

## CHRISTMAS MAIL-ORDER BRIDES

### *“A Trusting Heart”*

By Carrie Turansky

#### Chapter One

*An intelligent widower of 28 years from a fine family wishes to correspond with an honorable maiden or widow 18 to 25 years with a loving disposition who is interested in matrimony and would like a good husband and a life of plenty in Wyoming.*

Late October, 1880

The shrieking blast of the train whistle shook the platform of the Chicago Central Train Station. Annika Bergstrom clutched her twin sister, Sophia, and swallowed her tears. She must be strong for Sophia's sake.

“I don't know how I shall ever get along without you.” Tears ran down her sister's cheeks. She reached up and brushed them away with her gloved hand.

Sophia's new husband, Lars, stepped forward and tenderly placed his arm around his wife's shoulder. “We'll pray for you, Annika, every day.”

“Thank you, Lars.” Annika studied the man who had won her sister's heart. He would take care of Sophia. They were a good match and had a wonderful future ahead, serving the Lord at a small, rural church in northern Illinois.

Would her future husband treat her with such love and tenderness? Annika forced a smile. “I promise to pray for you both as well. I'm sure God will keep us safe in His loving care.” She truly believed that, but she said it aloud to reassure herself as well as her sister and Lars.

“And you must write to us often,” Sophia said. “I'll be waiting for your letters.”

Annika's hands trembled, and she grabbed her sister once more. “I will. I promise. And you must do the same. I want to hear all about your new church as soon as you're settled.”

Annika stepped back and gazed at her sister, memorizing the curve of her cheek and the look of devotion in her blue eyes. If she didn't love Sophia so much, she could never leave her like this. Since the day they were born, and even those nine months before, they had never been parted. How would she survive without Sophia?

The huge, black locomotive hissed. Puffs of steam and smoke filled the air. All around her travelers said their last goodbyes, gathered up their belongings, and moved to board the train.

The conductor, dressed in a black uniform and cap, walked toward them. “All aboard,” he called.

A shot of panic raced through Annika. Was it too late to change her mind? But if she did, how would she support herself? For the last three years, since their parents' deaths, she and Sophia had worked as maids at the Hillman School for Girls. Even when they combined their meager salaries, they barely made enough to scrape by. She could never afford to live on her own now that Sophia was leaving Chicago.

No. Her decision was made. She had accepted Charles Simm's proposal of marriage, and she was a woman of her word. She would travel to Wyoming as his mail-order bride and make a new life for herself. But more importantly, she would free Sophia to make a new life with Lars.

“It's time, Annika.” Lars nodded to the conductor as he approached.

“Are you headed to Omaha, miss?” the gray-haired conductor asked.

Annika gripped the handle of her bag. “Yes, sir, and then on to Laramie, Wyoming.”

“My goodness, all the way to Wyoming?” He chuckled and turned to Lars. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on her this first leg of the trip.” He took Annika’s bag and walked toward the train.

Sophia kissed her cheek. “Good-bye, dear heart. I love you.”

Annika was afraid her reply would come out as a sob, so she kissed her sister then followed the conductor to the train.

He checked her ticket and directed her to the second-class coach.

She lifted her skirts and mounted the steps. Making her way down the aisle, she looked for an open seat by the window so she could catch one last glimpse of her sister and Lars. How long would it be until she saw them again? Six months? A year? Five years? Would her sister be holding a baby in her arms the next time they met? Would Annika? She gulped and pushed that thought away. The possibility of having a baby with a man she had never met was too much to consider at the moment.

The train creaked and groaned as the engine built up steam. The car lurched forward and rolled away.

She waved to Sophia then pressed her face against the cool, dirty glass, watching her sister grow smaller and disappear from sight as the train rounded a curve. She let her tears fall, but only a few. This was the right decision. Her parents’ loving and selfless example had taught her to put Sophia’s needs above her own.

Sophia had initially refused Lars’s proposal because she didn’t want to leave Annika alone in Chicago. It was only after Annika found a suitable groom through Mrs. Mayberry’s Matrimonial Society for Christians of Moral Character that Sophia had finally agreed to move ahead with her wedding plans.

