

CHAPTER 1



Imogene Spencer turned eighteen in the early months of 1880, which everyone in her small town in Maryland thought was the perfect age to marry. The problem was Miss Imogene Spencer, the only daughter of a tailor and a long-forgotten woman who had died in childbirth, had no suitors. In fact, no one in their town could remember the last time Imogene had had a man interested in her, not even the old ladies whose sole mission while doing charity work for the church was to spy on the doings of others.

They all said the older Miss Spencer wasn't unfortunate looking; she was just rather plain. She was petite, barely reaching five feet, with cornflower blue eyes and blonde hair. Her body was almost too slim, and she didn't have the curvy hips or full breasts of a woman ready to take on the role of wife and mother. In fact, they were surprised the common cold hadn't killed her, especially since she seemed as frail as a porcelain doll.

Perhaps most dire of all was her personality, or lack of one, the second Mrs. Spencer often said, cruelly regarding her stepdaughter. She was a good daughter with a sunny disposition and sweet tempered. She hadn't reprimanded her father once about the fact

he had married the second Mrs. Spencer just two months after the birth of his first daughter. The eldest daughter of the Spencer family had served as a good older sister, though nanny might have been a better term, to her four half-brothers and two half-sisters who had been born shortly after her father's remarriage. Many couldn't understand why Mrs. Spencer disliked her stepdaughter so much, especially since she had known her since she was two months old.

"She's as quiet as a church mouse," Mrs. Spencer often complained to anyone who would hear her, whether it was the butcher, the baker, the dressmaker, or even her own husband. "I can hardly get two words out of her that isn't 'yes, ma'am' or 'no, ma'am.' It's like she doesn't have any intelligent thoughts of her own or can't comment on anything that isn't the weather. What man would be interested in marrying a woman with no personality and the body of an overgrown child?" When she wasn't complaining about Imogene's personality, she was complaining about her fashion sense. While all the young girls struggled to look their best by copying the latest hairstyle from Paris or painfully stitching more pleats or lace to their dresses, the daughter of a tailor seemed content with an old calico dress and her hair in a braid.

If Imogene was aware of what her stepmother said, she didn't show or comment on it, which, instead of causing admiration in the townspeople for her good, Christian attitude, caused them to think she was rather stupid. Many of them believed she would remain a spinster for the rest of her life and take care of her aging parents.

Yes, no one wanted to marry Imogene Spencer.

The Spencer family lived in the nicer part of town, given the fact that Mr. Spencer did most of the tailoring for the wealthy gentleman and ladies from their town and even the neighboring town. Although they were not wealthy, they could afford a luxury now and then. They even had a hired girl who came on Mondays to wash the windows and wash the clothes, both tasks Mrs.

Spencer and Imogene hated to do for vastly different reasons. Mrs. Spencer hated anything that would take time away from admiring herself in the mirror, and Imogene was simply too short to reach the upper windows and, because of her small stature, easily tired bending over the washing pot to scrub the clothes of nine family members.

"Martin, you can't wear that to church," Imogene explained carefully to the youngest member of the Spencer family.

"Why not?" the four-year-old complained, sticking his lip out.

"Because, Martin dear, it's covered in dirt and the blood of a mouse you and Robert, er, sent to Heaven." Imogene wasn't typically an impatient woman, but they were already late as it was and the whole family was waiting in the wagon already.

"No, I want to wear it!"

"Martin Spencer, you will put on a clean dress shirt right now or I will make sure you will not do anything fun at all this week." Mrs. Spencer entered the room wearing a horribly tight black and white striped dress. "You will not embarrass me. You have three minutes to get ready, or you and Imogene can walk to church."

Martin murmured a response and hurried back to his room in defeat.

Mrs. Spencer turned to Imogene and gave her a cold smile. "You shouldn't be so weak-willed. You are supposed to be an adult."

"I didn't mean—"

Her stepmother ignored her weak apology as she headed downstairs. Imogene sighed as she looked at her reflection in a nearby mirror while she tucked back a loose strand of blonde hair. She looked like she always did, small, sad, and insignificant.

Might as well get used to feeling like this, she thought moodily. I've been like this for eighteen years, and I doubt very much it will change on my deathbed.

Contrary to what many people thought, she knew her stepmother disliked her, possibly even hated her. However, she didn't know why.

"Imogene, I'm ready." Martin appeared once again in a clean white shirt.

"How handsome you look," she murmured as she grabbed his hand and both of them headed toward the wagon.

The church service was long and boring, as usual, especially since Pastor Joshua was elderly and seemed overly fond of the topics of sin and human vanity. After church, the Spencer family always socialized for a while, each breaking off into their small group of friends. Everyone except Imogene who thought Sundays after church were a special form of torture.

Normally, she just stayed behind and admired the flowers or talked to the elderly Mrs. Draper who she was positive was deaf. However, this time, something caught her attention. There was a group of young women around her age huddled together in a circle near the fountain, giggling uncontrollably. Imogene thought it was rather odd they were laughing at a newspaper. What could possibly be funny?

Due to her growing curiosity, she started inching herself forward until she was next to Claude, the girl she was closest to and who treated her kindly. "What's so funny?"

