time for dinner. Mr Rainer is coming."

Again? Charlotte sighed. She needed to move fast.

She strolled down the main street, then looked about to ensure no one was watching. When it was clear, she turned into the alleyway her mother had told her never to enter.

Apparently, there was a criminal element that would steal the coat off your back. But today she was desperate enough to risk it.

Against her better judgement, she walked tentatively toward the horrid little pawn shop down the end of the alleyway. She stood outside pondering whether to enter. Her heart beat quickened knowing she really had no choice.

If she was to get away, she had to sell her expensive brooch.

She stared at the man standing in front of her. He snatched the brooch of her hands, and she worried she'd never see it again.

He looked her up and down, then fingered the brooch. Then he picked up his magnifying glass to get a better look.

He whistled. "Where did you get this, little lady?" he asked. *Did he think she'd stolen it?*

She took offense at the question. "It's mine," she said in a huff. "A birthday gift from my parents."

He nodded. "If you say so." The sneer on his face told her he didn't believe a word of it.

He tapped his finger on the shiny piece of jewelry firmly entrenched in his hands. "I can't give you too much for this piece," he said, studying it again. "I won't be able to sell it."

She snatched it out of his hands. "Good day to you, Sir," she said, then turned to walk out of the store.

"Wait a minute, little lady." He scratched his head. "That's a good lookin' piece and I want it."

She turned back toward the frightening man standing before her. She looked him up and down, and for the first time noticed the pistol sitting at his waist.

Would he just take her brooch without paying? She swallowed hard.

"Make me an offer, Sir," she said, her heart racing and her hands clammy.

He pulled a bundle of notes from under the counter. "It's the best I can do."

Against her better judgement, she shook her head. "It's not enough for... what I need," she said, and turned to walk away.

She knew it was a bad idea coming here. So why did she do it? Because she was desperate, and she knew it.

"Wait!" he bellowed at her as she opened the door to leave.

As she stared at him, he leaned down and snatched up another handful of notes. "Will this be enough? I can't offer you anymore. Stolen jewelry is difficult to sell."

"It's not stolen," she spat. "I told you, it was a gift." She snatched the additional money from his hands and with reluctance passed over the sparkling diamond brooch. Her favorite. "It's enough for what I need."

She pushed the notes into her pocketbook and fled from the disarming store.

She almost ran from the alleyway and leaned against a wall, trying to catch her breath. Tomorrow Charlotte would buy her train ticket to Dayton Falls, Montana.

* * *

"It's highly unusual," Miss Bethany said. "But these are dire circumstances."

Charlotte nodded. "I have my railway ticket, and I'll leave in the morning. Otherwise, I'll be married to that vile man in two days."

She straightened her back. She wouldn't cry in front of this kind lady again.

"He won't know you're coming. You haven't even had time to answer his letter." Miss Bethany paced the floor. "This is highly unusual," she said again, her voice getting higher with every sentence she spoke.

"I'll just try and find him once I've arrived," Charlotte said. "The town can't be that big."

Miss Bethany stared at her open-mouthed. "You can't be serious? You must be collected, you can't go wandering around in a strange place." She put her hand to her head. "Just let me think a minute or two."

She stood still for a moment, then continued to pace the room.

"Oh, I have an idea," she said, grinning broadly. "Show me your ticket, Charlotte."

Charlotte handed over the ticket, and Miss Bethany wrote down the details.

"I shall send a telegram and let him know when you're arriving." She stared at Charlotte as if looking for acceptance of her idea.

Charlotte nodded, relieved everything was in order.

* * *

Charlotte packed as much of her clothing into her overnight bag as she could manage.

She needed to have at least two changes of day dresses, and of course, undergarments. But she had to travel light. When she snuck out of the house at the crack of dawn, she would have no one to carry her bags, and indeed, she didn't want any help.

She dare not utilize any of the servants, as that would implicate them when her parents discovered she was gone.

She looked around her huge bedroom. She'd spent most of her life in this room. As Miss Bethany had said, she was very privileged. Not many young women of her age enjoyed the luxuries she'd had endowed on her. Indeed, most women of any age did not receive the indulgences she saw as normal.

She opened drawers and cupboards, deciding what she needed to take. She was going to miss all this, and she knew her new life would be very different to her current life.

And yet, she knew she had to leave.

She must leave, and the time to leave was near. She had no choice.

* * *

Charlotte headed to the railway station at the crack of dawn.

The house was quiet, which meant she had to be extra careful not to make a sound. The trip to Montana was going to be long and tiring. She couldn't imagine how awful she would smell after several days on the train! She was pleased she'd packed her lavender water.

She slid through the night like a cat burglar, not wanting anyone to know she'd been there.

It was eerie at that early hour. More eerie than she'd anticipated. Charlotte had never been outside at this ungodly hour and hoped she never did again.

By the time she arrived at the train station, she was petrified. Every sound, every movement startled her. In nearly every case it was either

birds or other creatures such as cats, going about their nocturnal business.

She was in near-panic by the time she found the correct platform but straightened her back as she'd been taught to do. It wouldn't do to have others see her slouching.

At the last moment she thought to adjust her bonnet, to cover her face. The last thing she needed was for someone to recognize her and tell her father where she was headed.

"All aboard!"

Charlotte gasped. She hadn't realized how late it was already and hurried to her carriage. The conductor checked her ticket and let her pass.

She walked up and down the aisle until she found her seat. Once seated she held her bag tightly on her lap. It contained all her worldly possessions and she didn't know what she'd do without them.

She stared out the window and saw people running. Her train was about to depart. Charlotte Montgomery was about to begin her new life.

* * *

Miss Bethany sent the following telegram three hours after Charlotte's train departed:

To Sheriff Angus Doyle, Dayton Falls, Montana.

*Miss Charlotte Montgomery arriving Monday 4 o'clock stop
please collect from train station stop
situation dire stop*

Signed Miss Bethany Wilde – Westlake Mail Order Bride Agency

Angus read the note over and over again. "But, but I don't know anything about her," he said to his sister. "I haven't had a chance to tell her about young Emma either."

He screwed up the telegram as he sunk down into a chair. "What am I going to do now?"

Abigail stared at him. “What you are going to do, dear brother, is collect her from the station on Monday afternoon.”

“So much for not getting a mail order bride,” she said under her breath.

He glared at her. “I heard that. Besides, you left me no choice. What else was I going to do?”

Abigail shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea. But what’s done is done. Looks like you’re getting married on Monday.”

“Get in the cell, you filthy...” The deputy stared at Abigail. “Sorry Miss Abigail. I didn’t know you was there.”

Abigail smiled, then hugged her brother. “I better let you get back to work. I can’t wait to meet your bride,” she said, then left the Sheriff’s Office smiling.

* * *

Enjoy this sample?

Click here to BUY NOW¹

Check out the entire series here².

About the Author

Multi-published, award-winning author, Cheryl Wright, former secretary, debt collector, account manager, writing coach, and shopping tour hostess, loves reading.

She writes both contemporary and historical western romance, as well as a series of holiday romances.

She lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is married with two adult children and has six grandchildren.

When she’s not writing, she can be found in her craft room making greeting cards, or in her kitchen baking.

1. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07786G9R7>

2. <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07B7MM58K>

Check out Cheryl's Amazon page for a full list of her other books:

<https://www.amazon.com/author/cherylwright>

Other Links:

[Website](#)³

[Facebook](#)⁴

[Join Cheryl's Newsletter List](#)⁵

3. <http://cheryl-wright.com>

4. <https://www.facebook.com/cherylwrightauthor>

5. <http://cheryl-wright.com/newsletter.htm>