Annika took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped her nose and cheeks. Perhaps if she read the letters again it would calm her heart and strengthen her for the journey. She pulled the small packet from her bag. A pale blue ribbon tied the five envelopes together, one from Mrs. Amelia Mayberry and four from Charles Simms. She scanned Charles’s first letter dated June 18, although she had read it so many times during the last three months she had almost memorized it.

A man’s penmanship told a great deal about him, and Charles’s writing was neat and precise. Even though he had been raised in the West, he was obviously an intelligent, educated man with a caring heart.

His description of the family’s large cattle ranch intrigued her. She’d lived on a small farm in Sweden until her family immigrated to America when she was twelve. Living in the country again after spending the last ten years in Chicago sounded wonderful. The Simmses’ ranch was only six miles from Laramie, a small town on the Pacific Railway Line about halfway between Omaha and San Francisco. Life would be different in Wyoming, but she was strong, she knew how to work hard, and she was willing to learn how to be a rancher’s wife.

She looked down at the letters again, and her gaze rested on the last paragraph where Charles mentioned his prayers for a loving wife for himself and a kind and caring mother for his seven-year-old daughter, Mariah. Annika had prayed for a thoughtful and understanding husband. His willingness to allow them a month to get acquainted before the wedding convinced her she had made the right choice. And Mrs. Mayberry had assured her she only referred responsible Christian men who provided good references for their character and position.

So many nights she had prayed for God's direction. Finally, everything had fallen into place. This had to be His answer. Her parents' marriage had been arranged by their families, and it had been a loving union. Surely she could build a new life with Charles Simms. She might not love him at first the way Sophia loved Lars, but in time love would grow. She clasped her hands and stared out the window.

*Dear Lord, let it be true.*

The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee, ham, and eggs greeted Daniel Simms at the back door. He stomped the mud off his boots and hustled into the kitchen. Warmth radiated from the cast iron stove, drawing him closer. He rubbed his hands together and held them out toward the heat. "Breakfast almost ready?"

Song Li, their Chinese cook looked up and scowled at Daniel. "You come in too soon. Breakfast not ready."

Daniel held back a grin. Song Li might work for them, but he owned the kitchen. "I'll just get a cup of coffee while you finish up."

Song Li muttered in his native tongue then returned to flipping ham slices with a vengeance, while his long black braid swung across his back.

"Uncle Daniel, look what I made." Mariah hurried over, carrying a tin plate of puffy, golden biscuits.

"Mmm, those sure look good." He smiled at her and ran his hand over the top of her head, smoothing down her wild hair. "Why don't you run up and get a brush, and we'll see if we can tame these curls."

Her face puckered into a frown. "My hair don't need brushin'." She placed the biscuits next to her plate and pushed her hair back with floury hands. "'Sides, Song Li needs my help."

"You done now," Song Li said. "Obey Uncle Daniel. Go get brush."

She huffed. "Why does everyone fuss about my hair!" She stomped off toward the stairs.

Daniel shook his head. That girl was too smart for her own good and cute enough to get away with it. She needed a firm hand, or she was going to turn out as ornery as a wild mustang.

Charles Simms, Sr., strode into the kitchen.

"Morning, Pa. Why are you dressed up?"

"I'm going into town after breakfast."

"How come?" It wasn't Sunday, and his father hadn't mentioned a meeting of the cattlemen's association.

His father frowned, ignoring the question, and glanced around the room.

"Where's Chase?"

Daniel shrugged. The last time he'd seen his older brother he'd been sound asleep, snoring like a grizzly bear. But he didn't want to set his father off with a report like that, especially when he already seemed bothered about something.

His father huffed. "That boy will be the death of me yet. Where's Mariah?"

"She went up to get a hairbrush."

"Well, at least someone's getting ready for the day." His father turned toward the stairs. "Chase, get yourself down here!"

Daniel stifled a groan. His father shouldn't treat Chase like a kid, but the way he'd been acting lately, staying out late and carousing around with a wild bunch of cowboys, he almost deserved it.