"Not funny, amusing," Claude corrected as she took the thin piece of paper from Nellie and handed it to her. In black letters, the words *The Matrimonial Enquirer* stared back at her. There were rows and rows of boxes separated by numbers starting at 121. As Imogene looked closer, she realized the newspaper was advertising something; it was advertising people who were searching for matrimony all across the country. The majority of them were lonely men, but there were a few women scattered around as well.

Her blue eyes scanned the men section and realized there were all types of men searching for a wife, tall men, short men, lawyers, farmers, shoemakers, widowers, men with children. It was a catalogue of available men all put together in a pretty, little package.

Imogene clutched the paper in her hand, wishing she had more time to look it over. "Are any of you girls writing to these men?"

"No," Nellie sniffed, making it clear that writing to strange men in search of matrimony was beneath her. "But Callie kept bragging about how she got herself a fiancé by responding to one of these silly ads. We wanted to see what all the fuss was about." Nellie smirked. "Of course, you can keep it, Miss Spencer. Maybe *The Matrimonial Enquirer* can help even *you* find a husband."

Imogene was unaware of the sarcasm in the girl's voice, as she was still focused entirely on the ads. She quickly thanked Nellie and headed back to the wagon where her family was waiting for her.

After helping her stepmother with dinner, Imogene settled into her little bedroom in the attic. The good part of having a stepmother who disliked her was that she tried to keep Imogene away from her "real" children as much as possible, which was just fine for Imogene who enjoyed the privacy.

Her eyes roamed once again through the ads. She had already read through four and wasn't too pleased with the men she had read about. As she read through post 125, she hoped it would be her lucky shot. The post of this man was quick and to the point.

Never married gentleman, age thirty-two years, looking for a wife. I am six feet tall with black hair and hazel eyes. Looking for a good Christian woman to marry and have children with. Must be older than twenty-two years and be a strong woman who is able and willing to live the life of a rancher's wife. Address, Mr. Stefan Stevenson, Redwood Post Office, Wisconsin.

Imogene knew there were other ads quite not so direct and perhaps a bit more romantic than Mr. Stevenson's post, but for some reason she was heavily drawn to answer it. He was a bit older than she would have liked, but she knew many couples who had an age difference and they had turned out just fine. She obtained a piece of paper and a pen she rarely used from her small writing desk.

As she read over the ad again, she wondered what she could possibly write about when she felt her heart sink. Stefan Stevenson

wanted someone who was older than twenty-two and who was physically strong enough to live the life of a rancher's wife. She had barely turned eighteen and there was nothing strong about her besides her stubbornness. Sometimes it felt like a strong wind could end her.

Would it be terrible to lie? she thought as she bit her lip. *It's just a letter and there is a good chance he might reject me, or I might reject him. Really, what is wrong in fibbing a little? I hardly ever do it after all.*

Before she could convince herself that lying was not the Christian thing to do, she found herself putting thoughts onto paper.

Dear Mr. Stevenson,

It is lovely to be answering your ad from The Matrimonial Enquirer. I am twenty-five years old and the oldest of seven children. I am a responsible, caring, and hardworking Christian woman who also desires a husband and children. Although I live in a town in Maryland, you shall find I am quite adept in farm work and how life in the country works. My favorite color is blue, and I enjoy daisies.

Imogene didn't know why she had added the last part. She doubted very few men cared about what her favorite color or flower was, but she thought adding it made the letter more personal. She stuffed it into an envelope and managed to get it delivered to the post office before it closed.

The oldest Miss Spencer felt like her heart was beating rapidly as she put on her nightgown after telling her stepmother she wasn't hungry. It was done. Now all she had to do was wait for Mr. Stevenson to swallow up her lies.

Imogene received a letter from Stefan two weeks later and she promptly responded to him. Two letters became four, then they quickly became six. She felt she was starting to get to know the rancher more intimately with each letter she received. She knew he was the youngest with two older brothers, one who was a pastor and the other the town sheriff. He had inherited the cattle ranch from his aging father, and he didn't particularly enjoy sweets and didn't understand her fondness for chocolates.

She found herself reading each of his letters multiple times before bed, slowly falling in love with a man she had never met and to whom she was lying. In his seventh letter, he included a picture of himself and asked her to send one back. She promptly responded, telling him she couldn't afford one. If he saw a picture of her, he would easily find out she was a delicate girl who was much younger than she said she was.

Imogene treasured the photo he had given her and kept it in her Bible, so her stepmother or siblings would never find it. Since she had gotten the picture, she had done nothing but stare obsessively at it. Stefan Stevenson was a handsome man, with a full head of dark, wavy hair, clear eyes, and a strong jaw. He wasn't smiling in the picture—people seldom did—but she could tell he was a kind man.

She knew she should stop writing to him, but she was already in too deep. Their letters should have never continued after the first one. She knew she wasn't what he was looking for in a bride. To continue the relationship, would just be cruel. But for some reason, she couldn't stop staring at his picture. She wondered what it would be like to wake up wrapped in his arms or to feel his lips on hers every morning before breakfast.

Imogene picked up a fresh piece of paper, ignoring the guilt she was feeling. Would it really be terrible if she continued with her little white lies?