"Grampa, I can't find my hairbrush," Mariah called.

His father growled and pounded up the stairs.

Daniel hustled after him, ready to protect his niece from the older man's temper. Charles Simms loved his granddaughter, but he had a short fuse, and the fact that Chase did little to care for his daughter infuriated him.

"I'll help her, Pa," Daniel said as he reached the top of the stairs.

His father ignored him and banged on Chase's door. "Time to get up!"

A low groan issued from the bedroom. "Go away."

Daniel shook his head, knowing exactly what was coming.

His father shoved the door open with a bang and marched into the room. "Charles Joseph Simms, get out of that bed!" He yanked back the covers and snatched the pillow off his son's head. Daniel watched from the doorway, praying for a quick end to the confrontation.

Chase blinked and lifted his head. "Pa, what are you doing?"

"You need to get up and get dressed. We're going to town."

"What?" Chase squinted toward the window, then moaned and flopped back on the pillow. "I can't go anywhere. My head's killing me."

"You'd feel a whole lot better this morning if you hadn't been drinking so much last night."

"Don't lecture me, Pa. I'm a grown man."

"You're still living under my roof, so you'll do as I say. Now get out of bed."

Mariah grabbed Daniel's leg and looked up at him with a trembling chin.

Daniel patted her shoulder. "It'll be all right." Whenever his father and Chase raised their voices, she sought refuge with him. He didn't blame her, all their hollering made him wish he could head to the barn, but he wouldn't desert Mariah.

His father picked up a wrinkled shirt and a dusty pair of pants off the floor and tossed them toward Chase. "Put those on and be downstairs in five minutes."

Chase groaned. "Ah, Pa, what's the hurry?"

"We're meeting the eleven o'clock train." His father straightened. "Your future wife is on board, and you need to be there to meet her."

Chase's mouth gaped open. "My what?"

"You heard me. Your bride arrives at eleven. We need to leave right away."

"What? Are you crazy?" Chase grabbed his shirt and stuffed his arms in the sleeves.

"No, but I'm tired of watching you waste your life."

"My life is just fine."

"No it's not. You need to get married again and settle down, so I found you a wife."

"You *are* crazy!" Chase jumped into his pants, grabbed his hat, boots, and jacket, and charged out of the bedroom door.

"Papa, wait. Where are you going?" Mariah reached for Chase as he flew past, but he didn't even slow down.

Daniel blew out a disgusted breath and shook his head. His father had really done it this time. He hustled down the stairs after them with Mariah close behind.

Chase dropped his boots on the kitchen floor and shoved his feet into them. "You can't run my life, Pa." Glaring at his father, he jammed his hat on his head. "I'm not going to town, and I'm not marrying some woman I never met!" He stormed out the door and slammed it behind him.

His father jerked open the door. "Come back in here, young man!"

Chase marched straight for the barn.

His father spun around, his face flushed and his gray moustache twitching. “Go after him, Daniel. Talk some sense into him.”

“Me?” Daniel huffed. “What am I supposed to say?”

His father pulled a photo from his jacket and held it out. “Show him her picture. Tell him she’s a decent woman who’d make a good wife and mother, and he ought to think about someone besides himself for a change.” He glanced down at Mariah, and his angry expression softened a bit.

Daniel examined the photo. A fair-haired young woman with large pale eyes and a shy smile looked back at him. “Who is she?”

“Her name’s Annika Bergstrom. She’s from Sweden by way of Chicago. She speaks English and writes a fine hand, and she has good references from her minister and head of the school where she worked.”

Daniel rubbed his chin. “She looks mighty young.”

“She’s twenty-two and never been married. She can sew, tend a garden, clean, and cook.”

Song Li gasped, banged a lid on the frying pan, and began ranting in Chinese.

His father spun around. “What’s the matter with you?” he boomed.

Song Li waved a wooden spoon and shouted back in Chinese, then switched to English. “Song Li cook! Song Li clean! Song Li take care of family!”

Mariah burst into tears and clutched Daniel’s leg.

Daniel laid his hand on Mariah’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

*Lord, help us!*